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HISTORY OF THE AIR FORCE GOOD CONDUCT MEDAL

The Air Force good conduct medal has a long and rich history. Its roots are derived from thousands of years in the refinement of objects to honor individuals for accomplishments or bravery.

In 1974, I received my first Air Force Good Conduct Medal. I was proud to have it awarded to me. But some of the pride was diminished by the way it was presented. I was at an annual records review when I first learned that I was eligible to wear the Good Conduct Medal. The medal was never formally presented to me. The records clerk dug through a cabinet to locate one and tossed it on the desk to me. That was my introduction to the Air Force Awards and Decorations system.

Through the years, I have been awarded many different awards and decorations, some for personal achievement and others for my contribution to the Air Force or my squadron's mission. Yet, through these years I have wondered why the Air Force Good Conduct Medal has been treated with such indifference.

I would like to explain the importance of the Air Force Good Conduct Medal by tracking its history from its ancient predecessors to what it is today. By understanding the history behind medals, it becomes clear that the Air Force Good Conduct Medal is part of a rich, historic heritage.

I will explain how awards for personal bravery and achievements used in ancient Rome, as well as influenced our present decoration system. I will also explain how the British military decoration customs have molded our current traditions. I will describe the evolution of our country's military decorations from Revolutionary War times until the present, highlighting the impact on Enlisted military members. Finally, I will describe the Good Conduct Medals from our sister services and their influence upon the Air Force adopting a Good Conduct Medal of her own. Any study of military awards must first start with the very first awards given for bravery and high achievement.

ANCIENT INFLUENCE ON MILITARY AWARDS AND DECORATIONS.

The practice of the ancient Romans to award a wreath made of small branches of laurel as symbols of honor are still with us today. In his book The Medal, by Frank Donovan, writes of the Roman General, Fabius, returning to Rome after his victory over Hannibal. Upon his arrival in Rome "...There were speeches. Then a consul stepped forward and placed a wreath made of small branches of laurel on Fabius's head. This was the first Medal of Honor. It was not worth anything in money. But it was the greatest award that any Roman could win, because it meant that he was the best, most outstanding, man in his field." (4:2) In his book Gladiators, Michael Grant states, "The victorious gladiators were presented with palm branches as a prize,

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and in Greek lands of the empire they were given a wreath or crown in addition or instead." (5:77) These wreaths of laurel are still with us today. It is represented on many U.S. decorations, including the Medal of Honor and the Air Force Cross, to name a few. Another ancient symbol is the cross. It is a symbol of sacrifice. In addition to many countries the United States use the cross for their highest military honors. The British Victorian Cross, German Iron Cross, French Croix de Guerre and the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry are just some of the cross designs used in military decorations. The United States has the Distinguished Service Cross, Navy Cross, Air Force Cross, and the Distinguished Flying Cross. The design of these medals and the high regard and honor associated with them directly reflect their beginnings. The wreaths of laurel had one drawback. They very quickly wilted and did not last very long.

To overcome this problem, metallic medals came into being. These were probably an off-shoot of the coinage of the day. Roman coinage at the time had portraits of Emperor's on them with a laurel wreath somewhere in the design. The wreath was either worn by whoever was on the coin or it was placed along its outer edges. In Frank Donovans book The Medal, he writes, "To replace the laurel wreath with something that would last, something that a man could wear to show that he had won high honors, metallic medals came into being. The first were large coins with the laurel wreath engraved around the edge." (4:3) This was the beginning of the medals that we have become familiar with today. It was in the Middle Ages that the use of metal medals came into popular use.

