

## Air and Space this Week

### Item of the Week

# THE DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS

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**KEY WORDS:** DFC Gabreski Herbert Roddenberry Worthington Rowan

*The Distinguished Flying Cross is an unusual (mostly) military decoration, distinct from the UK's medal of the same name or the U.S. Air Force Cross. It has been awarded to a number of civilians, a few women, several foreign nationals, and to a few folks that might surprise you.*

### ESTABLISHMENT

The U.S. Congress established the Distinguished Flying Cross on July 2, 1926, in Section 12 of the United States Army Air Corps Act. The Act was amended by Executive order 7786 on January 8, 1938, which stated that the DFC was to be given to any person who distinguishes themselves by heroism or extraordinary achievement while participating in an aerial flight while serving in any capacity with the Air Corps.

### AN UNUSUAL HISTORY

President Coolidge issued [Executive Order 4601](#) on March 1, 1927, that defined who was, and was not, eligible for consideration for a DFC and further details about how and when the recommendation for the award was to be made. It allowed for foreign nationals to be eligible, and stated that the Secretary of War, the Secretary of the Navy, and the Secretary of the Treasury “may promulgate, for the service pertaining to their respective departments, such additional regulations, supplementary to these regulations and not in conflict therewith, as they may deem proper, and may from time to time alter, modify, or rescind such regulations.”

During the time between establishment and its amendment in 1938, the DFC was not restricted to military personnel only. Congressional action, however, was required in order to award the DFC retroactively for actions taken prior to establishment. For example, a posthumous DFC was awarded to Captain James Ely Miller for his becoming the first American aviator serving with an American unit to be KIA in WWI (action on May 9, 1918). Congress also passed special legislation on February 23, 1929, that awarded the DFC to Wilbur and Orville Wright.

The creation of the DFC medal itself took some time after establishment. “Various designs from the U.S. Mint, commercial artists, and the Office of the Quartermaster General, were submitted to the Commission of Fine Arts and on 31 May 1927. The Commission approved a design submitted by Mr. Arthur E. Dubois and Miss Elizabeth Will.” ([source](#), which includes description of the DFC medal and ribbon).

President Coolidge gave DFC certificates in lieu of the yet-to-be-created medal to the ten USAAC aviators who had participated in the Pan-American Good Will Flight, which took place from 12/21/1926 to 5/2/1927. Two of those aviators were killed during the Flight. Several of the aviators went on to high command positions within U.S. military aviation, including Ira C. Eaker, Herbert Dargue, and Ennis C. Whitehead, [And, NASM fans, one Lt. John Benton (no relation to our late friend) – he was one of the two men killed on the Flight].

The first time the DFC medal was awarded in real-time was when President Coolidge gave it to reservist Charles Lindbergh after his solo trans-Atlantic flight (awarded on 6/11/1927). The first active-duty military awardee was Cdr Richard Byrd, USN for his trans-Atlantic flight from NYC to France in June/July, 1927 (Cdr Byrd and his mechanic, Floyd Bennett, had already received the Medal of Honor for their flight over the North Pole on May 9, 1926).

President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 7962 on August 22, 1938, that amended EO 4601 to bar civilians from receiving the DFC, and to allow the DFC to be awarded to Lt Richard L. Burke, USCG. You can find out more about him [here](#). The referenced document does not explicitly say why Lt Burke was being cited for a DFC with Executive Order support from FDR, but I strongly suspect it was his heroic attempt, alas failed, to rescue USCG aviator Chief Gunner's Mate Charles Thrun, who crashed in the Atlantic flight testing the new Grumman J2F Duck amphibious airplane in January, 1935. Thrun was the first Coast Guard aviator lost in the line of duty. Burke and his crew who helped attempt the rescue all received the [Silver Lifesaving Medal](#) (the awardees of the Gold/Silver Lifesaving Medal make for interesting reading).

The criteria for awarding the DFC were still a bit fluid prior to WWII, and during that War, the DFC award criteria varied somewhat depending on the service involved, theater of operations, and other factors. Officers tended to be awarded the DFC for actions that would be recognized with an Air Medal for enlisted personnel. In the ETO, some aircrews received the DFC for overall performance rather than specific actions.

