JONATHAN M. DANIELS, VMI CLASS OF 1961

Jonathan Daniels, valedictorian of the VMI Class of 1961, was a seminarian at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Mass., in 1965 when he answered the call of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for clergy to assist with civil rights and voter registration efforts in the South. On Aug. 20, 1965, he made the ultimate sacrifice: giving his life for that of another.

Daniels, Richard Morrisroe, a Catholic priest from Chicago, and black teenagers Ruby Sales and Joyce Bailey approached Varner’s Cash Store in Hayneville, Ala., to buy sodas. Tom Coleman, a part-time deputy sheriff, appeared in the doorway of the store holding a shotgun. As Coleman lowered his gun at Sales, Daniels pushed her to the ground just before the first blast killed him, almost instantly. Father Morrisroe then shoved Bailey behind a parked car before the second blast hit him. He was critically injured and spent six months in the hospital recovering.

When he heard of the tragedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “One of the most heroic Christian deeds of which I have heard in my entire ministry was performed by Jonathan Daniels. Certainly there are no incidents more beautiful in the annals of church history, and though we are grieved at this time, our grief should give way to a sense of Christian honor and nobility.”

Over the years, Jonathan Daniels’ selfless act often has been recognized. Two books have been written about him, and in the summer of 1994 the Episcopal Church added the date of his death to its Calendar of Lesser Feasts and Fasts, an honor bordering on sainthood or martyrdom. Daniels’ name is inscribed in Canterbury Cathedral’s Chapel of Saints...
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In February 1999, "Here Am I Send Me: The Journey of Jonathan Daniels" was narrated by Sam Waterston and aired nationally on the Odyssey Channel. The film is viewed by each entering class of the Institute.


The VMI Board of Visitors established the Jonathan M. Daniels ’61 Humanitarian Award in December 1997 to emphasize the virtue of humanitarian public service and to recognize individuals who have made significant personal sacrifices to protect or improve the lives of others. The scope of nominees is on a national level.

The External Development Committee of the VMI Board of Visitors and a separate task force established criteria and guidelines for the award. These committees worked closely with VMI’s Promaji Club, an organization of VMI cadets that promotes positive relations among all races and ethnic groups in the Corps of Cadets. The Promaji Club initiated a Jonathan Daniels Award in 1992, and its leadership graciously agreed to give the Institute exclusive use of the name for the new Jonathan Daniels Humanitarian Award.

Though a recipient of the Jonathan Daniels Award may not necessarily be selected each year, an annual ceremony is held each March on or near Jonathan Daniels’ birthday (March 20). Its purpose is to afford cadets a continuing reminder that it is possible to embody and display heroic qualities of honor, loyalty and devotion at any age and in any circumstances. The External Relations Committee oversees this annual ceremony and the bestowing of the award upon selection.

In February 1998, a ceremony establishing the Daniels Humanitarian Award was held at VMI; and during the annual memorial event in March 2000 it was announced that President Carter would be the first recipient. On hand to speak at both events was The Very Reverend John A. Simpson, Dean of England’s Canterbury Cathedral. In March 2004, the Institute dedicated the Jonathan Daniels Courtyard and archway at VMI. Ambassador Andrew Young was presented the second Daniels Humanitarian Award in March 2006. Dr. Paul V. Hebert, VMI Class of 1968, was presented the third Daniels Humanitarian Award in 2011. The Honorable John Lewis, U.S. Representative – Georgia 5th District, received the award in 2015. Carolyn S. Miles, President and Chief Executive Officer of Save the Children, was presented the award in 2019.