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Army Awards

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Abstract

The Army awards program has lost its value through years of reduction in the required standards of excellence. Regulatory guidance provides criteria for each award, yet leadership conveniently overlooks or outright ignores the guidance. The Good Conduct Medal is a rubber-stamp award without meaning. To earn a combat award, one must merely serve in a combat zone and performance is irrelevant. Badges for infantrymen are blanket awards given to all members of a unit deployed regardless of their contact with the enemy. Rank continues to be a discriminating factor despite the regulations restriction on such criteria. Leadership sets aside its ethics when knowingly signs recommendations that do not meet eligibility or performance requirements.

Army Awards

While the design of the Army awards program is to recognize and reward Soldiers for heroism, meritorious achievement, or meritorious performance, leaders at all levels have devalued the program by neglecting to uphold eligibility criteria and enforce the standards required for Soldiers to receive awards and decorations. The common leadership philosophy that giving every Soldier a medal is taking care of them has contributed to the loss of esteem these awards originally represented. The culture in the Army that to give awards to everyone while not questioning the recommender's integrity, created the problem we have today with the Army award system. In many cases, leaders ignore ethics and recommend or approve awards for Soldiers who clearly do not meet either the eligibility criteria or the standard of performance.

Regulatory Guidance

The Army regulation governing the awards program clearly states that awards are for those individuals whose achievements have made a significant contribution. The regulation also states that there are no automatic entitlements to a departure award for permanent change of station and these awards should be limited to exceptional cases. (AR 600-8-22, 2006) Today, the exception is the Soldier who departs without an award. Many out-processing checklists contain a section that leaders must complete regarding a Soldier's departure award. First line leaders must justify, usually in writing, why a Soldier is not receiving an award. This pressures the young noncommissioned officer to submit all Soldiers, regardless of performance, for an award. This reduces the effectiveness of the award program and reduces the value the award once held. This also causes an automatic increase in the level of award recommended. A Soldier normally deserving an Army Achievement Medal based on meritorious performance will now receive an Army Commendation Medal since Soldiers who have done less have already

received the AAM. Should a well-deserving Soldier receive the same award as his less deserving peers he will feel that the system is not fair and his leadership failed to take care of him.

Good Conduct Medal

Individuals receive the Army Good Conduct Award for three years of exemplary service. Many Soldiers commit actions that do not meet the criteria for the award. Leadership fails to document properly such incidents or does not understand the disapproval process required for the GCM. Even if leadership at a current assignment properly documents ineligibility for the GCM, once the Soldier changes station, documentation disappears and the new leadership has no choice but to award the medal. The GCM has become a standard award given after three years of service regardless of that character of service.

Combat Awards

Combat awards pose the biggest ethical problem in the awards program for the Army today. In a time of war, there is no doubt the Army must maintain morale and reward exceptional performance. Is it right to use military awards as a means to this end? Leaders are afraid to tell their Soldiers that their performance, while good, is not worthy of recognition as exceptional. In addition, leaders trample eligibility criteria in order to reward themselves, their Soldiers, or their unit.

Combat Infantryman's Badge

The Combat Infantryman's Badge (CIB) recognizes those infantrymen who engage in direct fire with the enemy in a declared combat zone. The regulation clearly defines the award as one reserved for the infantryman. During my first combat tour in Afghanistan in 2002, a unit submitted an engineer officer for award of the combat infantryman badge. Clearly, this officer

did not meet the eligibility requirements of the award, as the first requirement is to hold an infantry designation. While this officer's actions certainly warranted recognition, the CIB was the incorrect device to use for that recognition. The division command group returned the award on three occasions, disapproved, based on the eligibility criteria. Eventually, the unit submitted the award to Human Resources Command, where after much deliberation they approved award of the CIB to this engineer officer. The same organization that issues guidance and criteria for maintaining the dignity and value of the awards program violated the integrity of the regulation by awarding the CIB to this individual. This caused the division commander and command sergeant major much consternation as they felt this undermined both their authority and ability to uphold the standards of the CIB. If the Army will not uphold the standard, how can lower echelons do so?