MEDALS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

The Middle Ages gave rise to the use of medals as a way of readily identifying individuals who have demonstrated the highest degree of bravery or other service to the crown. Again, in the book The Medal, Mr. Donovan writes, "Every order of knighthood had a medal to identify its members. If King Arthur's knights really existed, they probably wore a medal that showed they were members of the round table. The Knights of the Golden Fleece wore one, as did the Knights Templars, the Knights of Jerusalem, and all the other Knights of the Crusades." (4:3) Mr. Charles P. McDowell identifies the Monastic orders of knights as first to use medals to identify membership. monastic. He states in his book Military and Naval Decorations of the United States, "In the middle ages first the monastic and later the secular orders of knighthood used ornate badges to indicate membership; later these kinds of badges were awarded for acts of merit. The concept was strikingly simple: those who provided some heroic or unique service to the crown or to the state were in effect members of a company of noteworthy individuals, and their membership-based on service or achievement-was to be denoted by wearing of a medal or badge. Thus emerged the practice of awarding medals for heroism or service." (8:7) This is the basis for the awards and decoration system that is practiced by the United

States military today.

EARLY UNITED STATES MEDALS

During the Revolutionary War, the United States had no medals or decoration system in the military. The thought of military men being awarded or wearing medals was rejected. It was felt that medals were a concept for monarchies, not for Americans. In The Medal, Mr. Donovan writes "...most people felt that medals were not proper for Americans. They said, 'If European soldiers wear medals it's a good reason why American soldiers should not. We want no kings, no knights, no nobles-and no medals. Medals are not democratic.'"(4:5) If this was the popular feeling, how did the United States come to its present system of awards and decorations?

In the earliest days of this country, Congress did present medals per se. They were more tokens of appreciation and were not designed to be worn. They were large and only minted as necessary for special occasions. These were not awarded by the military, but by Congress. The first medals presented to military members for a purely military act were the Andre Medals.

The Andre Medals were presented to three enlisted men for their actions on September 21, 1780. The three captured Major John Andre, a British spy who plotted with Major General Benedict Arnold to surrender the garrison at West Point. Charles P. McDowell states in the book Military and Naval Decorations of the United States "In gratitude for the disclosure of this plot, Congress enacted a Joint Resolution on November 3, 1780, awarding (Private John) Paulding, (Private David) Williams, and (Private Isaac) van Wart an annual sum of two hundred dollars each and a "silver medal" to be presented "with the thanks of Congress for their fidelity, and the eminent service they have rendered their country." The medals were presented by the Commander in Chief, and although they were presented to soldiers for what might well have been a military act, they were not really military decorations in the modern sense."(8:9) The first medal to be designed as a military medal was the Badge of Military Merit, known today as the Purple Heart.

THE PURPLE HEART IS THE FIRST UNITED STATES MILITARY DECORATION

General George Washington knew very well the trials that his troops endured. It was his idea to develop some kind of award for attaining the highest of standards in the military. He wanted something that could be presented by the Commander in Chief to recognize services rendered. It was also his idea that this decoration could be awarded to all members of the military and not just the senior individuals. He wanted to recognize the efforts of the enlisted man as well. This was a unique idea. The Armies of European countries had decorations, but they were just for the officers and ranking staff members.

General Washington established the Badge of Military Merit on August 7, 1782. It is the oldest of any United States military decoration. In Military and Naval Decorations of the United States, Mr. McDowell quotes General Washington's order of the day: "The General, ever desirous to cherish a virtuous ambition in his soldiers, as well as to foster and encourage every species of Military Merit, directs that whenever any singularly meritorious action is performed, the author of it shall be permitted to wear on his facings, over the left breast, the figure of a heart in purple cloth, or silk, edged with narrow lace or binding. Not only instances of unusual gallantry but also of extraordinary fidelity and essential service in any way shall meet with a due reward. ...The road to glory in a patriot army and a free country is thus opened to all. This order is also to have retrospect to the earliest days of the war, and to be considered a permanent one." (8:233)

It is interesting to note that at this time, the Purple Heart was not given for wounds in combat like it is today, but for extraordinary military acts. It is also interesting that only three known awards were made. All three were enlisted men. Sergeant Elijah Churchill was the first recipient, Sergeant William Brown was the second, and Sergeant Daniel Bissell was the third. (8:224-5) Sergeants Churchill and Brown received theirs for bravery in combat, and Sergeant Bissell for intelligence gathering on the enemy.

