

# Artist Driven To Honor Heroes

Mickey Harris' Special Work To Commemorate Medal Of Honor Winners Makes Its Way To Gettysburg

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Most people celebrate their birthday with a party, a cake and gifts. Menno resident Mickey Harris celebrated his birthday Sept. 21 as a special guest at the Congressional Medal of Honor Society convention. Harris, a renowned free-hand airbrush artist, has painted a 1956 Ford Thunderbird featuring Medal of Honor winners. The vintage auto was displayed at the Sept. 18-22 convention and reunion in Gettysburg, Pa.

On his Facebook page, Harris proclaimed the experience "the best birthday ever." With 35 years of professional experience, Harris has become well known for his strong patriotism. His work often honors veterans and features military scenes. He moved last year from Tennessee to Menno, where he continues his creations.

For his latest work, Harris painted an intricate series of patriotic scenes on the 1956 Ford Thunderbird owned by Ronnie Rains of Odessa, Texas. The car's dashboard contains dog tags inscribed with the names of the nation's 79 living Medal of Honor winners.

Last June, Michael Fitzmaurice of Hartford — the lone surviving Medal of Honor win-

ner living in South Dakota — provided the first signature on the Thunderbird's hood. The goal is to gather as many Medal of Honor signatures as possible.

About 3,500 people have received the highest award given by the United States. The award is achieved only through an act of Congress.

Besides providing a powerful salute to veterans, the airbrushed 1956 Thunderbird will benefit veterans, Harris explained on his Facebook page.

"As most of you know, the car will be auctioned off at Barrett-Jackson (auction company), with 100 percent of the money going to charity," he said. "Half (is) going to (the) Wounded Warriors Family Support, and the other half going to the Medal of Honor Foundation."

Harris worked on the car at a Menno garage before it was transported to Texas for finishing touches. The car was then taken last week to Gettysburg for the annual Medal of Honor reunion. This year's reunion commemorated the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg.

Rains made sure that Harris was present for the veterans' gathering.

"Ronnie Rains and the Texas gang brought (my wife) Laura and myself to Gettysburg, Pa., for the Medal of Honor Society reunion," Harris said, posting nearly two dozen photos from the event.

Harris met a number of the



RANDY DOCKENDORF/P&D

A 1956 Thunderbird has become a work of art, as Menno freehand airbrush artist Mickey Harris has created the Medal of Honor theme for the car to be sold at auction. As part of the car's patriotic symbolism, Harris has incorporated a dash board with dog tags for each of the nation's 79 living Medal of Honor recipients.

Medal of Honor winners who will benefit from the Thunderbird's sale. At least 45 of the nation's 79 living Medal of Honor winners attended the convention, according to media reports.

Harris considered it a privilege to meet what he considers true American heroes.

"For those of you who know me, you know I was in heaven," he said. "To be in the

company of these men was a great honor for me."

Harris provided the Medal of Honor winners with an opportunity to see the 1956 Thunderbird. However, he also sought to add a large number the veterans' signatures to the vintage auto before the Barrett Jackson auction.

"We got 22 signatures on the hood ranging from (World War II) to Korea to Vietnam to Afghanistan," he said. "Every one (is a) recipient of our nation's highest honor."

## A SIGNATURE MOMENT

The 1956 Ford Thunderbird began its public odyssey last summer during a program at the Classic Collision auto body shop in Menno. Harris had been using the shop as his studio for working on the car.

Fitzmaurice signed the hood of the blue car during the June program, which included area veterans from various eras. The vintage convertible is airbrushed with murals of Marine, Army, Navy and Air Force service members, bald eagles, military memorabilia, scenes from several wars and American flags.

In one scene, Harris portrayed the pain and other intense emotions in the face of a soldier.

With the stroke of a pen, Fitzmaurice launched the effort to secure other Medal of Honor recipients' signatures.

"I have signed a lot of stuff, but this is only my second car that I have ever signed," the Hartford veteran said with a smile. "I'm pretty excited about being the first to sign this car."

At the time of the Menno ceremony, only 79 out of nearly 3,500 Medal of Honor recipients were still alive. Each signature will make the 1956 Thunderbird even more valuable, Harris said.

"This will make it a very, very rare car, and we thought it was appropriate that the first signature come from South Dakota," he said.

Fitzmaurice said he was just performing his mission when he was hit by shrapnel while serving in Vietnam in 1970-71.

According to his Medal of Honor citation, Spc. Fourth Class Fitzmaurice was issued his medal on Oct. 15, 1973, for acts in Khe Sanh, Republic of Vietnam, March 23, 1971.

