

ETHICAL DILEMMAS INVOLVING MILITARY AWARDS PROCESS

Ethical Dilemmas Involving the Military Awards Process

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Abstract

Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO) face many ethical decisions when recommending soldiers for military awards. There are numerous circumstances when our NCOs have been faced with two Soldiers that deserve commendation and the commands guidance is to recommend only one Soldier. NCOs' are the first line supervisors of most Soldiers in the Army today. It is the NCO that must be able to identify when one of their Soldiers deserve and or earned a military award. The NCO must be able to articulate the achievement, commendable performance, outstanding service, and in many cases today heroism, gallantry and bravery when recommending military awards. This will allow our chain of command to understand the Soldiers accomplishments and recommend approval or not. Army commands have issued guidance on the type and or percentage of awards to recommend for wartime service, training events, inspections, and other military operations. This guidance in some cases is too extreme and not in keeping with the regulation and history of military awards. We must ensure that as Senior Leaders we do not put our subordinate leaders in these ethical dilemmas and support their recommendations.

Ethical Dilemmas Involving the Military Awards Process

Every service member understands that military awards are given for valor, commendation, achievement, meritorious service, and or going above and beyond the call of duty. Army Regulation 600-8-22 (Military Awards dated 11 December 2006) states, "It is the responsibility of any individual having personal knowledge of an act, achievement, or service believed to warrant the award of decoration, to submit a formal recommendation into military command channels for consideration"(page 37). Leaders in today's Army are making ethical decisions everyday on whether a soldier's service or performance was valorous, commendable, or if they went above and beyond the call of duty. Senior NCOs need to support and defend all award recommendations justified and educate our Soldiers and leaders on the awards recommendation process.

Leadership Responsibilities

How do our subordinates figure out when their Soldiers deserve commendation? The recommender needs to understand duty and when a Soldier goes beyond that expected duty, they deserve recognition. The level of commendation is the next thing a recommender needs to decide. Was the Soldier's, who went beyond the call of duty, level of valor praiseworthy and if so at what level? A Soldier can be given praise verbally, in written letters or counseling, or recommended to receive an individual military award. What can possibly break a Soldiers spirit is when they feel they deserve recognition and they do not get it, but their peers do.

All leaders are responsible for Soldiers, and our team, section, and squad leaders have to be proficient in writing not only counseling, but award recommendations as well. All too often, leaders that are not proficient will not submit awards because of their inability to write or many other excuses. Their Soldiers watch as their peers are rewarded in writing and wonder why no one in their team, squad, section, or platoon is receiving recognition. Many young NCOs are not

familiar with the military awards process and regulation. It is our duty as senior leaders to educate the Army and Soldiers on this process. Professional development should include the military awards process, separate from counseling.

Service Awards

Have you ever seen or heard in your commands that Bronze Star Medals (BSM) for service are reserved for platoon sergeants wartime service and above? Better yet, Meritorious Service Medals (MSM) are for company leadership and above. All too often service awards are based on a Soldier's rank and not on the Soldier's commendable service. AR 600-8-22 (Military Awards, dated 11 December 2006) states, "No individual is automatically entitled to an award upon departure from an assignment" (page 41). However, does every Soldier leaving an assignment deserve an individual military service award?

We all can agree that higher level of service awards are meant for leaders in positions of greater responsibility. AR 600-8-22 (Military Awards, dated 11 December 2006) states, "Awards for meritorious achievement of service will not be based on the grade of the intended recipient. Rather the award should reflect both the individuals' level of responsibility and manner of performance. The degree to which an individual's service enhanced the readiness or effectiveness of the organization will be the predominant factor" (page 37). This means that if a Soldier served in a unit, his service must have enhanced the readiness and effectiveness of the unit. I hope we all can agree that most Soldiers in a unit deserve an individual award, because if they are not improving on their unit, then we should send them back to their hometown. AR 600-8-22 (Military Awards, dated 11 December 2006) also states, "Awards presented in conjunction with a permanent change of station (PCS) will be limited to exceptional cases. Certificates of Achievement or Letters of Commendation or Appreciation are appropriate means to recognizing departing personnel" (page 36). Need I say more?