CERTIFICATE OF MERIT

After the Revolutionary War was over, the Badge of Military Merit fell into disuse. From that time until the Civil War, there were no decorations for the military. In the war of 1812, the beginning of the Indian Wars, and the War with Mexico, there were no military medal decorations for the men who fought. On March 3, 1847, Congress enacted a law establishing the Certificate of Merit. Mr. Charles P. McDowell quotes in his book Military and Naval Decorations of the United States, "...Congress enacted a law providing that "When any private soldier shall so distinguish himself" the President was authorized to grant him a Certificate of Merit. In 1854, noncommissioned officers were made eligible for the award, which was to be granted specifically for "extraordinary exertion in the preservation of property, or rescuing from destruction by fire or otherwise, or any hazardous service by which the government is saved in men or material". (8:11) This was the first time that an award was established specifically for the enlisted man. In February 3, 1891, Congress authorized the awarding of the Certificate of Merit for specially meritorious service in peace time. (8:45) On January 11, 1905, War Department General Order Number 4 authorized the creation of a medal to accompany the Certificate of Merit. (8:46). The Certificate of Merit Medal is the only medal besides the Good Conduct Medal that has been awarded solely to the enlisted individual. Public Law 193 of July 9, 1918, establishing the Distinguished Service Medal and the Distinguished Service Cross also provided that any enlisted man that

had been awarded the Certificate of Merit receive the Distinguished Service Medal. (8:45) Up until the Civil War, the Certificate of Merit was the only way to formally recognize military achievements.

CIVIL WAR AND LATER

At the beginning of the Civil War, Congress passed an act on December 21, 1861 authorizing the Navy a Medal of Honor. A Joint Resolution of Congress established a Medal of Honor for the Army on July 12, 1862. It was not until March 3, 1901 that Congress enacted Public Law No. 155 permitting enlisted men of the Navy and Marine Corps to receive the Medal of Honor. (6:4) The Air Force did not establish a Medal of Honor of its own until November 1, 1965. Before then, the Air Force had used the Army design of the Medal of Honor. The Medal of Honor was the only formal military medal until 1898. It is the First military medal of the United States. Charles P. McDowell describes in his book Military and Naval Decorations of the United States the development of a Distinguished Service Medal. He writes: "On July 5, 1911, Major General Lenord Wood, Chief of Staff of the Army, submitted a report to Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson in which he noted that the need existed for a "suitable badge" to recognize distinguished service not of such a character as to be "of the most distinguished personal bravery or self sacrifice above and beyond the call of duty" for which the Medal of Honor was the appropriate award. General Wood was of the opinion establishment of such a "badge" was especially important in the case of officers, as "...enlisted men may secure a Certificate of Merit for distinguished service, though the officer who participates with such enlisted men in this distinguished service must receive the Medal of Honor or nothing..." General Wood ...felt that the lack of a lesser decoration had on occasion led to the awarding of the Medal of Honor to officers whose services were not sufficiently distinguished to have really justified the award, but who did deserve some kind of recognition. He felt that by adopting a "Distinguished Service Medal" as a reward for distinguished service other than in operations against an enemy, the cheapening of the Medal of Honor could be avoided. He also believed that the establishment of a Distinguished Service Medal would give the Army greater flexibility in rewarding heroism and distinguished service on the part of both officers and enlisted men. General Wood informed Secretary of War Stimson that "It would seem to lie entirely within the power of the President to divide...distinguished service...into two general classes: distinguished war service and distinguished peace service." This was the beginning of a concept that was ultimately to lead to the establishment of the Distinguished Service Cross and the Distinguished Service Medal." (8:77) This is important to note because it was the first "peace time" award formally recognized. The Distinguished Service Medal is also the first to be eligible to both officers and enlisted. This eventually lead to a series of awards and decorations that could be earned during peace time and are in use today.

