

Running head: THE WARTIME AWARDS SYSTEM

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### Abstract

The major factor in determining what award to issue a Soldier is often not the act of heroism or the performance of duty. Instead, it is based on the rank the Soldier possesses and the award system becomes a shell of what it is intended to be. Additionally, there are individuals that use their rank and loopholes in the regulation to garner awards that they are not entitled to.

### The Wartime Award System

The Army's award system is too often dependant upon the recipients rank or position and not the actions or performance of the individual. The writer has encountered many ethical dilemmas throughout his military career. During these incidents the integrity of the award system was without a doubt tarnished.

The first adverse experience with the Army's wartime award system was during Desert Storm. Assigned as a young Staff Sergeant with the lead section of a Cavalry platoon, the division was part of the flanking movement that V Corps executed. The Troop saw extensive action, with two Soldiers making the ultimate sacrifice and several sustaining serious wounds. The other two Troops served as over watch and reserve during the action. An ongoing sandstorm rendered them both non-combat effective due to the limited visibility. These units did however assist with security during the reconsolidation of the Troop's combat power as the Armor took the lead in the battle. The rest of the war was uneventful with regards to combat. Screening and traffic control points consumed the days until redeployment. Once redeployed the business of awards became the priority. Several months later, the Squadron hosted an awards ceremony and several Soldiers and leaders were shocked at the results. Each Troop in the Squadron had the same approximate number of Bronze Stars, Army Commendation Medals (ARCOM), and Army Achievement Medals (AAM). Furthermore, awarded medals were similar with regards to rank and duty position. Everyone could see what was occurring right before our eyes. The awards that spent so much time in the editing phase had gone into the system and were regurgitated in a cookie cutter fashion. The only warriors that were exempt from this practice, thankfully, were the KIA or WIA Soldiers. Of major concern was the number of Bronze Stars that were downgraded to Army Commendation Medals. The troop leadership was outraged and

immediately began to work the system to fix the awards, but ran into a wall of bureaucracy. The explanation that was given had to do with the level of responsibility of each Soldier. The regulation states that, “the Bronze Star Medal is awarded to any person who, while serving in any capacity in or with the Army after 6 December 1941, distinguished himself or herself by heroic or meritorious achievement or service, in connection with military operations against an armed enemy” (AR 600-8-22, 2006, para. 3-14 b). The regulation makes no mention of the level of responsibility or rank that the Soldier possesses. The situation all those years ago went unchanged and many deserving warriors did not receive the award they earned and deserved.

The writers experience with this practice continued during Operation Joint Endeavor. Once again during redeployment, leadership began writing awards for deserving Soldiers. Once again, the term “level of responsibility” popped up and a rank was assigned to eligible awards. Staff Sergeants and above were eligible for the ARCOM, and Sergeants and below were eligible for the AAM. The result was Soldiers that logged over 10,000 miles of patrols on mine infested terrain dealing with hostile locals were given the same award as a Soldier that never left the Forward Operating Base (FOB), as long as they had the same rank. The intention is not to belittle the contribution of these Soldiers. Everyone does their part, but in the generic sense, there is a real difference between the arduous tasks performed during combat patrols and the tasks associated with staff work or other logistical FOB based duties. At any rate, both should be judged on the merit of their performance and not by the pay scale.

During Operation Iraqi Freedom, the writer pledged to insure Soldiers received the award that their actions merited. Again, the system would prove frustrating and disappointing. While conducting operations in Iraq, the Troop was first handed the most challenging and dangerous sector in the Brigade. Later it was hand picked by the Brigade Commander to continue combat

operations while the rest of the Squadron began training Iraqi Soldiers. The latter is no small task, but it lacked the sexiness that most combat Soldiers crave when relating stories. The result was a fractured unit ripe with petty jealousies that spilled over into the award system. Yet, once again, the writer was forced to watch Soldier's tour awards being downgraded for various reasons that had everything to do with a quota and nothing to do with the heroic deeds displayed on a daily basis. When the dust settled the Soldiers were subjected to the same practices identified throughout this paper. This time the justification was the command did not want to divide the unit any more than it already was. On the surface, this argument had some merit. It soon lost all credibility when all the submitted impact awards were mysteriously lost and repeated resubmissions met the same fate. The awards were found sometime later after an IG complaint, but the deadline for award submission had passed. This was not the only dilemma faced with during OIF. The Combat Action Badge (CAB) also provided its share of issues.