### **DFC National Memorial Act of 2014**

The U.S. Senate passed this Act in July, 2014; it was sponsored by Senator Barbara Boxer of California. The Act designated that a memorial to the DFC would be established at the March Field Air Museum, which is adjacent to the March Air Reserve Base in Riverside, California. The Act was signed into law by President Obama on July 25, 2014. The announcement ([here](#)) contains a dead link; I could find no mention of the DFC Memorial on the March Field Air Museum website, or anywhere else.

## **AWARDEES**

### **Who You Would Expect**

Many officers of high rank by the end of their careers have earned the DFC, some for actions taken when they were more junior, others for cursory (but appropriate) actions they took in more of a supervisory capacity. There are far too many single-DFC awardees to go into here,

even two-time awardees are too numerous. For more on high-rank awardees of one or two DFCs, see the list [here](#).

Almost every Astronaut was in the military. Every Mercury astronaut received the DFC for their flight (John Glenn had four others from his earlier service). Most of the Gemini and Apollo Astronauts also received the DFC, as did Shuttle Astronauts Joe Engle (who also flew the X-15), Guy Gardner (see below), Robert Crippen, Mark Kelly (2 DFCs), and Scott Kelly; Joe Edwards received a DFC prior to his service on STS-89.

### More Than One or Two

Being awarded more than two DFCs is much less common. Here's the best list I could compile from multiple sources:

[Col "Gabby" Gabreski](#) (13!), America's highest victory total in the ETO (34.5); also a Korea Ace

[Adm Stan Aurthur](#) (11), 500+ combat missions over Vietnam, 50+ Air Medals, Vice-CNO

[Col David C. Schilling](#) (11), 23.5 victories in the ETO, first non-stop trans-Atlantic jet flight

[BGen E. Daniel Cherry](#) (10), 285 combat missions in F-4s and F-105s over Vietnam

[LtCol Robert S. Johnson](#) (9), 27 ETO victories in the [P-47](#)

[Col James E Swett](#) (8), Won Medal of Honor for downing 7 VAL dive bombers in one mission

[Capt Charles S. Whitehouse](#) (7), 21 Air Medals as USMC dive bomber pilot; CIA after WWII

[Capt Joseph Kittinger](#) (6), Awarded 2 DFCs for high-altitude ballooning; 4 for actions in Vietnam

[MGen Robin Olds](#) (6; his [Dad](#) has one), 259 combat sorties; 12 victories in WWII, 4 in Vietnam

NOTE: Sources disagree; [here](#) lists only DFC for Valor, Air Force Cross; 4 Silver Stars, +

[Col. Charles H. MacDonald](#) (6), Third-ranking U.S. Ace in PTO (27 victories, in P-38s).

[LtCol Ray Shuey Wetmore](#) (6), Quadruple Ace in ETO

[Maj Thomas McGuire](#) (6, plus Medal of Honor), Second-highest scoring Ace in PTO; KIA

[MGen Marion Carl](#) (5?), *Life* magazine pre-War; Guadalcanal hero; murdered in 1998, see [here](#)

[LtCol Dick Rutan](#) (5), 325 combat missions in Vietnam; flew *Voyager* not-stop around-the-world

[Cdr Eugene A. Valencia](#) (5 + Navy Cross), 23 PTO victories in Hellcats, 6 of them on 4/17/1945

[MGen Mele Vojvodich Jr.](#) (5), Flew 135 F-4 combat missions over Vietnam

[BGen Frederick Walker Castle](#) (4 + MoH), Shot down flying B-17, saved crew but not himself

[Col Robert J. Rankin](#) (4) Double-Ace in WWII; Korea; led 6 Squadrons – never lost a pilot

[LtCol Dan Hampton](#) (4), "Two Dogs" flew 151 sorties F-16s in Gulf War. Wrote "Viper Pilot."

[Capt Alan Cozzalio](#) (4 + DSC + Silver Star), Shot down 6 times flying helos over North Vietnam

[CGMST Duane D. Hackney](#) (4 + many), "[Most Decorated Airman in USAF History!](#)"

[BGen Robert Scott](#) (3), Commanded Flying Tigers in CBI, 388 combat sorties; 13 victories

[Col James K. Johnson](#) (3), Flew P-40s & P-47s in ETO; Double Jet Ace in Korea; 4 Major Trophies

[Capt Cecil E Harris](#) (3), 23 WWII victories; Awarded Navy Cross for carrier defense

[Col Guy Gardner](#) (3), 177 combat missions over Vietnam; test pilot; Space Shuttle pilot astronaut (STS-27, STS-35); Commanded Test Pilot School at Edwards AFB; FAA

## CIVILIANS

The non-exclusion of civilians prior to 1938 allowed a number of civilians to be recognized. In addition to Wilbur and Orville, already mentioned, the following seven civilians earned a DFC.