BRITISH TRADITIONS

The United States military has adopted many of the traditions of the British. The officer rank structure, organization of the Army and Navies, and many other customs and courtesies derived from the British. This is natural considering that the military leaders at the time of our separation from Britain were in or had served in the British armed forces. When we became a separate nation, our military forces were established much like the British were.

One of the traditions the United States eventually adopted was a device to represent good conduct in the enlisted ranks. In the book Badges and Insignia of the British Armed Forces by W.E. May, W.Y. Carman, and John Tanner, the authors write, "It was back in 1777 that the French Army first issued chevrons to mark the service of a good soldier who was continuing his term of service. These were not adopted in the British Army until 1813 when it was stated that the badge of the color sergeant was in the nature of recognition of the good service of an NCO. It was not until 1836 that a special distinguishing mark was authorized for 'well conducted soldiers'. The Horse Guards General Order no. 526 of 10th October 1836 authorized soldiers including acting bombardier or acting corporal...to wear immediately above the right sleeve a chevron to mark 'a period of good conduct'." (7:191) The authors continue to write: "By 1st March 1881 a new general order had appeared and the position was on the left arm below the elbow, the exact spacing depending upon the ornamentation on the cuff. One chevron was permitted for two years of good conduct, two chevrons for six years, three for twelve, four for eighteen, five for twenty-three and six for twenty-eight. It would appear that the number of chevrons for good conduct and long service could rise up to ten for fifty year's service." (7:191) The British used chevrons to identify enlisted individuals who have conducted themselves admirably. When the United States established the recognition of enlisted members for good conduct, badges and medals were used instead of chevrons.

UNITED STATES GOOD CONDUCT MEDALS

The United States established the good conduct badge on 26 April, 1869. It was established by A.E. Borie, Secretary of the Navy. In the book United States War Medals, Bauman L. Belden cites the circular of the Secretary of the Navy, "Any man holding a Continuous Service Certificate who is distinguished for obedience, sobriety, and cleanliness, and is proficient in seamanship and gunnery, shall receive upon the expiration of his enlistment a good conduct badge: and after he shall have received three such badges, under consecutive reenlistments, within three months from the dates on his discharges, he shall if qualified be enlisted as a Petty Officer, and hold a Petty Officers rating during subsequent continuous reenlistments and he shall not be reduced to a lower rating, except by sentence of Court Martial." (3:22) The author further states that Navy General Order No.

327, dated November 21, 1884, adopts a new design and states, "Good-Conduct Badges are special distinctions for fidelity, zeal, and obedience, and will not be granted for the first term of enlistment under Continuous Service".(3:22) On July 13, 1892 the Navy Regulation Circular formally calls Good Conduct Badges Good Conduct Medals.

In 1896, the United States Marines established a Good Conduct Medal for the Corps. The criteria for issuance and wear are much different for the Marine Corps. Navy Special Order No. 49 by the Secretary of the Navy established the criteria for the Marines. Bauman L. Belden cites the Special Order, "...That any man holding an excellent discharge, shall, upon reenlistment, when recommended by the commanding officer of a ship, or the commanding officer station, and a board of three officers ordered by the Colonel Commandant, U.S.M.C., receive a good conduct medal. Only those men who are distinguished for obedience, sobriety, industry, courage, neatness, and proficiency shall be recommended for good conduct medals." He further cites, "... Good Conduct Medals are given in recognition of good behavior and faithful service, and no person shall be deprived of them, or of the advantages attached to them, except by the sentence of a general court-martial. The commanding officer may, however, forbid the wearing of medals by any person undergoing punishment or restriction of privileges."(3:24) These General Orders by the Secretary of the Navy have set very high standards for the issuance of the Good Conduct Medal for the Navy and Marine Corps. The Good Conduct Medal was held in high esteem by the individuals authorized to wear them due to these very strict guidelines established for earning them. It's also interesting to note that it took a Court Martial to revoke the Good Conduct Medal once it had been awarded to the individual.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ARMY GOOD CONDUCT MEDAL AND THE AIR FORCE USE OF IT

