**In the beginning, they were few and rare. But that was in the beginning.**

# A SHORT HISTORY OF MEDALS

**By Bruce D. Callander**

THE tradition of awarding medals to America's military men and women dates to the American Revolution. On Aug. 7, 1782, Gen. George Washington established the first authorized US military decoration—the Badge of Military Merit. It was a piece of cloth in the shape of a heart. The nation used it to recognize unusual gallantry or extraordinary fidelity.

During the Revolutionary War, the Badge of Military Merit was awarded to only three soldiers, in recognition of their singular meritorious actions. The wearers were allowed to pass guards and sentinels without challenge.

No more awards of this type were made until 1932, when the practice was revived by Gen. Douglas MacArthur, then Army Chief of Staff, who proposed a new medal to mark the bicentennial of the birth of George Washington.

Washington's profile adorned the heart that formed the body of the medal. It became known as the Purple Heart.

The revised award still was given for meritorious acts. However, new Army regulations said that war wounds would qualify as evidence of such acts. Thereafter, the Purple Heart became associated with combat injuries and fatalities.

The second award specifically designed and authorized for American service members was the Medal of Honor. On Dec. 21, 1861, Congress passed a bill authorizing creation of the MOH for enlisted men of the Navy and Marine Corps. Within seven months, Congress had passed a similar bill for the Army.

On July 14, 1862, President Lincoln signed the legislation creating the Army Medal of Honor for enlisted Army troops. It would be the following year before Congress authorized the Medal of Honor for officers.

During the Civil War, more than 2,000 Medals of Honor were issued. Allegations of fraud and shady politics in the award of the medal led to a review of all those issued to Army members prior to 1917. A commission of five retired general officers determined that 911 of the medals had been improperly awarded. They were revoked.

Among the contested medals were those given to members of the 27th

*From left, Air Force Cross, Silver Star, Distinguished Flying Cross, Air Medal, Air Force Commendation Medal, and Kosovo Campaign Medal.*


Maine Regiment for re-enlisting during the Civil War and those given to members of the honor guard at President Lincoln's funeral. The commission also revoked medals of several civilian scouts, including Buffalo Bill Cody, and that of Mary Walker, a surgeon and the only female recipient. Later, the government restored these medals to Cody and Walker.

## Especially for Fliers

The first medal developed exclusively for aviators was the Distinguished Flying Cross. It was authorized in 1926 by the same legislation that set up the Army Air Corps. The following year, President Coolidge presented DFCs to the fliers who completed a goodwill flight to South America and, a month later, to Charles Lindbergh for his trans-Atlantic flight.

Congress authorized the award to be retroactive so that it could be given for accomplishments in World War I. A special act of Congress also awarded the DFC to the Wright brothers.

Since the outbreak of World War II, the number of decorations available to airmen has grown. Congress, when it made the Air Force a separate service in September 1947, authorized USAF to develop its own version of various medals, including the Medal of Honor, Distinguished Service Cross (which became the Air Force Cross), and Soldier's Medal, now the Airman's Medal.

In World War II, Army Air Forces units gave out the Distinguished Flying Cross by the tens of thousands—Eighth Air Force alone issued some 46,000. And many air units awarded the newly created Air Medal automatically for a given number of missions.

Subsequent changes and additions have been made. In 1958, Air Force Secretary James H. Douglas Jr. created the Air Force Commendation Medal to replace the earlier Army version of the award. In 1980, Secretary Hans Mark established the Air Force Achievement Medal for service that doesn't quite warrant the commendation medal. In 1988, Secretary of the Air Force Edward C. Aldridge Jr. approved the Aerial Achievement Medal, which ranks just below the Air Medal.

The number of service ribbons grew as well. The Air Force developed awards for recruiting, overseas tours, longevity, marksmanship, and selection as an Outstanding Airman of the Year.

Ribbons now are available for completing initial training, for being an outstanding basic graduate, for taking NCO professional training, and for instructing in basic training. Airmen are also eligible for ribbons for serving in a growing number of operations or simply for being in one of a number of places at the right time.

## Simplifying the Uniform

In some cases, medals and ribbons were created to replace the badges and insignia that had adorned the Army Air Forces uniform. Specialty and unit patches, insignia for marksmanship, and hash marks representing years of service and time overseas—all were carryovers from the Army.

When USAF first became a separate service, it allowed members to continue wearing many of these Army accoutrements. However, when the service developed its own distinctive uniform, officials decided it was time to rethink badges, patches, and ribbons. Shoulder patches were removed, corps insignia disappeared, and hash marks were eliminated.

However, the Air Force never quite achieved the "plain blue suit" look that the early leaders envisioned. As it eliminated some insignia, it continued to approve requests for new specialty badges and other adornments.

Today's service members have more "fruit salad" available than at any time in history, and more awards are in the works.

Maj. Jolisa Dudley, chief of the Air Force's Recognition Programs Branch, acknowledges that this bothers some old-timers. She said, "There is a perception, especially among people who have been in service longer, that people are racking up more awards than they used to."

The Air Force has ribbons for training, long tours, short tours, longevity, and good conduct. Officers who move every two or three years, as most do in the Air Force, said Dudley, "get some form of end-of-tour ribbon."