**Curtiss, Glenn Hammond**, for aircraft design and construction, awarded in 1933 (posthumous)

**Earhart, Amelia**, legendary aviatrix, First woman to receive DFC by an Act of Congress, in 1932

**Ely, Eugene**, Pioneer aviator first to land on a ship, awarded in 1933 (posthumous)

**Gatty, Harold**, Navigator for Wiley Post on his around-the-world flight, awarded in 1932

**Post, Wiley**, First to fly solo around-the world, awarded in 1932

**Turner, Roscoe**, colorful air racer, with a lion sidekick, awarded in 1952, the last to a civilian. A special Act of Congress in 1949 was required to give him the DFC.

The seventh was **Carl Ally**, who was cited for his being a fighter pilot in WWII, but seems to have been given the medal after becoming a civilian. [He became a famous ad executive after the War, one of the OG “Mad Men.”]

**Neil Armstrong** is a special case. His pre-Apollo actions more than justify at least one DFC, but he got his by a special Act of Congress, because he was a civilian, after Apollo 11.

## WOMEN

In addition to **Amelia Earhart**, a civilian:

**1Lt Aleda Lutz** served as a flight nurse on 196 C-47 Medevac aircraft missions during WWII, earning a DFC along with an Air Medal and four Oak Leaf Clusters. She perished on November 1, 1944, on a soldier evacuation mission, and was awarded the DFC posthumously.

**1Lt Roberta S. Ross** served as a flight nurse who flew 100 missions “over the Hump.” She was recognized with a DFC and an Air Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster for her service. [She was a very colorful character, worthy of the Item of the Week feature in the future.]

Famed flier **Jacqueline Cochran** received a DFC in 1964 for her wartime service transferring military aircraft, commanding the WASPs, and for being the first woman to pilot at supersonic speed.

**Capt Patricia A. McFetridge** (USCG) received a DFC for her long career flying a variety of helicopters for the Army and Coast Guard, culminating in her command of USCG Air Station Boringquen.

**Col Eileen Collins** (USAF) was awarded at DFC in 1999 for being the first woman to command a Space Shuttle mission.

**LtJG Sara Ann Stiles** (USN), was the first female Navy flight personnel to be awarded a DFC. She was a Radar Intercept Officer of an F-14B Tomcat off the *USS Theodore Roosevelt* that was supporting Operation Enduring Freedom. On November 9, 2001, she directed her armed reconnaissance flight that destroyed a Taliban convoy.

**Col Andra Kniep** was an USAF A-10 pilot serving in Kuwait during Operation Southern Watch. On March 5, 2002, she won the first of **two DFCs**, on consecutive days. Both missions were in support of ground troops, but she had command over the entire airspace during the second day's attack.

Col **Kim Campbell**'s DFC was awarded for her piloting an A-10 in support of ground troops during Operation Iraqi Freedom. On April 7, 2003, she was providing close support for U.S. troops fighting in Baghdad, when her Thunderbolt II had most of its tail blown off by a SAM, but she got the badly-damaged aircraft back to its base in Kuwait.

**LtCol Melissa May** was the first woman fighter pilot to be awarded the DFC. She flew the F-16 during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Her DFC was for her flying two successful missions against Iraqi missile sites, on March 20 and 24, 2003.

**CWO3 Lori Hill**, a helicopter pilot with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne in Iraq, won a DFC in 2006 for valor (first woman to do so) on a ground support mission where her aircraft received severe battle damage, but she still got it to a nearby FOB.

**Maj Mary Jennings Hegar**, piloting a medevac helicopter in Afghanistan on June 29, 2009, was shot down and wounded after she had picked up some soldiers for evacuation. She climbed on the skids of another rescue helicopter in her flight, hanging on with one hand and firing an M4 in the other, providing fire support against the insurgents who had shot her down. Her injuries permanently grounded her, but she still had a lot of fight in her, so she took part in a lawsuit to get the prohibition of women in ground combat overturned (*Hegar vs. Panetta*), that helped end the prohibition.

