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Deserving the Same Recognition and Respect

On 14 April 2005, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and LTG David Barno, the senior U.S. commander and senior Army officer in Afghanistan at a townhall meeting with the troops in Kandahar, Afghanistan showed poor leadership. In particular, the Secretary of Defense demonstrated his usual style of leadership, a very confident (almost arrogant) performance. The Secretary of Defense's actions probably left the Soldiers wondering why they were pulled away from their duties.

What led to this unacceptable behavior was a question originated by a young female MP Specialist from the 133rd Airborne who addressed a question to the Secretary of Defense regarding why MPs were not considered for the Close Combat Badge. The Secretary of Defense immediately responded, "...you are wondering what?" The young Soldier asked again why MPs were not considered for the Close Combat Badge. This time the Secretary of Defense turned to LTG Barno and asked, "what is the answer?" LTG Barno responded with our Army leadership's decision that the Close Combat Badge would only be awarded to those units designated to fight as infantry. In other words, those Soldiers trained to be full-time infantrymen, not artillerymen or engineers. The Close Combat Badge (CCB) has not been extended to field artillery, armor, engineers, or combat support. This is the current position on awarding the Close Combat Badge.

The Secretary of Defense looked at LTG Barno and stated "she did not ask what the decision was, she asked why that was the decision." Laughter from the audience was noted.

LTG Barno addressed the Soldiers present at the townhall meeting informing them they had to realize he got to do this with the Secretary every two weeks and they got lots of tough questions like that. Again, this brought laughter from the audience.

The Secretary of Defense ended the meeting with one last question stating, “make it an easy one. I have had a long day. I started in Baku.”

I think there is much here to criticize. I think the Secretary’s closing comment to the young Specialist was a bit disrespectful for someone who sits at the top of the chain of command. I would bet that this young Specialist, along with lots of other Soldiers present at the meeting, probably had a long day too and probably a long deployment in Afghanistan. I am sure her senior NCOs and commanders have all had long days. But, they do not ask for “easy one (s)” because of that, and they do not get them either. I know that our Soldiers would have thought I was a putz (or worse) if I said to them “take it easy on me fellas. I’ve had a long day.” I do not think I ever would have lived that down. Granted, the Secretary of Defense is 20 years older than me. But this is The Man at the top of the chain of command. A little more humility and service oriented leadership would be a good thing.

Second, I think the Secretary should take this note back with him to Washington. Clearly, the Army doesn’t have a good explanation for this rule, as indicated by the Secretary’s follow-up comment that the MP asked why the rule was what it was, not what the rule was. Obviously, he is not going to overrule the Army on the spot, but I think he should have thanked the Soldier for raising a good question and told her that he would ask the Secretary of the Army about it when he got back to Washington. After all, that is the whole point of these townhall meetings, right? It is to enable the senior Pentagon leadership to hear feedback from the men and women with their boots on the ground. Ideally, this feedback should go somewhere, not just into the echo chamber.

Third, I am disappointed in LTG Barno's response. He should know better than to simply parrot the party line. Given his background, he knows a lot more about combat than the Soldiers present at the meeting. And, he knows a lot about current operations in Afghanistan, enough to know that non-infantry units are engaging in close combat, and that the female MP raised a valid question. I think that a lot of Soldiers expect a better answer that compares this new badge to the Combat Infantryman's Badge, or which explains the value in having a badge for combat arms units only. I do not agree with LTG Barno's explanation, but I think that he could have at least answered the Specialist's question. His closing remark about "tough questions" was also inappropriate. One of the responsibilities of being a general is having to answer the tough questions.

Fourth, I think a comment should have been made regarding the rules for awarding the badge. Here is the rule as announced by the Army in February 2005.

The Army will award the CCB to Armor, Cavalry, Combat Engineer, and Field Artillery Soldiers in military specialties or corresponding officer branch/specialties recognized as having a high probability to routinely engage in direct combat, and they must be assigned or attached to an Army unit of brigade or below that is purposefully organized to routinely conduct close combat operations and engage in direct combat in accordance with existing rules and policy. The CCB will be presented only to eligible Soldiers who are personally present and under fire while engaged in active ground combat, to close with and destroy the enemy with direct fires.

Simply, I think this is bunk. The occupational field requirements strike me as incredibly archaic given the nature of today's non-linear, non-contiguous battlefield where units of many stripes engage in close combat. Infantry units are not the only ones fighting as infantry these days; neither are armor, artillery and combat engineer units that are tasked to fight as infantry. In both scenarios of Iraq and Afghanistan, MP units have a high probability

of routinely engaging in direct combat, and are purposefully organized to routinely conduct close combat operations and engage in direct combat.

In reality, today's Army's regulations and MTOEs say otherwise. Other combat support units, such as air defense artillery and non-combatant engineers units, have been reorganized and retasked with combat missions. And, the Army combat service support units have found themselves accidentally involved in direct combat, or purposefully engaged in direct combat as part of their base security or convoy operations missions. **If the standard is "close combat," then I think this badge's criteria must be changed to reflect the ground truth in Iraq and Afghanistan.**

I also think there is another issue here worth mentioning: the gender of the young MP Specialist asking the question to Secretary Rumsfeld. Next, note the fact that the units and occupational specialities listed for the CCB are all males units. There must be quite a few female Soldiers in MP; ADA and EN units see that see this rule as not too subtle sexual discrimination.

In conclusion, I think the Army, as institution, needs to catch up to reality. The Close Combat Badge, as currently designed, is flawed. It does not match reality on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Army should change the criteria for this badge to reflect its title. It should measure a Soldiers' participation in "close combat." This should not be done automatically, but perhaps on a certification basis, i.e. where a Colonel or 2-star general awards the badge to those Soldiers who actually meet certain functional criteria. Reshaping the award in this fashion will give it more meaning, and enable those who have really earned the badge to wear the badge, regardless of their unit designator or MOS.

This concludes my briefing. I have covered information about deserving the same recognition and respect.