The Army Good Conduct Medal, which the Air Force used until the creation of a separate Air Force medal, was established in 1941 by Executive Order. Air Force Regulation 900-10, dated 4 April, 1958, states "The Good Conduct Medal was established by Executive Order 8809, 28 June 1941, as amended by Executive Order 9323, 31 March, 1943, and Executive Order 10444, 10 April 1953."(2:6) It goes on to cite the requirements for award: "The Good Conduct Medal is awarded for exemplary behavior, efficiency, and fidelity in an enlisted status while in the Federal military service under the following conditions: (1) All "character" and "efficiency" ratings, prior to 1 October 1957, must have been recorded as "excellent" or higher, except that the following ratings are not disqualifying: (a) Ratings of "unknown" (b) Service school efficiency ratings below "excellent" awarded prior to 3 March 1946 (2) For service on or after 1 October 1957, each award of the Good Conduct Medal will be made upon specific recommendation of the unit commander rather than upon "character" and "efficiency" ratings, which have been discontinued in the Air Force. The unit commander's recommendation will be indicated on AF Form 75, "Airman

Performance Report"... (3) During the period considered for the award, there must be no conviction by a civil court (other than minor traffic violation) or by courts-martial, or record of punishment under Article 15." (2:6-7)

Air Force Regulation 900-10 also states the time periods of eligibility. Usually the Good Conduct Medal is awarded for every three years of service, but there are some exceptions. For example, if a period of one year is served between 7 December 1941 and 2 March 1946, (WWII), or between 27 June 1950 and 27 July 1954 (Korean War). It can also be awarded for periods less than one year provided that part of the service time was after the beginning of the Korean War, or final separation was due to disability incurred in the line of duty (2:7)

It is interesting to note the date that the Good Conduct Medal was established, June of 1941. The United States was about to go to war with Germany and Japan at this time. Morale was wavering in light of the victories in Europe by the Germans and by the Japanese in the Pacific and Asia. With the massive buildup of the American Armed Forces getting ready to take place, the Good Conduct Medal established a target that all Army personnel were to strive for as far as their personal conduct was concerned. It also was established to foster pride in accomplishment of overcoming many personal hardships.

THE AIR FORCE ESTABLISHES IT'S OWN GOOD CONDUCT MEDAL

The Army Good Conduct Medal was used by the Air Force until 31 May 1963. (1:6-3) Starting 1 June, 1963 the new Air Force Good Conduct Medal was used. This is in line with the movement at that time to establish separate Air Force Awards instead of continuing to use the Army decorations. A primary example of this is Public Law 86-593, signed into law on July 6, 1960. This Congressional act established the Air Force Cross and Airmans Medal. (6:173-4) These replaced the Army Distinguished Service Cross and the Soldier's Medal. This was the beginning of the establishment of a separate system of Awards and Decorations for the Air Force.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS AWARDS AND DECORATIONS

In the 1970's, the attitude toward awards and decorations in general, and the Air Force Good Conduct Medal specifically, was that most of them did not mean anything. In their book Awards and Decorations-Motivation or Just So Much Fruit Salad, Majors Glenn B. Reaves and Radford L. Reavis, conducted a survey on the attitudes of the awards and decorations system in 1976, and they write, "The writers feel that due to comments made about the number of medals worn by rated personnel, these non-rated personnel do not view awards and decorations programs as being to their benefit. Also, based on the complaints about the program, the apparent abuse of the program and the fact that only a bare majority (51 percent of the respondents feel the program accomplishes its stated objective), the writers contend

that the awards and decorations program has the opposite effect. Therefore, the writers conclude that the awards and decorations program created morale problems, stifled incentive and (because of the proliferation of awards during the Vietnam conflict) removed the spirit from esprit de corps. (10:78)