Let us discuss wartime service awards more in depth. A Soldier can receive the Distinguished Service Medal, Legion of Merit, Distinguished Flying Cross, Bronze Star Medal, Air Medal or Army Commendation Medal for wartime service or achievement. Now the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal are reserved for service pertaining to aerial flight. Therefore, this leaves a majority of ground forces left with four levels of service awards. The Distinguished Service Medal should be reserved for General Officers and their respective Command Sergeants Major with Division and higher level of responsibility in wartime service. The Legion of Merit reserved for Brigade level of responsibility. The Bronze Star Medal reserved for Battalion level of responsibility and the Army Commendation Medal for Company level of responsibility. That would make things so simple, but of course, we only leave Platoon and Squad level of responsibility with a “pat on the back or an attaboy”.

Wartime service medals cause an ethical dilemma to leaders because there are not enough types of service medals to range for the different levels of wartime service. All too often, you see a Squad Leader earn a Bronze Star Medal for Service and that same award presented to the Battalion Commander. The Battalion Commander level of responsibility is for over six hundred soldiers and the squad leader with eight soldiers, justified.

In today’s Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), leaders in some units are tasked to write service awards before actual deployment just to meet the timeline requirements for individual award recommendations. Does this sound as if it is justified? AR 600-8-22 (Military Awards, dated 11 December 2006) states, “The Bronze Star Medal may be made to recognize meritorious service, the lesser degree than that required of the Legion of Merit” (page 37). We can look at all types of service awards this way, bottom line, it would be hard to justify that a team leader or squad leader met the same level of distinction of meritorious wartime service as the Battalion Commander or Command Sergeant Major.

Service Awards for peacetime and wartime will always bring on philosophical views from the command on what level of distinction and or responsibility deserves an award. I have been in units where Squad Leaders and above that served with distinction earned the BSM, and in units where the BSM was reserved for Platoon Leadership and above, of course there are always exceptions to this standard, but not without a fight. In garrison, the Meritorious Service Medal has been predominately reserved for Company and Battalion level of responsibility, but I have seen squad leaders and equivalent staff earn the MSM in other units, justified.

Valor Awards

Webster's dictionary (2001) defines *valor* as "bravery, courageous, one not afraid" (page 612). AR 600-8-22 (Military Awards, dated 11 December 2006) defines *valor* as "heroism performed under combat conditions" (page 185). So when a squad leader or platoon leader submit an award recommendation for an Army Commendation Medal with Valor device, Bronze Star Medal with Valor device, Silver Star, or any other individual award recommendation, it simply must articulate heroism. The chain of commands responsibility is to review the award and ensure the recommendation denotes heroism or bravery of the soldier recommended. So why then is valor and bravery construed differently by leaders across the Army? All too often subordinates ask their supervisors if they should submit an award, when what they should be doing is submitting the award if they believe the recommended Soldier demonstrated valor. The commands responsibility is to decide what level of bravery the Soldier demonstrated.

The ethical issue with valor awards is even more drastic than service awards, because we have to decide what level of heroism was witnessed. Some commands are afraid to issue awards like candy, and take away the meaning of the award. This fear of being the candy man brings a higher standard to the award requirements. What might have earned the Medal of Honor in World War II, might only earn a Silver Star in today's GWOT. To date there have only been two

recipients of the Medal of Honor in the current GWOT, a war that has been going on for over five years. AR 600-8-22 (Military Awards, dated 11 December 2006) states, "The deed performed must have been one of personal bravery or self-sacrifice so conspicuous as to clearly distinguish the individual above his comrades and must have involved risk of life" (page 41) to be recommended for the Medal of Honor. I guess we are saying that of the hundreds of thousands of Soldiers serving and who have served in the GWOT, that only a few have met these criteria and even the lesser to earn the Distinguished Service Cross. I know this to be not true, there is just a belief in the commands that the Medal of Honor and Distinguished Service Cross must meet a higher standard of valor than that defined in the regulations and dictionary.

Conclusion

Leaders today do recommend and issue out many deserving awards to Soldiers. Nevertheless, are we preventing more deserving Soldiers from receiving service or valor awards by implementing a maximum number of authorized recommendations? Our awards system is not broke, instead some commands are implementing higher standards to the regulation. I feel that Hollywood movies and War Novels have added to the level of heroism that should be expected of our Soldiers. From WWII to Korea to Vietnam through the Cold War to today's Global War on Terrorism, the standards for valor have increased significantly but the regulation has not changed much at all. We must come back to realization and recognize our deserving Soldiers as the commands attempted to during previous combat. There is no doubt in my mind that there have been many deserving Soldiers that demonstrated personal sacrifice, acts of heroism and bravery during the last five years. As seniors serving in the United States Army, we owe it to our Soldiers to recognize their VALOR and OUTSTANDING SERVICE to our nation.

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