**Sgt Julia Bringloe**, a flight medic on a medevac mission over Afghanistan, was recognized for her actions during three-day Operation Hammer Down (2001). She would be lowered by cable, then treat and load wounded soldiers, and ride with them as they were hoisted aboard. Her leg was broken on her first rescue, but she stayed on duty for 60 straight hours, rescuing 14 wounded soldiers, action for which she was awarded the DFC for Valor. Both pilots on the flight were awarded the DFC for Valor, with an Air Medal with "V" Device, and the crew chief received an Air Medal with "V" Device. Their mission was named Air/Sea Rescue of the Year by the Army Aviation Association of America.

#### **NON-AMERICAN DFC RECIPIENTS**

[Wing Commander James Blackburn](#) (RAF): DFC for work on extending Liberator bomber range

[Wing Commander Adrian Warburton](#) (RAF): Accomplished recon pilot and Malta defender

[Squadron Leader Robert Stanford Tuck](#) (RAF): Spitfire Ace, 27 victories, shot down – POW  
[Col Francesco De Pinedo](#) (Italy): Long-range seaplane expert; Four Continent Flights in 1927  
[LtCol Dieudonne Costes](#) (French Army) Completed round-the-world flight in 1927-1928, with:  
[Joseph Le Brix](#) (French Navy) Completed round-the-world flight in 1927-1928  
[James Fitzmaurice](#) (Ireland): Completed first trans-Atlantic flight from East to West, with:  
[Ehrenfried Gunther von Huenefeld](#) and [Hermann Koehl](#). All three were awarded a DFC.  
[Maj Georgy Parshin](#) (USSR AF?), Soviet fighter ace; twice Hero of the Soviet Union [I could find no evidence of his DFC, and the link in [here](#) doesn't confirm it either.]  
[Maj Arthur Chin](#) (ROC AF) Chinese-American fighter Ace  
[Jesus Villamor](#) (Philippines) Medal of Valor and DFC in a P-26. See also [here](#). He flew with:  
[Lt Hose Gozar](#) (Philippines) DFC for action in defense of the Philippines in 1941.

## SURPRISES

[LtCol Jerry Coleman](#); Marine WWII bomber pilot, MLB player after the War, MLB Rookie of the Year 1949; 1950 World Series MVP; Korea service; long-time announcer for the SD Padres

[1Lt John Ehrlichman](#): Yes, the Watergate guy has a DFC; he was a B-24 lead navigator in the ETO.

[Maj Clark Gable](#): Enlisted in August, 1942, after Carole Lombard's death; five combat missions in a B-17; made important recruiting film. Hitler had bounty on him, if captured alive.

[Cap Don Herbert](#) (Mr. Wizard!): Yes, fellow Boomers, our beloved Mr. Wizard flew 56 combat missions as a B-24 pilot in the Fifteenth Air Force.

[1Lt George H.W. Bush](#), Avenger torpedo pilot shot down over Chichi-jima; other future politicians with the DFC include: Joe Foss, future Governor of South Dakota, who was awarded the Medal of Honor along with his DFC; other future Governors Bruce Sundlun and Brendan Byrne; future Senators George McGovern (35 missions as B-24 pilot), Jeremiah Denton, Peter H. Dominick, William Hathaway, Joseph McCarthy, Ted Stevens; and future Speaker of the House Jim Wright and Representatives Bruce Alger and Richard Harding Poff.

[Gene Roddenberry](#), *Star Trek* creator, flew the B-17 in the PTO, then served as air crash investigator, heroic action post-War in Pan Am airliner crash; see also [here](#).

Dan Rowan wasn't Laughing-In his P-40 over New Guinea; two victories, see Didja Know below

[BGen James Stewart](#): First movie star to enlist in WWII, Deputy Commander, 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing, highest rank ever for actor; flew B-52 mission in Vietnam

[Jack Valente](#): Flew 51 combat missions as B-25 pilot before 38 years as head of Motion Picture Association of America; in President Kennedy's motorcade on 11/22/1963; movie rating system

[Cal Worthington](#) (but not his anything-but-a-dog, Spot), flew 29 missions as B-17 pilot in ETO, received DFC from Jimmy Doolittle personally, flight training for several future astronauts, before becoming famous for off-beat ads selling cars in the western USA.