The war in Vietnam is not the only conflict where the overissue of medals was evident. In an article for the Marine Corps Gazette, Captain Charles J. Potempa, USMCR discusses Operation Urgent Fury. He writes "The invasion of Grenada (Operation Urgent Fury) in October 1983 provides a good example of U.S. military action and provides insight into the extent of the overissuance of awards. I use this as an example because there is readily available information on the number of awards issued. ...For Operation Urgent Fury, the Army issued a total of 9,802 medals that included 812 Bronze Stars (59 with a V for Valor), 5,079 Army Commendation Medals, (99 with a V for Valor), and 2,946 Army Achievement Medals. It also awarded 3,530 Combat Infantry Badges. This total includes only personal decorations. The Air Force was not to be outdone and issued a total of 3,077 medals that included 272 Bronze Stars, 841 Air Medals, 1,649 Air Force Commendation Medals, and 311 Air Force Achievement Medals. ... (9:65) It was a general feeling that if you just did your job, awards and decorations would be yours. This feeling applied to the Air Force Good Conduct Medal. It was viewed as a giveaway. All one had to do to receive it was put in three years time and you got one. Air Force Regulation 900-48, dated 24 July 1979 specifically states, "...commanders must avoid awarding it solely on the basis of minimally acceptable performance; that is, merely staying out of trouble. Individuals must demonstrate a positive attitude towards the Air Force." (1:6-2)

REVERSING THE TREND

To reverse the trend that the Air Force Good Conduct Medal is just a giveaway, it will take the efforts of the enlisted force to do it. Remember, this is the only Air Force decoration that is solely for enlisted personnel. Officers are not eligible. We must insure that the medal is not cheapened by permitting it to be awarded for substandard performance. As enlisted members, it will only be held in high regard when we, as a group, insure that it is awarded only for the highest of standards.

When we hear someone refer to the Air Force Good Conduct Medal as anything except as an award for only the highest of personal conduct and fidelity, we need to educate that individual on the importance of the award.

Explain to them what I have told you, the Air Force Good Conduct Medal is rich in its history and traditions. Explain that it's roots go back to the days of the Roman Empire, when they used to award wreaths of laurel for bravery in combat or victories over the enemy. Explain that the Knights of the middle ages had used medals to reward heroism or service, and this is what the United States has based her

Award and Decorations system on. Let them know that even though the early Americans did not want medals because they reminded them of a system that they were fighting against) Congress had awarded three medals to enlisted men for the capture of Major John Andre, a British spy, who conspired with General Benedict Arnold to surrender West Point. Remind them that it was General George Washington that created the only award during the Revolutionary War, the Badge of Military Merit. Only three were issued, and all three to enlisted men. Let them know that during the War with Mexico, enlisted men were awarded the Certificate of Merit for acts of bravery or outstanding, distinguishing service. Tell them Congress later established the Distinguished Service Cross and anyone holding the Certificate of Merit was authorized the Distinguished Service Cross. Insure that they are aware that many of our military traditions were adopted from the British, and one of the things that were adopted was the Good Conduct Badge. The Navy was the first to adopt this in 1869. The Marines followed in 1896. The standards that were set were extremely high, but once awarded, it took a court martial to rescind it. The Air Force Good Conduct is a direct descendant of the Army's Good Conduct Medal. The Army established their medal in 1941, right before the start of WWII. The Air Force had used the Army Good Conduct Medal until it's own was established in 1963, during a time when the Air Force had adopted a set of medals specifically for the Air Force. Remind them of the high standards that must be maintained to be eligible for the award. We, as enlisted members, cannot afford the feeling that the Air Force Good Conduct Medal is just a giveaway.

If the Air Force Good Conduct Medal is to maintain any meaning, it is us, the enlisted force, that must attach the meaning to it. It must represent the fidelity it was designed for. We must uphold the highest of personal standards of conduct. The Air Force Good Conduct Medal signifies that we have met or exceeded the highest standards of personal conduct and fidelity to the United States Air Force.

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