The first of these issues was the fact that if four Soldiers in a vehicle within 50 meters of an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) and one of them happened to be an Infantry Soldier, everyone would be awarded for the incident except the Infantry Soldier. The Combat Infantry Badge does not make provision for this situation. The regulation states, "the Infantry man must be engaged in active ground combat, to close with and destroy the enemy" (AR 600-8-22, 2006, para. 8-6 b (5)). The spirit of the regulation is clearly understood, but the enemy's use of the IED has changed the playing field just a little. No longer are Soldiers always looking into the eyes of the enemy. More often Soldiers are looking for wires and disturbances of earth to find the killer. The fact that you cannot shoot at it does not make it any less a threat or impacted Soldiers any less dead or wounded.

The second issue was the CAB hunters. Seemingly, overnight reports of patrols calling in transformed from gunfire that was observed or heard turned into reports of gunfire on their positions. Even with no visible effects on patrols and vehicles, the CAB can still be awarded. The regulation states, "Soldier must be personally present and actively engaging or engaged by the enemy" (AR 600-8-22, 2006, para. 8-8 b (3)) Personnel that habitually performed their duties on the forward operating base (FOB), would worm their way onto a patrol and that patrol would undoubtedly receive fire. The CAB became more important than the Soldier's integrity.

The last and most distasteful of the injustices I have witnessed related to the Purple Heart and many leaders were guilty of using their rank to influence the awarding of this medal. The overriding loophole used for this award was the IED and the real or fabricated concussions from the blast. The writer's crew sustained a blast from a 500-pound bomb 15 meters in front of the vehicle. Everyone experience ringing in the ears and headaches but not one raced to the infirmary to be treated by medical personnel. The writer witnessed several officers and one First Sergeant run to be treated when witnesses stated it was questionable if they were even close enough to the blast to be awarded the CAB.

None of the aforementioned examples is a good example of what the Army award system is designed to be. A recent article in the Army Times amplified the true nature of the award system. To date Operation Enduring Freedom has generated 69,411 awards, including one Distinguished Cross, 95 Silver Stars, and 696 Bronze Stars for Valor. Operation Iraqi Freedom has issued 346,220 awards, among them one posthumous Medal of Honor to Sergeant First Class Paul Smith; five Distinguished Crosses, 347 Silver Stars, and 44,985 Bronze Stars for Valor. In total, there have been 40,102 CIBs and 43,985 CABs for service in Afghanistan and Iraq (Tice, 2007). Another article highlighted five heroes from the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division being awarded

the Silver Star for acts of gallantry. The Soldiers ranged in rank from Specialist to Captain. While reading the citations for each warrior's award, there were no apparent similarities in the level of responsibility for any of the Soldiers. One was an Army medic, another was a reconnaissance platoon machine gunner, and yet another was a Troop First Sergeant. What stood out throughout the article was Americans answering the call of duty and exemplifying the Warrior Ethos. They were presented with the awards that they earned and deserved.

In conclusion, the spirit and intent of the military award system is simple, award deserving Soldiers for their actions and or performance. Gallantry and heroism have no rank. As a Command Sergeants Major and Sergeants Major, graduates of this Academy are obligated to use all available resources to ensure that Soldiers under their watch receive the awards that they earn. No more and no less.

References

*AR 600-8-22*. (2006).

Tice, J. (2007, December 10). Afghanistan, Iraq awards doubled from first Gulf War. *Army Times*, p. 26.