After observing three explosive charges being thrown into a bunker, Fitzmaurice hurled two of the charges back outside, and threw his flak vest and himself over the remaining charge. Although suffering from serious multiple wounds and partial loss of sight, he charged out of the bunker and engaged the enemy.

"I received my Medal of Honor in 1973, but I never thought about medals (in Vietnam). I was just fighting to stay alive," he told the *Press & Dakotan*. "I never figured I would survive. It must have been a Higher Power."

Fitzmaurice spoke with reverence about those who never made it home.

"I'm nothing special," he said. "I just did what I had to do."

## ON A MISSION

Rains, a Vietnam War veteran from Odessa, Texas, bought the 1956 Thunderbird at auction. He told the *Press & Dakotan* that he has restored cars for many years.

The Thunderbird isn't the first time he bought a car for the purpose of benefiting a cause.

"We have the sale of these cars, and the money raised goes for charities," he said. "Most of the time, (the cars) are donated back and are sold two or three times."

Rains said he felt moved to take on the Wounded Warriors Family Support mission. The organization benefits injured service members and their families.

"This was a spontaneous decision. I have collected Corvettes, but for this, I went with a Ford," he said. "This is the first vintage car that I have sold. We are looking at probably auctioning it in January."

Col. John D. Folsom, a retired Marine, founded the Wounded Warriors Family Support organization. He praised Rains' decision to purchase the vintage car, restore it and sell it to benefit wounded warriors.

"Ronnie Rains is one of the most extraordinary, generous men I have had the privilege of meeting," Folsom told the *Press & Dakotan*. "This is Ronnie's baby. It's his mission and vision. I support the job that Ronnie Rains is doing."

Folsom admired the progress made on the car and its body.

"This was basically a rust bucket," he said. "Ronnie took it down to Odessa, Texas, and put it on a rotisserie restoration. They stripped the car down to nothing. I saw it was a work in progress."

When it came to the artwork, Folsom and Rains knew they wanted Harris for the job. The two men learned Harris had moved from Tennessee, and they traced him to Menno.

Harris has become well known for his patriotism and support for the military. He accepted the request for painting the Thunderbird.

For Harris, the car's theme — particularly the dog tags with the names of the remaining Medal of Honor recipients — has made the work even more special.

"I'm doing this (mission) for what it represents," he said.

The American people need to be reminded of the sacrifices made by the men and women in uniform, Folsom said.

"It's unfortunate that more people know the 'Dancing With The Stars' celebrities and think they are heroes," he said. "That's not good. They are forgetting the real heroes."

Folsom strongly believes something divine has brought the entire mission together.

"For Ronnie, Mickey and me to come together, that's not a disconnected thing," Folsom said. "There are tremendous blessings in our lives. Sometimes, we forget that the

Lord has blessed us. Many things are done by Divine Providence."

## REMEMBERING THE LOST

Not all Medal of Honor recipients returned home alive.

Sue Wilson of San Angelo, Texas, was present during this summer's program at Menno. She attended school with Rains in Odessa, and her brother, Alfred "Mac" Wilson, was killed in Vietnam in 1969 at age 21.

Sue Wilson held a picture of her late brother and his framed Medal of Honor. She described to the *Press & Dakotan* her brother's ultimate sacrifice.

"There was enemy fire and they were ambushed. He threw his body on a hand grenade," she said. "(My brother's death) just killed my mother. She died three months to the day after my brother was killed. She grieved herself to death and died of a broken heart."

Sue Wilson said she felt grateful for the support given wounded service members and seeing Harris and the 1956 Thunderbird.

"Ronnie Rains and John Folsom don't want our military to be forgotten," she said. "I feel so honored to be among this and to be part of this."

According to the Odessa American newspaper, the 1956 Thunderbird was taken on tour after the completion of the airbrushing job. With the final changes, the car now honors Odessa's two Medal of Honor recipients, Alfred "Mac" Wilson and Marvin "Rex" Young. The men are buried in Odessa and died in action during the Vietnam War.

In the trunk, airbrushed images of the men are painted with a message: "In memory of the two sons of Odessa, Texas who gave their lives in service to our country."

