

# 3,365 Miles of Honor

## A VFW member and retired Army lieutenant colonel worked for a decade to ensure that 12 states officially declare US Highway 20 as the Medal of Honor highway

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A decade ago, while driving in his home state of Oregon, Dick Tobiason, a retired Army lieutenant colonel, realized that none of the highways in the state recognized or honored veterans. He wanted to change that.

Tobiason, a member of VFW Post 4108 in Redmond, Oregon, founded the Bend Heroes Foundation in Bend, Oregon. On June 20, 2017, the Vietnam War veteran's work paid off when the Oregon legislature and then-Gov. Kate Brown approved H.B. 2100, a law that officially declared Oregon's 451-mile-long U.S. Highway 20 as the Oregon Medal of Honor Highway. The route stretches between Newport, on the state's central coast, to the Oregon-Idaho state line.

For Tobiason, this was only the beginning. He wanted all of U.S. Highway 20, the longest highway in the U.S., which spans 3,365 miles from the Pacific to the Atlantic oceans, to be named in honor of Medal of Honor veterans. He said it became a reality when Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker on Nov. 17, 2022 signed a bill that officially named Massachusetts' U.S. Highway 20 in honor of Medal of Honor recipients. Massachusetts was the 12th and final state to officially dedicate U.S. Highway 20 for veterans who have received the nation's highest award for valor.

### **PUTTING HIS EXPERIENCE TO USE**

During his time in the Army, Tobiason served as the commanding officer of a forward air patrol unit that supported the 3rd Marine Division during his first tour of Vietnam in 1966 and 1967. On his second tour in 1972 and 1973, he was an advisor to the South Vietnamese government. Later in his career, Tobiason worked at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration as a manager for its flight research program in Washington, D.C.

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After retiring from NASA, Tobiason then worked as a lobbyist for several airlines from 1985 to 1990. That was where, he said, he learned the “ins and outs” of the legislative process.

Putting that experience to use, Tobiason began contacting veterans groups in the 11 other states east of Oregon that contain portions of Highway 20:

- Idaho, 411 miles
- Montana, 12 miles
- Wyoming, 531 miles
- Nebraska, 432 miles
- Iowa, 302 miles
- Illinois, 234 miles
- Indiana, 156 miles
- Ohio, 260 miles
- Pennsylvania, 45 miles
- New York, 372 miles
- Massachusetts, 153 miles

#### **‘PROUD OF THE ACCOMPLISHMENT’**

In the state of New York, the VFW Department of New York, along with the Bend Heroes Foundation, led efforts to pass legislation in the state to rename New York’s section of U.S. Highway 20. Past VFW Department of New York Commander Michael Hoag said he learned about the highway project headed by Tobiason after reading an article in the August 2017 issue of VFW magazine.

“After learning about this, I knew what I wanted to work on during my year as commander,” said Hoag, a Vietnam War veteran and Purple Heart recipient. “The Department of New York Headquarters in Albany is only about a mile away from Highway 20.”

In the years leading up to his year as the Department of New York commander (2021-22), Hoag said he began working with Tobiason and VFW Department of New York Legislative Advisor Kirby Haman to work with the state’s government for the project. Hoag said that last year, the New York legislature approved S. 7620-A and A. 9067-A to name the highway. Gov. Kathy Hochul on July 18, 2022, signed the bill into law.

“I am proud of the accomplishment,” said Hoag, who was drafted into the Army in 1966 and served a tour in Vietnam from 1967 to 1968.

#### **HIGHWAY ACROSS AMERICA**

Tobiason said he is working to get U.S. Highway 20 renamed to honor Medal of Honor veterans on the national level.

“To achieve that goal, Bend Heroes Foundation has requested Oregon’s Sen. Ron Wyden (D) to sponsor legislation by Congress designating the National Medal of Honor Highway,” Tobiason said. “It would be cosponsored in the House of Representatives by Pennsylvania Rep. Mike Kelly (R).”

Tobiason added that Kelly represents a district that is home to U.S. Highway 20. He added that VFW has given its support to the project.

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