In summer of 2004, on my second tour in Bagram, Afghanistan, a rocket landed in the middle of the airfield, causing no damage or injuries. The next morning the Special Forces unit collocated with us at Bagram Airbase, submitted all infantry personnel that were in their camp the previous night for award of the CIB. The Commander of the Special Forces Group, a Colonel, signed the paperwork recommending the award. An officer willing to sign award recommendations that clearly do not warrant award of the CIB demonstrates a lack of integrity as well as a level of disrespect for his higher commander by placing him in an ethical dilemma. We returned the recommendations without action, as they did not meet the requirement of being engaged in direct fire with the enemy.

Leader Integrity

The fact that the group commander signed the recommendations highlights another problem with the award system. Leaders feel that their signature is all that should be required for

the approval authority to approve award recommendations. Often, award recommendations would come forward with little or no detail on the achievements of the individuals contained within. To return them disapproved, without action, or requesting further information was to question the integrity of the signature authority. Commanders felt it was more important that their “word” be enough rather than put the effort into correctly preparing the recommendations.

The Awards Board of Combined Joint Task Force – 180 consisted of the Division Command Sergeant Major, Division Chief of Staff and the Assistant Division Commander for Support and Assistant Division Commander for Operations. These individuals each reviewed every award recommendation submitted for approval of the Task Force Commander and made their recommendation. My responsibility was to ensure recommendations met regulatory guidance and the board members remained true to the established standards. The board often found themselves frustrated with the lack of information in recommendations, especially for those awards for valor. In some instances, the narrative would not detail the events that warranted a valor award. While the board members wanted to recommend approval of valor awards, they could not because the write-up did not support the award. These recommendations returned to the unit with a request for further information to give them the opportunity to do the right thing.

Rank as a Discriminating Factor

The percentage of awards approved for officers, clearly exceeded the percentage of awards approved for noncommissioned officers, which in turn exceeded the percentage of awards approved for lower enlisted Soldiers. Even though the regulation does not allow rank as a consideration in award recommendations, it is a discriminating factor throughout the Army. During both deployments to Afghanistan, officers on the awards board were more likely to

recommend approval on an officer's award recommendation, based on his identity without regard to the narrative, yet for NCOs these same officers would scrutinize the recommendation and often recommend downgrade. In peacetime, individuals receive awards based on rank first and achievements second. In May 2003, 11 Soldiers died in a helicopter crash during a training mission at Fort Drum, New York. The awards recommended for this group of patriots included two Meritorious Service Medals (MSMs) for the officers killed and nine Army Commendation Medals (ARCOMs) for the enlisted Soldiers killed. What made the sacrifice of the officers worthy of a higher award than the enlisted? Was the award for their performance up to the time of the incident? How do you explain to the families of the enlisted Soldiers that the lives of their family member did not warrant the same level of recognition as that of the officer? More importantly, how do you justify the difference in the two awards to the Soldiers in that unit that remain? Fortunately, the Division Command Sergeant Major realized the significance of what was about to happen and he and the Division Commander corrected the oversight by awarding the MSM to all 11 individuals.

Conclusion

Leaders at all levels have a responsibility to uphold the quality of the Army awards program by enforcing eligibility criteria, submitting clear and detailed recommendations that support the award, and having the courage to tell Soldiers the truth about their performance. Holding officers and enlisted to the same standards, and removing preconceived notions that officers deserve higher recognition by virtue of being an officer will return some of the dignity to the award system. Finally, by limiting award recommendations to those who clearly exceed the standard, and eliminating those awards that have become automatic, we will allow the Army awards system to fulfill its original goal of recognizing those who are truly deserving.

References

Army Regulation 600-8-22, (2006). *Military Awards*, Washington D.C.: HQDA, Retrieved on December 4, 2007 from <http://www.usapa.army.mil>.