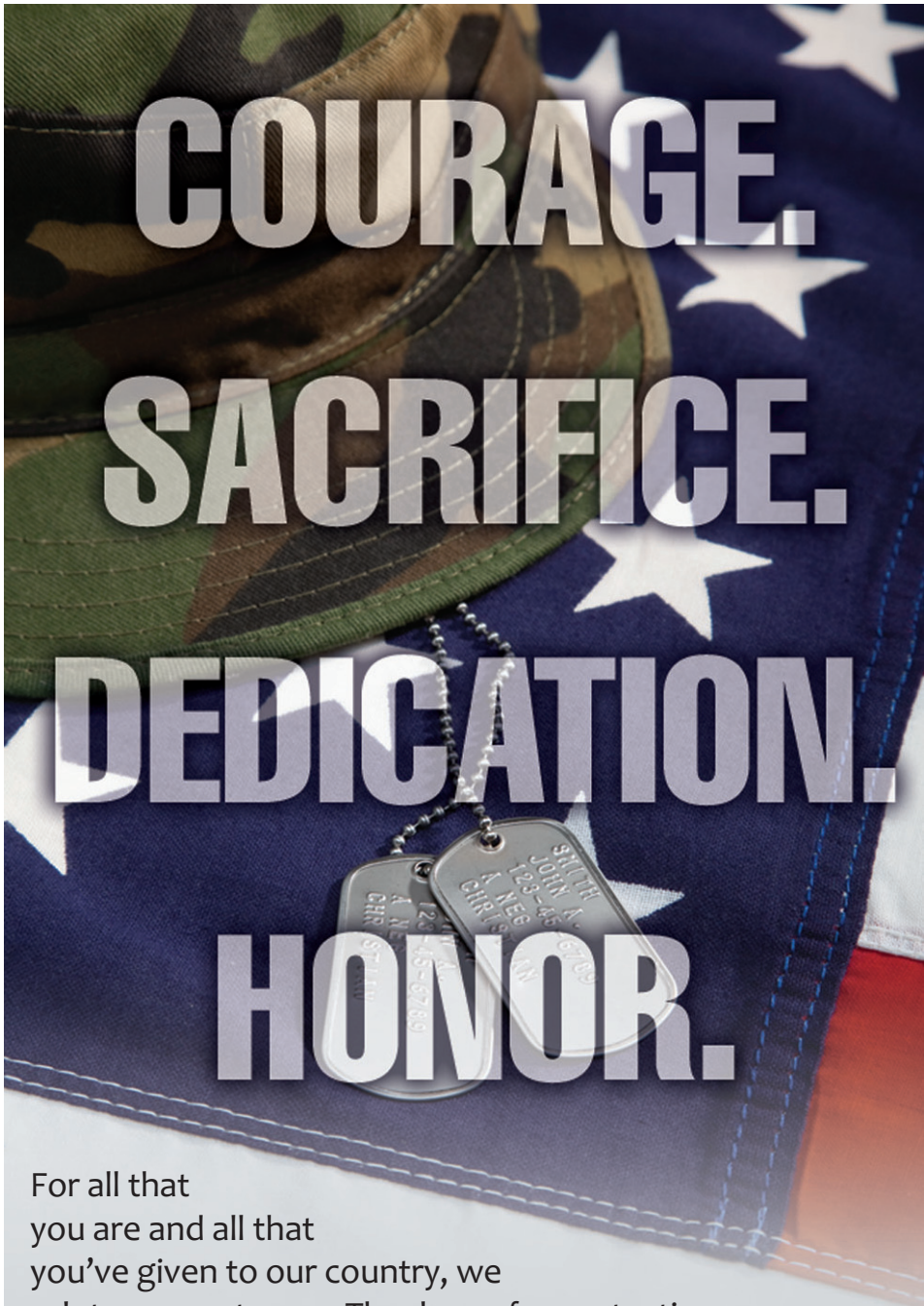
With the 1956 Thunderbird now completed, Harris expressed appreciation to those who made it possible for him to attend the recent Gettysburg reunion.

"None of this would have been possible if not for Ronnie Rains, a man I am proud to call my friend," he said on his Facebook page. "Thank you, Ronnie, and thank you to all those who have wished me a Happy Birthday. This has been the best birthday ever."

For information on Folsom's organization, visit online at [www.woundedwarriorsfamily-support.org](http://www.woundedwarriorsfamily-support.org).

For information on Harris' work, visit online at <http://mickeyharrisart.com> or visit his Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/mickey.harris.94>.

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For all that you are and all that you've given to our country, we salute you, veterans. Thank you for protecting our freedom at home and overseas. Your service and your sacrifice will always be remembered.

**With gratitude, we honor America's veterans and military personnel, and our very own veterans and military personnel:**

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