

# Korean War Vets

## Thomas Hudner Jr



On 4 December 1950, Thomas J. Hudner Jr. was part of a six-aircraft flight supporting U.S. Marine Corps ground troops who were trapped by Chinese forces. At 13:38, he took off from the USS Leyte with squadron executive officer Lieutenant Commander Dick Cevoli, Lieutenant George Hudson, Lieutenant Junior Grade Bill Koenig, Ensign Ralph McQueen, and Ensign Jesse L. Brown, who was Hudner's wingman. The flight traveled 100 miles (160 km) from Task Force 77's location to the Chosin Reservoir, flying 35 to 40 minutes through very harsh wintery weather to the vicinity of the villages Yudam-ni and Hagaru-ri. The flight began searching for targets along the west side of the reservoir, lowering their altitude to 700 feet (210 m) in the process. The three-hour search and destroy mission was also an attempt to probe Chinese troop strength in the area.



Thomas J. Hudner shortly after becoming a naval aviator in 1950.

Though the flight spotted no Chinese, at 14:40 Koenig radioed to Brown that he appeared to be trailing fuel. The damage had likely come by small arms fire from Chinese infantry, who were known to hide in the snow and ambush passing aircraft by firing in unison. At least one bullet had ruptured a fuel line. Brown, losing fuel pressure and increasingly unable to control the aircraft, dropped his external fuel tanks and rockets and attempted to land the craft in a snow-covered clearing on the side of a mountain. Brown crashed into a bowl-shaped valley at approximately 40°36'N 127°06'E, near Somong-ni, 15 miles (24 km) behind Chinese lines and in 15-degree weather. The aircraft broke up violently upon impact and was destroyed. In the crash, Brown's leg was pinned beneath the fuselage of the Corsair, and he stripped off his helmet and gloves in an attempt to free himself, before waving to the other pilots, who were circling close overhead. Hudner and the other airborne pilots thought Brown had died in the crash, and they immediately began a mayday radio to any heavy transport aircraft in the area as they canvassed the mountain for any sign of nearby Chinese ground forces. They received a signal that a rescue helicopter would come as soon as possible, but Brown's aircraft was smoking and a fire had started near its internal fuel tanks.

Hudner attempted in vain to rescue Brown via radio instruction, before intentionally crash-landing his aircraft, running to Brown's side and attempting to wrestle him free from the wreck. With Brown's condition worsening by the minute, Hudner attempted to drown the aircraft fire in snow, and pull Brown from the aircraft, all in vain. Brown began slipping in and out of consciousness, but in spite of being in great pain, did not complain to Hudner. A rescue helicopter arrived around 15:00, and Hudner and its pilot, Lieutenant Charles Ward, were unable to put out the engine fire with a fire extinguisher and tried in vain to free Brown with an axe for 45 minutes. They briefly considered, at Brown's request, amputating his trapped leg. Brown lost consciousness for the last time shortly thereafter. His last known words, which he told Hudner, were "tell Daisy (his wife) I love her." The helicopter, which was unable to operate in the darkness, was forced to leave at nightfall with Hudner, leaving Brown behind. Brown is believed to have died shortly thereafter of his injuries and exposure to the extreme cold. No Chinese forces threatened the site, likely because of the heavy air presence of the VF-32 pilots.



**Ensign Jesse L. Brown**

Hudner begged superiors to allow him to return to the wreck to help extract Brown, but he was not allowed, as other officers feared an ambush of the vulnerable helicopters resulting in additional casualties. In order to prevent the body and the aircraft from falling into Chinese or North Korean hands, the U.S. Navy bombed the crash site with napalm two days later, reciting the Lord's Prayer over the radio as they watched Brown's body consumed by flames. The pilots observed that his body looked to have been disturbed and his clothes stolen, but he was still stuck in the aircraft. The remains of both Brown and the aircraft were never recovered. Brown was the first U.S. Navy officer killed in the war.

The 4 December incident grounded Hudner for a month, as he injured his back in the landing, an injury he later said persisted for 6 to 8 years. He flew 27 combat missions during the war, serving there until 20 January 1951, when the Leyte was rotated back to the Atlantic Fleet. On 13 April 1951, Hudner received the Medal of Honor from President Harry S. Truman, meeting Brown's widow, Daisy Brown, in the process. The two stayed in regular contact for at least 50 years following this meeting. He was the first servicemember to be awarded the medal during the Korean War, though several others would be awarded the medal for actions which occurred before 4 December 1950.



**Hudner receives the Medal of Honor**

Hudner said he was occasionally criticized for his actions, and "about 90" people have told him he acted recklessly. His commanders noted his actions may have endangered the helicopter pilot and sacrificed an aircraft, criticisms Hudner later said did not make him regret his decision, as he felt it was a spur of the moment action. Still, commanders later issued orders forbidding pilots from crash-landing in a similar way to try to save downed wingmen. On later reflection, Hudner indicated he did not consider himself a hero for his actions.

After receiving the Medal of Honor, Hudner was transferred to the United States and served as a flight instructor at Naval Air Station Corpus Christi in Texas in 1952 and 1953. Following this, he served as a staff officer for Carrier Division 3, which at the time was part of Task Force 77 and operating around Japan, in 1953 and 1954. In 1955 and 1956, he served in Development Squadron 3 at Naval Air Station Atlantic City in New Jersey, where he flew developmental and experimental aircraft. During this time, he was trained on jet engine-powered aircraft.

Beginning in October 1957, Hudner served in an exchange program with the U.S. Air Force, flying for two years with the 60th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron at Otis Air Force Base in

Barnstable County, Massachusetts. During this assignment, he flew the F-94 Starfire and the F-101 Voodoo. He was then promoted to commander and served as aide to the Chief of the Bureau of Naval Weapons until 1962, when he attended the Air War College at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama. Upon graduating in July 1963, he returned to flying duty and was appointed the executive officer of Fighter Squadron 53, flying the F-8E Crusader aboard the USS Ticonderoga. After serving as executive officer, Hudner assumed command of VF-53. Following this assignment, he was transferred to a position as Leadership Training Officer at the office of Commander, Naval Air Forces, at Naval Air Station North Island in Coronado, California.

Hudner was promoted to captain in 1965, taking command of Training Squadron 24 at Naval Air Station Chase Field in Bee County, Texas, which he commanded in 1965 and 1966. In 1966 he was assigned to the USS Kitty Hawk, first as a navigator, then as the ship's executive officer. The Kitty Hawk deployed off the shore of South Vietnam in 1966 and 1967, flying missions in support of the Vietnam War, and he served on the ship during this tour but saw no combat and flew none of the missions himself. In 1968, he was assigned as the operations officer for the Southeast Asia Air Operations division of the U.S. Navy. That year, he married Georgea Smith, a widow with three children, whom he had met in San Diego. The two had one son together, Thomas Jerome Hudner III, born in 1971. Hudner's final Navy posting was as the head of Aviation Technical Training in the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington, D.C., a post which he held until his retirement in February 1973.

On 17 February 1973, days before Hudner's retirement, the Navy commissioned the Knox-class frigate USS Jesse L. Brown (FF-1089), the first U.S. ship named in honor of an African American. Present at the commissioning ceremony in Boston, Massachusetts, were Daisy Brown Thorne, who had remarried, her daughter Pamela Brown, and Hudner, who gave a dedication.[15] The ship was decommissioned on 27 July 1994 and sold to Egypt.

In May 2012, the Secretary of the Navy announced that an Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer will be named USS Thomas Hudner



**Hudner's military decorations**

[Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Hudner](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Hudner) Jul 2012 ++]