

Staff Sergeant Salvatore Giunta, USA, first living recipient of Congressional Medal of Honor since Vietnam War, rescued two members of his squad during insurgent ambush in Afghanistan's Korengal Valley, October 2007 (U.S. Army/Leroy Council)



# “Gallantry and Intrepidity”

## Valor Decorations in Current and Past Conflicts

By Eileen Chollet

The Battle of Chosin Reservoir lasted 17 bitterly cold days in late November and early December 1950. Thirty thousand United Nations (UN) troops were surrounded by 120,000 Chinese troops, and they fought as a Siberian cold front brought the temperature down to  $-30^{\circ}\text{F}$ . Back in the United States, the country had been enjoying the peace dividend fol-

lowing the end of World War II, and Soldiers and Marines were sent to Korea with equipment that was not designed for the environment. By the time the UN forces broke the encirclement and fought their way to evacuation at Hungnam, 3,000 U.S. Servicemembers had been killed, another 6,000 had been wounded, and 12,000 had suffered frostbite injuries. Fourteen Marines, two Soldiers, and a Navy pilot were awarded the Medal of Honor for heroic actions during the Battle of Chosin Reservoir.

The scorching deserts of Iraq and Afghanistan are a long way from frozen Chosin, and 60 years have elapsed since the Korean War. The nature of warfare has changed, from a brutal force-on-force engagement to a high-tech counterinsurgency operation. During 11 years of war, nearly 2.5 million U.S. troops have served in Iraq and Afghanistan, more than 5,000 have been killed, and nearly 50,000 have been wounded due to hostile action. However, only 13 Medals of Honor have been awarded for actions in those

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U.S. Marines patrol during cordon and search mission in Habib Abad, Helmand Province (DOD/Anthony L. Ortiz)

11 years, compared with 17 awarded for those 17 days in Korea. Servicemembers and civilians alike wonder why.

### Valor Decorations Then and Now

Official criteria for the three highest U.S. decorations for valor—the Medal of Honor, Service crosses, and Silver Star—were established shortly after World War II, so reliable comparisons can be made for these awards through the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Medal of

Honor is presented to Servicemembers for gallantry and intrepidity in risking their lives above and beyond the call of duty. A Service cross (the Navy Cross, Distinguished Service Cross, or Air Force Cross) is presented for heroism not rising to the level of the Medal of Honor. The Silver Star is presented for heroism not rising to the level of a Service cross.

Although records on military decorations are public information (subject to the Freedom of Information Act),

no complete database exists, with the Pentagon citing privacy concerns and incompleteness of records following a 1973 fire in an Army records building in St. Louis.<sup>1</sup> Following the recent Supreme Court overturning of the Stolen Valor Act, which upholds the right to lie about receiving a valor decoration, the Department of Defense (DOD) has begun to compile a database, initially intended to include only Medal of Honor winners going back to September 11, 2001, and recently expanded to include Service crosses and Silver Star. A complete database of Medal of Honor winners is maintained by the Congressional Medal of Honor Society, but the only mostly complete database of Service crosses and Silver Star awards is the *Military Times* Hall of Valor, which is maintained by military historian Doug Sterner.

Although the incompleteness of the data complicates the analysis, a comparison of award rates for current and past conflicts shows that 20 times fewer valor decorations have been awarded during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars than during Vietnam and Korea (see table 1). The Medal of Honor is the most talked about example.

### Explaining the Decrease

Lawmakers, journalists, and military historians have speculated on what might be causing the 20-fold decrease in award rates. In a 2009 *Army Times* article, former Marine Joseph Kinney argued that being killed in combat had become a de facto criterion for winning a valor decoration, charging that DOD has an “inordinate fear that somebody is going to get the Medal of Honor [and] be an embarrassment.”<sup>2</sup> Of the 11 medals awarded for the current conflicts, only 4 went to living recipients, and the first was not presented until 2010. The cases of Captain Charles Liteky, USA (a Vietnam-era chaplain who later renounced his medal in protest of U.S. policies in Central America), and Major General Smedley Butler, USMC (who later wrote a book denouncing war as a government “racket” to protect the interests of cor-

porations), argue for caution in presenting the high-profile Medal of Honor to living recipients. However, the award rates for the Service crosses and Silver Star have dropped by the same factor of 20, suggesting that something common to all three decorations—that is, something beyond the widespread publicity unique to the Medal of Honor—is causing the decrease.

In a report accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2010, the House Committee on Armed Services requested that DOD study the Medal of Honor award process to determine whether commanders in the field had inadvertently raised the criteria for valor, leading to the low numbers of awards. DOD reported that it was confident that the process had not changed and cited two reasons for the decrease in award rates: the current use of “stand-off” technology (unmanned aerial vehicles, or “drones”) by U.S. forces, and the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) by the enemy.<sup>3</sup> However, a closer look at the data shows that these changes in the nature of warfare are only part of the answer, accounting only for a factor of about 6 from the factor of 20.

