

Battle Decorations

By LtCol Robert E. Cushman

“A MAN WILL FIGHT LONG AND WELL FOR A LITTLE piece of colored ribbon.” Since approximately those words were spoken by Napoleon many years ago, the field of battle decorations has expanded considerably. The principle of human nature upon which the idea of awarding decorations was founded has not changed, however. Proper recognition of bravery is still an extremely important and effective means of maintaining morale and fostering the growth of the tradition of courage and its resultant esprit de corps. The policies which are set for the purpose of governing awards and decorations are, therefore, also important. It is time we reviewed the mistakes of the past war in a constructive way to see what improvements can be made, for I believe we all realize that the system was not perfect and many gripes resulted.

Let's examine some of the more popularly voiced grievances and then see if there appear to be constructive suggestions which might prevent their repetition in the future. Probably the first and foremost trouble was the seeming variation in policy in relation to awarding decorations for heroism. There was an overall variation, taking the war as a whole, between the beginning and the peace; there was a variation between the services; and there was a variation in requirements for the same medal at different times.

Perhaps the seeming variation in policy between the beginning and end of the war was due to the changing composition of the review boards rather than a deliberate change in policy; but whatever the cause it seemed evident to the troops that it was becoming harder and harder to get a medal—any medal. The feeling grew up that regardless of how rigorous the requirement was for an award, that at least the standard should be the same throughout. It not only became harder to get a high ranking medal, it became harder to get any medal at all for deserving marines. The Bronze Star, which was apparently designed for those many minor acts of bravery performed by privates and other front line troops on any

battle field, was becoming more and more a staff decoration and in many cases was being refused to the troops, the latter being cut down to letters of commendation in many cases. Then, of course, the variation between the standards set up among the services was extremely evident. While Marine battalion commanders on Bougainville were getting Bronze Stars, an Army cook was given a Legion of Merit for setting up a bakery in Melbourne, Australia, and it was so publicly announced in print. Undoubtedly there were instances where the injustice occurred on the other side of the fence. Be that as it may, the fact remains that there should be no variation in favor of any service. A man can be just as brave in one as the other and the reward should be the same. Finally there were the variations in the requirements for the various medals. To qualify for a Navy Cross at the end of the war required, seemingly, an act of greater bravery than at the beginning of the war. The same held true for the Silver Star. In earlier days a conspicuous staff officer might get a Legion of Merit for one campaign, by the end of the war it took two or more. This, of course, does an injustice to those who get to war late, and whether it was a tightening up of the boards, a change in personalities involved, or overall policy it did not help morale.

Next in line for criticism was the amount of red tape involved in obtaining awards. Many were the cases in which the man who was recommended for a medal in one campaign was killed in the next battle months later without ever receiving his decoration. Toward the end of the war certain subordinate commanders were allowed to award some of the lower ranking decorations, which afforded some improvement, but not enough. To be most valuable, an award must follow closely on the heels of the deed for which given. The submission of innumerable copies of precisely written recommendations, which must then slowly pass in review through a number of successive boards, militates against this desirable prompt-

ness of awarding decorations. This is even more understandable when it is realized that these recommendations must be typed, for the most part, in lower echelons of command which have only a few overworked typewriters which are usually busy trying to put out a complete action report on the recently completed campaign at the same time. And to make it worse the higher headquarters often demand typographical standards normally reserved for the records of proceedings of courts-martial—and these standards must be met under field conditions!

