

## **President, Congress grant Medal of Honor Highway national designation**

By Ken Olsen

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### **Oregon Legionnaire succeeds in mission to honor America's heroes on coast-to-coast route.**

After eight years of tireless effort, Dick Tobiason delivered on his promise to the late Bob Maxwell, his long-time American Legion colleague and fellow combat veteran.

With the stroke of President Biden's pen on Dec. 17, U.S. Highway 20 officially became the national Medal of Honor Highway. The 3,365-mile coast-to-coast route traverses 12 states from Newport, Ore., to Boston and honors the "bravest of the brave," says Tobiason, a Vietnam War veteran and founder and chairman of the Bend (Oregon) Heroes Foundation. "I always believed this noble cause would succeed. But the question was, when?"

Maxwell saved three fellow soldiers when he threw himself on a German hand grenade in Besancon, France, in 1944. He lost part of his right foot and suffered shrapnel wounds when the grenade exploded. President Franklin Roosevelt signed Maxwell's Medal of Honor proclamation shortly before he died. And Maxwell inspired Tobiason to start the memorial highway project after they met in Bend more than 20 years ago.

The pair persuaded the Oregon Legislature to designate the state's portion of Highway 20 as a Medal of Honor Highway in 2017 and then began working on the other 11 states. "What's most rewarding is bringing unknown Medal of Honor recipients to the attention of the public – not just on paper in some obscure archive, but now they're right in front of people when they drive down the road," Maxwell said at the time.

Idaho passed a measure similar to Oregon's in March 2019, just a few months before Maxwell died. Tobiason kept the project rolling with the help of fellow Legionnaires and other veterans and volunteers in states along the route. This included Daryl Harrison and Ken Hanel in Nebraska, Past National Commander Marty Conaster in Illinois, Past Department Commander Jim Kessler in Iowa and Past Department Commander Charles Stennis in Ohio.

Massachusetts became the 12th and final state to name its stretch of Highway 20 for the nation's highest honor for combat valor in late 2022. U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., then introduced a measure to designate all of Highway 20 as the national Medal of Honor Highway. The American Legion passed a resolution in support of that proposal, and the Senate unanimously approved the designation in December 2023. The House of Representatives gave its blessing Dec. 9.

The 95 state Medal of Honor Highway signs will remain in place and the U.S. Department of Transportation will coordinate the addition of national Medal of Honor Highway signage, Tobiason says. The Medal of Honor project is one of nine Oregon highways named in

honor of veterans because of efforts led by Tobiason. The most recent was the Oregon Gold Star Families Memorial Highway, dedicated on Veteran's Day in 2024. Tobiason says he hopes other states will come together to create a National Gold Star Families Memorial Highway.