### The DOD Answer: Drones and IEDs

In current conflicts, drones have played a prominent role in surveillance and targeted killing, replacing some Servicemembers who would otherwise be put in harm’s way. Since risk of one’s life is required for valor decorations, the use of drones does indeed partially explain fewer valor decorations, but not the entire factor of 20. Though the exact number of missed combat actions is difficult to estimate, casualties can be used as a proxy for combat actions since each casualty due to hostile action probably represents a chance for valorous action. Only 1 in 50 Servicemembers in the Iraq and Afghanistan theaters have been killed or wounded due to hostile action, compared with about 1 in 15 in the Korean and Vietnam wars. Since the casualty rate between the past and current conflicts has dropped by a factor of three, lack of opportunities for

**Table 1. U.S. Valor Decorations Awarded by War(s)**

	Korea	Vietnam	Iraq and Afghanistan
Medal of Honor	135 awarded	248 awarded	13 awarded
	1 per 13,000 Servicemembers in theater	1 per 14,000 Servicemembers in theater	1 per 200,000 Servicemembers in theater
Service Crosses	1,100 awarded	1,700 awarded	70 awarded
	1 per 2,000 Servicemembers in theater	1 per 2,000 Servicemembers in theater	1 per 37,000 Servicemembers in theater
Silver Star	88,000 awarded	35,000 awarded	1,000 awarded
	1 per 20 Servicemembers in theater	1 per 100 Servicemembers in theater	1 per 2,600 Servicemembers in theater

Note: The award rate in Iraq and Afghanistan has a 20-fold decrease from Korea and Vietnam for all valor decorations.

**Table 2. U.S. Valor Decorations Awarded per Casualties by War(s)**

	Korea	Vietnam	Iraq and Afghanistan
Medal of Honor	113 awarded	159 awarded	10 awarded
	1 per 1,200 casualties	1 per 1,300 casualties	1 per 5,000 casualties
Service Crosses	480 awarded	650 awarded	30 awarded
	1 per 300 casualties	1 per 300 casualties	1 per 2,000 casualties
Silver Star	7,000 awarded	5,700 awarded	300 awarded
	1 per 20 casualties	1 per 30 casualties	1 per 200 casualties

Note: The award rate in Iraq and Afghanistan for Servicemembers killed or wounded has a five-fold decrease from Korea and Vietnam for all valor decorations.

valor due to remote warfare probably accounts for a factor of 3 out of the factor-of-20 decrease in awards.

Among those who do experience combat and are wounded or killed as a result, the number of valor decorations is still lower than it was in the past (see table 2). Since personnel who do experience combat are receiving 5 times fewer decorations, the lack of personal combat actions cannot entirely explain the missing factor of 20.<sup>4</sup>

IEDs have been called the “signature weapon of the 9/11 era,” accounting for two out of three casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> Given the unpredictable nature of these weapons, Servicemembers probably have fewer opportunities to demonstrate “gallantry and intrepidity . . . above and beyond the call of duty.”<sup>6</sup> However, three factors argue against IEDs playing a large role in the drop of award rates.

First, explosives were extensively used in Korea and Vietnam, and they

historically account for more casualties than small-arms fire. Even the Vietnam War, known for its close fighting in the jungle rather than distant shelling, had more casualties due to explosives such as artillery, land mines, and grenades than to small-arms fire according to the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Southeast Asia Combat Casualties Current File.<sup>7</sup> While it might be “hard to be a hero against an IED,”<sup>8</sup> as one military historian put it, it is just as hard to be a hero against artillery fire, which can have an effective range of more than 10 miles.

Second, all the Medals of Honor awarded for combat in Afghanistan were for incidents that occurred in 2005 or later, when IEDs were most heavily used. If IEDs were causing the drop in award rates, we would expect the awards to be clustered at the beginning of the war when IED use was minimal.

Finally, reading through citations makes it clear that involvement in a close combat firefight is not the only (or even

the most common) way to be decorated for valor. Numerous awards have been presented to Servicemembers who jump on grenades or other explosives to shield their comrades. Rescue of one's comrades from danger—even while not under direct hostile fire—fits the criteria for a valor decoration. For example, Sergeant First Class Rodney Yano, USA, was a helicopter crew chief during the Vietnam War, and he was marking enemy positions with white phosphorous grenades. One exploded prematurely, partially blinding him and covering his body with severe burns while igniting other ammunition in the helicopter. He began shoving the burning ammunition out of the helicopter to protect his comrades, suffering additional burns that eventually took his life. He was awarded the Medal of Honor.<sup>9</sup> By comparison, Sergeant First Class Alwyn C. Cashe, USA, was decorated posthumously only with a Silver Star following his heroic rescue effort in Iraq. After his vehicle hit an IED, fuel from the vehicle spewed everywhere and ignited. Sergeant Cashe repeatedly returned to the vehicle to pull his fellow Soldiers to safety—all while his own uniform was on fire.<sup>10</sup>

If casualties are again used as a proxy for combat actions, and one-third of casualties are due to hostile action that does not include IEDs, then IEDs can account for at most another factor of 3 in the factor-of-20 decrease in valor decorations. Since IEDs do not *completely* prevent valorous actions, these weapons probably cause a decrease by a factor of about two. Between the factor of three due to fewer combat actions and the factor of two from IEDs, the official DOD explanations do explain a factor-of-6 decrease in awards, but not the observed factor-of-20 decrease. Something else must be contributing.