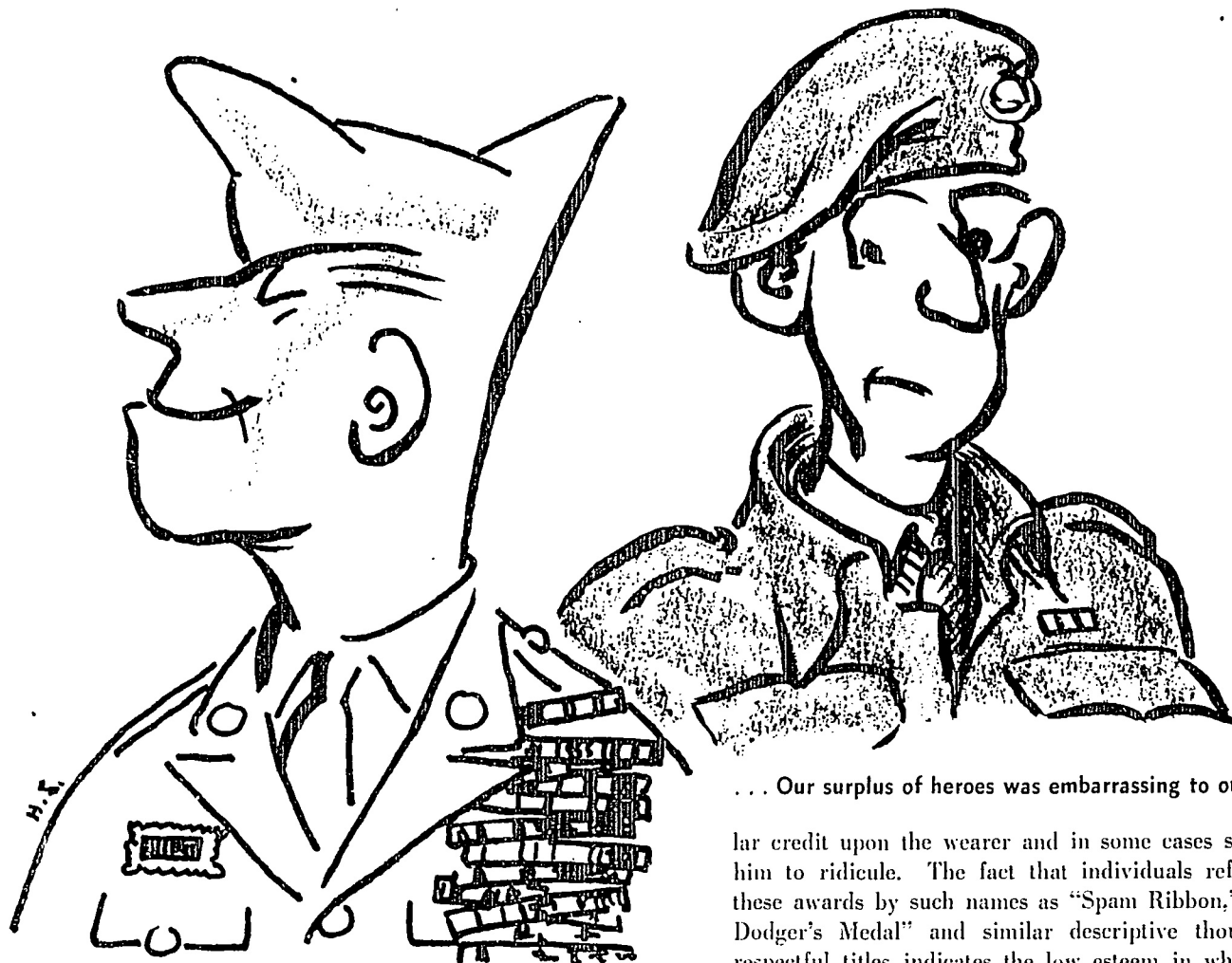
A further fault applicable to the subject of recommendations became evident as the war moved into its final period. The boards which passed in final review upon recommendations, particularly of the higher ranking medals, were remote from the scene of action and received the recommendations long after the action had been completed. Although a few of the members were officers ordered to the board for duty from participating divisions, such members, of necessity, were usually from the division staffs rather than from smaller units. Officers attached to the latter were too busy training for the next campaign or had become casualties. Hence the only real familiarity with the act under consideration for an award which could be reached by such a remote board was through the medium of the written recommendation describing the deed. The only possible result occurred—the basis for awards became the prose writing ability of the recommending officer. The company or battalion commander who could describe the brave act in the most glowing terms and with the most colorful and descriptive adjectives found that his recommendations were being approved as submitted rather than “cut down” to the

next ranking award. This made for inequities in decorations for almost exactly identical feats of arms.

Probably one of the most harmful situations in regard to morale of the troops was the one to be mentioned now. And that was the difficulty of getting a decoration for an enlisted man. One rather stern school of thought seemed to maintain that almost anything a private did in combat was simply his duty and was not, therefore, “above and beyond the call of same.” True, there were others who felt that some recognition should be made of every front line marine and that an award of the Bronze Star should be made almost automatically to all participants in close combat, but in general, the views of the first group seemed to dominate. It might be added that there is a great difficulty in obtaining material upon which to base recommendations for such marines. Under danger almost constantly and performing in an almost routine manner the highly courageous feats of taking pillboxes, storming caves, fighting off counterattacks, and other such deeds common to the assault of a defended beach, it is almost natural that familiarity should breed contempt and each marine sees nothing of note or worthy of particular mention in the actions of either himself or his comrades. At such times his primary interest is in getting the job done and of coming out alive. Furthermore, in a tough fight, many possible eye witnesses become casualties. And so it happens that after the fight when the call for recommendations goes forth and eye witnesses are sought, there is practically (and literally) a dead silence concerning the front line marine. Most of the platoon leaders who could be counted upon to spot the outstanding acts and recommend them with some judge-

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... Our surplus of heroes was embarrassing to our Allies.

ment have become casualties. The company commanders do not usually see enough individual acts to be able to recommend all who have performed them. And so the personnel for whom the whole system of awards and decorations was devised to benefit actually receive less recognition than any other group. Something must be done to alleviate this condition.

