

Navy Secretary Names Destroyer in Honor of Korean War Helicopter Crewman



WASHINGTON — Navy Secretary Richard V. Spencer named a future Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer (DDG-131) in honor of a Korean War veteran and Navy Cross recipient, Aviation Machinist's Mate 3rd Class George M. Neal, the secretary's public affairs officer said in a March 26 release.

Neal, a Springfield, Ohio, native, served with Helicopter Utility Squadron One (HU-1), a Navy helicopter rescue unit embarked from Australian light cruiser HMAS Sydney during the Korean War.

"At significant risk to his personal safety, Petty Officer Neal distinguished himself by volunteering to go into harm's way into North Korea to rescue a fellow service member," Spencer said. "He was a hero, and I am proud his legacy will live on in the future USS George M. Neal."

Neal was awarded the Navy Cross for his actions on July 3, 1951, when while serving with HU-1, he and pilot Lt. j.g. John Koelsch attempted to rescue Marine Corps Capt. James Wilkins. Wilkins crashed near Yondong in North Korea after his Corsair took antiaircraft fire.

Koelsch and Neal located Wilkins and, under increased enemy fire, lowered the rescue sling. However, the helicopter was disabled and crashed. For nine days, Neal assisted Koelsch and Wilkins in evading enemy forces before being captured and held as a prisoner of war. Koelsch died during captivity but Wilkins and Neal were released and returned to the United States in 1952 with more than 320 fellow POWs. Koelsch was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions.

Arleigh Burke-class destroyers conduct a variety of operations from peacetime presence and crisis response to sea control and power projection. The future USS George M. Neal will be a Flight III destroyer capable of fighting air, surface and subsurface battles simultaneously and will contain a combination of offensive and defensive weapons systems designed to support maritime warfare, including integrated air and missile defense and vertical launch capabilities.

The ship will be built at Huntington Ingalls in Pascagoula, Mississippi. The ship will be 509 feet long, have a beam length of 59 feet and be capable of operating at speeds in excess of 30 knots.