## **AND ONE NOTORIUS**

Richard McCoy (D.B. Cooper?) Served two stints in the Army, first as a demolition expert and the second as a pilot in Vietnam, where he was awarded the DFC. Afterward, he turned to crime, hijacking UA Flight 855, a B757 flying from Newark to LA. He had boarded during a stopover in Denver, used a gun and hand grenade to obtain a \$500K ransom, then escaped in mid-flight from the B757's aft door. He tried to throw off the scent by flying one of the helicopters searching for him, but was caught two days later and sentenced to 45 years in the Federal Prison in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. He and two other inmates made a daring escape, crashing through the main gate in a commandeered garbage truck. His two compatriots were soon captured while robbing a bank. McCoy was (presumably) killed in a shoot-out with police on November 9, 1974.

The MO for this incident is so similar to that used by D.B. Cooper that some assumed they were the one and the same, including an FBI agent working the case, Russell Calame, and Chief Probation Officer Bernie Rhodes. Lawsuits followed, the FBI case is still open, and "Cooper" has never been found. For more, see [here](#).

## **REFERENCES**

### **General Info on DFC**

Navy History and Heritage Command: <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/heritage/awards/decorations/distinguished-flying-cross.html>

Military Times: <https://valor.militarytimes.com/award/6>

DFC Society: <https://www.dfcsociety.org/pages/the-distinguished-flying-cross-medal>

Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Distinguished\\_Flying\\_Cross\\_\(United\\_States\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Distinguished_Flying_Cross_(United_States))

### **Pan-Am Good Will Flight**

National Museum of the USAF: <https://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/Visit/Museum-Exhibits/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/196945/pan-american-good-will-flight>

Air and Space Forces: <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/valor-the-greatest-gift>

### **DFCs Awarded to Women**

AOPA: <https://www.aopa.org/news-and-media/all-news/2017/september/pilot/milestones-heroic-women>

1Lt Aleda Lutz: <https://www.thenmusa.org/biographies/aleda-e-lutz>

Col Kim Campbell: <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/air-force-a-10-pilot-kim-campbell>

1Lt Roberta Ross: <https://inspire.eaa.org/2018/07/17/the-real-hero-of-the-piece>

Capt Patricia A. McFetridge: [https://wow.uscgaux.info/Uploads\\_wowll/070-16-01/COC\\_BQN\\_04JUN13\\_pdf.pdf](https://wow.uscgaux.info/Uploads_wowll/070-16-01/COC_BQN_04JUN13_pdf.pdf) and [here](#)

Cdr Sara Ann Stiles: <https://valor.militarytimes.com/hero/401075>

Col Andra Kniep: <https://americanwarriorradio.com/2023/10/andra-kniep-two-dfcs-in-two-days>

Col Kim Campbell: <https://blog.govx.com/for-this-warhog-pilot-the-close-air-support-mission-never-ends>

Lt Col Melissa May: <https://www.af.mil/News/Features/Display/Article/143000/academy-officer-shares-her-air-force-story>

CWO3 Lori Hill: [https://www.army.mil/article/421/cwo3\\_awarded\\_distinguished\\_flying\\_cross](https://www.army.mil/article/421/cwo3_awarded_distinguished_flying_cross)

Maj Mary Jennings Hegar:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170326164729/http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/03/female-helicopter-pilot-hegar-shoot-like-girl>

Julia Bringloe: <https://dustoff.org/julia-bringlow-stalker>

### **DIDJA KNOW?**

Dan Rowan, of *Laugh-In* fame, was another of the cadre of actors working in the 1950s and 60s who did not try to bank on their War-time heroics. He earned a DFC flying a P-40 Warhawk in the 8<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron in the Fifth Air Force in the Pacific Theater early in WWII. He shot down two Japanese aircraft, but sustained serious injuries when he was shot down over New Guinea. In addition to his DFC, he earned its Oak Leaf Cluster in lieu of his Second DFC, an Air Medal, and a Purple Heart. He had been raised in a show business family, so after the War, he went to Hollywood and met Dick Martin, whose TB had kept him from military service. They formed a comedy team in 1952, with Dick as the straight man, but they soon figured out their act was better when they switched roles. They worked the nightclub circuit, and would substitute for more established teams like (Dean) Martin and Lewis and Tommy Noonan and Peter Marshall (!) when needed. Marshall and Rowan had a falling out, and Marshall took the emcee role at *The Hollywood Squares* to prevent Rowan from getting the job. Rowan got back at Marshall by hosting a comedy review with (Dick) Martin in the Summer of Love (1967), which morphed into the enormously popular *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In*.

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