Medals of the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission

By Ronald E. Fischer

The purpose of this article is to describe the variations of the Carnegie Medal awarded by the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission since 1904. These medals continue to be awarded to individuals in the United States, Canada, and Newfoundland, who have risked their lives in an extraordinary manner, saving, or attempting to save, the lives of others in peril. This medal is important in at least three ways. It is America’s civilian equivalent to the Congressional Medal of Honor, but it is administered, not by the US Government, but by a private commission that has been endowed for this specific purpose. Each medal awarded is individually named to the recipient, the rescued (or attempted), the location and the date.

On March 12, 1904, Andrew Carnegie, in a 5 Million Dollar act of philanthropy, signed a 10 part Deed of Trust. (1) This began a Hero Fund commission in Pittsburgh, Pa. to recognize acts of bravery by ordinary Americans. The fund was to provide a medal, and in deserving cases also a cash award. He was inspired by the actions of two heroes from the then Harwick Mine explosion on Jan 25, 1904 that killed all but 1 of the 180 men in the mine. Both men lost their lives while trying to rescue miners that were trapped by that explosion. (2)

Since 1904 the Fund has awarded 9,975 medals (as of July 1 2015), and 37.2 Million dollars in cash awards to recipients. Twenty percent of these awards have been posthumous. The awards have come from nearly 87,000 recommendations.

There medals were initially awarded in Gold, Silver, and Bronze with the level being determined by the Commission. Over the years both the Gold and Silver levels have been eliminated. There have been a total of 19 awards in gold, and 617 awards in Silver Medals awarded. The last of the 19 Gold Medals was awarded to Charles L. Coe, 30, of Burkburnett, Texas, who died in a fire rescue act in 1923. These medals contained 9 ounces of gold, the cost of which, may have ended The last of the 617 silver medals went to Brian Mervyn Clegg and Robert Stephen Grant for their rescue of three individuals from exposure in a downed airplane in Lake of the Woods, Kenora, Ont., in 1979. The use of the silver medals was formally discontinued in 1981.
The first design of the medal in bronze was executed by the jewelry firm of J.E. Caldwell & Co. of Philadelphia. This medal is 3 inches (75mm) in diameter, and the early medals were 3/8” (4mm) thick. The design of the medal went untouched for the first 100 years of its existence. The Commission’s centennial in 2004 prompted a design review, resulting in subtle changes. Notably, medals awarded in the centennial year carried a banner across the base of the obverse: “1904-ONE HUNDRED YEARS-2004”, and the bust of Andrew Carnegie was modified by sculptor Luigi Badia of Somers, N.Y. His initials “LB” are located to the left of the bust on the obverse as well as on the reverse side. Also on the reverse, the seal of Newfoundland was dropped because the colony became a province of Canada in 1949. The detail work in the flora was simplified to make the elements more recognizable as well as the words “AWARDED TO”. These medals were marked on the edge GRECO IND. Danbury, Ct. This new version remains 3” (75mm), but the thickness is now nearly 5/8” (7mm). After 2004 the current version has the scroll was removed with the words “.Established April 15th 1904.” returned and marked GRECO IND Bethel Ct. on the edge.

The Carnegie Medal is now produced by Grecoin Insutries. Metallic content of the bronze used is copper, 90%, and zinc, 10%.

Now let us look at some of these medals, their cases, and an award document:

This is a 9 ounce 22 karat Gold medal for Titanic Disaster donated to the Smithsonian Institution in 1912 by the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission. The impact of the Titanic's sinking on public opinion was so great that the Commission created a medal to honor heroes from the Titanic's sinking. The Commission didn't have a particular individual in mind for this award, so the medal was given directly to the Smithsonian. (4)
Silver Medal obverse and reverse

Bronze Medal original design
Second design of award medal for the Centennial year

Current award medal of the new design
Card board box and cassette holder for the medal that opens at top or bottom
This medal was awarded mounted in Lucite. Award document below for the Carnegie Medal awarded in 1972 with the above medal (5)

Carnegie Hero Fund Commission
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

This certifies that

Cleon A. Roberts

has been awarded a Carnegie Medal in recognition of an outstanding act of heroism:

Bronze Medal awarded to Cleon A. Roberts, who saved Gus D. Ragland from drowning, Carville, Va., February 17, 1971. Ragland, aged 48, carpenter, fell from a railroad bridge into the Kiamus River, where he found inverted face down as he was carried downstream. Roberts, aged 49, carpenter, descended the river bank and entered the cold waters fully clothed. In water 10 feet deep 25 feet from the bank, he obtained a hold on Ragland, who still was inverted, and began towimg him diagonally across the current. Although experiencing some difficulty, Roberts moved Ragland to the bank, but then could not find footing there. He held to a tree and forced some water from Ragland. The latter was breathing regularly by the time other men arrived and aided him and then Roberts out of the water. Ragland recovered fully.

[Signatures]

August 7, 1972
Current wooden presentation box with insert that can display the medal

Eight other hero funds have also been established in Europe carry out a similar mission of recognition. The Carnegie Hero Fund Trust for Great Britain was set up in 1908 and was followed a year later by the Foundation Carnegie in France. In quick succession in came hero funds in Germany, Norway, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, and Italy. (6)
The UK Andrew Carnegie Hero fund trust bronze medal and the book of awardees (7)
The French bronze plaque used 1909-2009

The German Bronze Plaque used till 1934
German current small size medals restarted in 2005

The Norwegian Gold Medal

The Norwegian Bronze Medal
Original design of the Swiss Medal

The medal recently redesigned for Switzerland
The Netherlands bronze medal

The Swedish bronze medal
The Danish bronze medal

The Belgium bronze medal
The Belgium small size medal, note name and date on the reverse.

The Italian bronze medal
Sources: Web site references for the Carnegie Hero Fund.

1. Deed of Trust:  http://www.carnegiehero.org/deed-of-trust/
4. Titanic Medal at the Smithsonian Institution:  
   http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1415388
5. Photos of medal in Lucite and document provided by the Roberts family
6. European Funds and Medals:  
   http://www.carnegiehero.org/resources/andrew-carnegies-european-hero-funds/
7. Photos of European medals found on the internet

The Carnegie Hero Fund web site is very well designed and contains some great stories of selfless heroism that are truly worthy of their recognition.