## Times Are Changing

While the official criteria for the three highest valor decorations have not changed, the broader military culture has, and these changes may be causing the rest of the observed decrease in award rates. Following Vietnam, several decorations received authorization to

include the Valor Devices for combat service, and commanders may now nominate Servicemembers for these awards instead of decorations specifically for valor. During the 1990s, military officials debated internally whether medals were being awarded haphazardly and too freely, ultimately resulting in a Pentagon review of Bronze Star awards presented for the intervention in Kosovo. Delegations of approval authority for the Iraq and Afghanistan operations admonish commanders to reserve awards for those “who truly distinguish themselves from among their comrades by exceptional performance in combat or in support of combat operations.”<sup>11</sup> It would be unusual for these cultural factors not to affect the number of decorations awarded.

While the award process itself—from nomination to award (or not)—is understandably kept private, some indirect evidence suggests that something has changed in the award process since the Vietnam War. During the Vietnam era, the median time between a combat action and the presentation of a Medal of Honor was about 20 months. In Iraq and Afghanistan, that processing time has increased to 30 months. In past conflicts, 35 to 40 percent of valor decorations went to officers; in the current conflicts, that percentage has decreased to 25. Meanwhile, the percentage of decorations going to senior enlisted personnel (E7 to E9) more than doubled, from 3 percent to 8 percent. These data do not point to any specific cause, but we could speculate that the changing roles of Servicemembers in theater or the transition from a draft force in Vietnam to an all-volunteer force today may be playing significant roles.

The missing pieces of the data, along with the complex and changing nature of warfare and military culture, make the exact causes of the 20-fold decrease in the number of valor decorations in current operations difficult to determine. The prevailing explanation that the nature of warfare has changed is incomplete, explaining at most a factor of 6 out of 20. While the new DOD database makes a good attempt at transparency, it

needs to be expanded to include all valor decorations and conflicts. The natures of combat and military culture have changed since the 1970s, and the effects on the award process deserve more careful study to ensure that our Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Airmen are awarded the decorations they earn. JFQ

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, *Report to the Senate and House Armed Services Committees on a Searchable Military Valor Decorations Database*, March 2009, available at <<http://blogs.militarytimes.com/hall-of-valor/files/2012/06/DB-Report.pdf>>.

<sup>2</sup> Brendan McGarry, “Death before this honor: Why have Iraq and Afghanistan produced only 5 Medal of Honor recipients, none living?” *Army Times*, March 26, 2009, available at <[www.armytimes.com/news/2009/03/military\\_medal\\_of\\_honor\\_032509w/](http://www.armytimes.com/news/2009/03/military_medal_of_honor_032509w/)>.

<sup>3</sup> Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, *Report to the Senate and House Armed Services Committees on the Medal of Honor Award Process*, January 2011.

<sup>4</sup> The numbers here are somewhat uncertain. The decrease is somewhere between three-fold and eight-fold.

<sup>5</sup> Spencer Acerkman, “\$265 Bomb, \$300 Billion War: The Economics of the 9/11 Era’s Signature Weapon,” *Wired*, September 8, 2011, available at <[www.wired.com/dangerroom/2011/09/ied-cost/](http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2011/09/ied-cost/)>.

<sup>6</sup> Medal of Honor Criteria, Title 32 Code of Federal Regulations 578.4, available at <[www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CFR-2002-title32-vol3/html/CFR-2002-title32-vol3-sec578-4.htm](http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CFR-2002-title32-vol3/html/CFR-2002-title32-vol3-sec578-4.htm)>.

<sup>7</sup> “Statistical Information about Fatal Casualties of the Vietnam War,” available at <[www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.html#cause](http://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.html#cause)>.

<sup>8</sup> McGarry.

<sup>9</sup> *Military Times* Hall of Valor, Medal of Honor citation for Sergeant First Class Rodney James Tadashi Yano, available at <<http://militarytimes.com/citations-medals-awards/recipient.php?recipientid=2796>>.

<sup>10</sup> *Military Times* Hall of Valor, Silver Star citation for Sergeant First Class Alwyn C. Cashe, available at <<http://militarytimes.com/citations-medals-awards/recipient.php?recipientid=29028>>.

<sup>11</sup> Jim Tice, “If it’s easy medals you’re after, you’ve come to the wrong war,” *Army Times*, September 1, 2003.