Closely related to the above is the question of the "automatic medal." In an attempt to solve the problem of getting medals to deserving front line marines, the solution was suggested of giving a Bronze Star to all the infantry survivors of three, or some other set number, of campaigns. This idea died aborning. Such was not the case among flyers however, who received awards based upon the number of flights, opposed by the enemy, which they had completed. Regardless of the merits of the two systems, one system should be decided upon and applied to all. There are other examples, which while not strictly in the field of decorations, concern the same principle. These relate to the automatic ribbons for service which were given. One ribbon to show the theater, to which battle stars could be affixed, would seem to be of value. However, ribbons for service prior to a certain date, ribbons for service in the Zone of the Interior (United States), etc., did not reflect any particu-

lar credit upon the wearer and in some cases subjected him to ridicule. The fact that individuals referred to these awards by such names as "Spam Ribbon," "Draft Dodger's Medal" and similar descriptive though disrespectful titles indicates the low esteem in which they were held by the Marines in general. Incidentally, probably one of the greatest violations of the principle that the standard required for any particular award should not vary occurred in the case of the American Theater ribbon. At the beginning of the war it was rather rare and when worn usually indicated that the individual had earned it by some rather rough and hazardous duty guarding the convoys in the Atlantic. Then, lo and behold, the requirements were changed and personnel who never left the States qualified for the award. Conversely, those who had spent their time overseas to the point of not acquiring a year's time back home couldn't even wear it. The effect upon those early winners of the award is evident—one of great dissatisfaction.

This subject of automatic awards also introduces the idea that we have too many ribbons. Instead of begetting a deep feeling of pride in the wearer, which should be one of the primary purposes of giving decorations, the indiscriminate awarding of ribbons of various descriptions cheapens the entire procedure. People refer shamefacedly to their "fruit salad." Officers who can get away with it leave off the bottom two rows of meaningless ribbons and wear just those indicating decorations for bravery or service. Men who never heard a shot fired in anger rated more ribbons than

many of our Allies who had fought for six years in close proximity to the enemy. In order for the public to know who was outstanding in the performance of battle field duty, the meaning of each ribbon must be memorized. These are the results of prolific distribution of ribbons—none of them desirable.

It is easy to find fault; it is more difficult to find sound remedial measures, but this subject is of sufficient importance to warrant an effort. With that in mind there will follow some suggestions which it is believed might improve the situation in the future.

First is the question of the policy in relation to the requirements for various decorations. Recommendation should be made that this be standard throughout all services. Within our own province it would be very helpful to promulgate, now during peacetime rather than waiting until war comes, a policy within our service relating to decorations. This should cover the following principal points:

1. The requirements which must be met to qualify an individual for each particular decoration. This is set forth at present but in terse, almost legal, phraseology. What is required is in the nature of interpretative statements for each award, complete with examples. In relation to the Navy Cross, for example, we know it is awarded for "extraordinary heroism in operations against the enemy." But what is considered by the Marine Corps to constitute this type of heroism? Examples could be given to clarify the situation. These examples would help boards immeasurably.

2. No variations in standards should be permitted. Once set up, the requirements for any medal should be changed only in peacetime when they are not being awarded.

3. Decentralization. If major generals are qualified to command divisions and corps they are certainly qualified to award all but the highest decorations. Consequently, division and corps commanders should be authorized to award up to and including the Silver Star.

4. A certain number of decorations should be made on the spot. After a day's hard attack of a key point, certain individuals have qualified unmistakably for an award, particularly of the Bronze Star. Recommendations should be made verbally, within an established numerical limit, and the general or his representative should pin the medal on the marine the very next day up in the battalion command post or even in the fox-hole, or at a time when the unit is in reserve and a simple ceremony can be made of the presentation. The boost to morale which "on the spot" personal award of medals would accomplish, such as suggested here, would be immense.

5. Written recommendations for further or higher ranking awards should be made in a terse form. Adjectives should be forbidden. The only thing in the re-

commendation should be facts describing the actual physical act and its results. This would provide a fairer basis for the action of boards than the present flowery descriptions.

6. Make it easier for the front line marine to obtain a medal. The preceding two recommendations would take care of this to some extent, but in addition boards should be instructed to take it easy on cutting down medals to enlisted men who are in or operate with front line tactical units. It is not necessary to cheapen or make automatic an award to these personnel, merely to announce that the boards will follow this policy.

7. Do away with "automatic" awards of all types except three; the Purple Heart, a ribbon to indicate the theater of operations in which the recipient fought, and the Good Conduct Medal. In connection with the first mentioned of these, the Purple Heart, the regulations regarding its award need complete overhauling in order that they may state explicitly the conditions under which it may be awarded. Under the present terminology there have been men who qualified for it by scratching themselves diving for a fox hole; conversely, some men were blown silly by the force of nearby shell explosions which, however, left no mark, and they were tagged "combat fatigue" and given no medal.

We have definite need of some improvement in our system and the above suggestions are intended to furnish "a solution" as they say in school, not necessarily the only one. But our Marine Corps is founded on these traditions of courage by our men and it is only fitting that they be promptly and properly recognized by suitable decorations.

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