Dudley qualified her remarks, though, saying that many of the awards today are a direct result of the number of operations that have engaged airmen over the past few years. "It's probably one of the busiest times in recent history," she said. "We've added awards, and we have a lot of new ones in various stages of approval and implementation."

For instance, she said, the service has created an Air and Space Campaign Medal, and USAF recently approved the Air Force Expeditionary Service Ribbon to recognize people who deploy in various contingencies. Moreover, President Bush authorized two war-on-terrorism medals—the Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal and the Global War on Terrorism Service Medal. The Defense Department and each of the services are ironing out specific criteria for those awards now, said Dudley.

Basically, the expeditionary medal will go to members who serve in

military expeditions to areas such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Philippines. The service medal will be for members who serve in military operations such as Operation Noble Eagle, the homeland defense effort.

The Air Force is also working on "some unit awards to bridge the gap between the Presidential Unit Citation and the Air Force Outstanding Unit and Excellence awards," said Dudley. Those will be the Gallant Unit Citation and the Meritorious Unit Award.

The Presidential Unit Citation is presented for heroism equivalent to that displayed by an individual who receives an Air Force Cross, explained Col. Joseph Marchino, deputy director of the Air Force Personnel Council. "The Gallant Unit Citation is designed to be somewhat less than that and you can think of it in terms of a Silver Star," he said, adding, "When you come down to the Meritorious Unit Award, you're talking about a Legion of Merit type of award."

## Never Too Late

For veterans who earned medals but never received them, there is a legal way to claim them.

Although rules stipulate that recommendations for awards should be submitted within two years of the event and the awards made within three, said Marchino, there were always many requests for exceptions. Several years ago Congress authorized veterans to receive special consideration if they had been told they were going to get an award but never did. "Maybe it was processed but got lost in the paperwork, or maybe they just thought they were deserving of the award," explained Marchino.

Many such examples exist from World War II. Because of the rapid drawdown after victory was declared in Europe, "many units had other things to do, and there just wasn't a lot of time to process awards," said Marchino.

If a veteran wants to claim old awards, he must submit an application, and, "ideally," Marchino said, the veteran should have "some kind of an endorsement" from someone on an aircrew or from the unit commander. "It helps, too, if they have some documentation to go with that," he said, and added, "Perhaps they can show that other members of their crew got the award and they didn't."

The Air Force Decorations Board tries to apply the criteria that were current at the time of the event. "If it was something in World War II, we look at the things that were going on during that period and try to evaluate it without applying today's rules to the conditions of that time," he said.

Typical is the case of Wilbur C. West, a World War II pilot. In April 2001, the Air Force awarded West the Silver Star for a mission he flew as copilot 59 years earlier. It was the first low-level raid on Ploesti, Romania, on June 12, 1942. His airplane was one of 12 that reached the target, but it ran out of fuel and landed in Turkey, and West was interned for six months. At the time, other crews received medals for that mission. It was West's daughter who did much of the research that eventually led USAF to issue West a belated Silver Star.

While veterans of that 1942 raid received some recognition, the mission was overshadowed by another flown to Ploesti the following year. The 1943 mission, often erroneously identified as the first against the Ploesti oil fields, was widely publicized. The aircrews on that one received Silver Stars, and five were awarded Medals of Honor, all but two of them posthumously.

The award rules for World War II in general often seemed inconsistent from one theater to another.

In the Pacific, troops complained they received no medals until Lt. Gen. George C. Kenney, commander of Fifth Air Force, asked for and received authority to approve decorations up to the Distinguished Service Cross.

In Europe, aircrews in some Army Air Forces units received Air Medals for flying five missions and an oak leaf cluster for every 10 thereafter. Other units had different criteria. In one Fifteenth Air Force bomb group, no awards above the Air Medal were given out until statisticians at headquarters noted that the unit lagged behind others. Under pressure to make more awards, the group, within weeks, awarded several crews the DFC.

## More Than Metal

For Air Force enlisted members, the more prestigious medals translate into points under the Weighted Airman Promotion System. The Medal of Honor, for example, counts 15 points, the DFC counts for seven, and the Air Medal, three. The maximum number of points an individual can count for medals is 25.

However, this practice has been criticized for giving an edge to airmen in specialties where awards are more likely to be given. Officials argue, though, that the WAPS medal-point system only does what human selection boards have done for years.

As chief of the Air Force's Recognition Programs Branch, Dudley said she is more concerned with presenting awards where earned. "Our primary goal is to ensure that the appropriate awards are given to deserving airmen," she said. "We have vested the decision-making authority in our commanders, and we rely heavily on their integrity."

Approval authority rests with various commands, depending on the award. "For all the operations [in] Southwest Asia, awards up to and including the DFC are approved by the US Central Command Air Forces commander," said Marchino.

The highest medals recently awarded to Air Force members have been for actions in Afghanistan. There were two Air Force Crosses approved for operations there, said Marchino. They were posthumously given to pararescuejumper SrA. Jason D. Cunningham and combat controller TSgt. John Chapman, for heroic actions in Operation Anaconda in Afghanistan. Those have been the only two given out for any of the operations in Southwest Asia.

Eighteen Silver Stars have been approved for operations in Afghanistan and three more were pending approval.

The highest Air Force awards for Operation Iraqi Freedom have been Distinguished Flying Crosses—"more than 100 of them," said Marchino. ■

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