

Stolen Valor

John Kerry: His Awards and Decorations

By Dick Culver

This is just a new thrust on an old, old story, and one that caused no end of heartburn in Vietnam a number of years ago. Were there abuses of the awards system? In a word, yes. Were they rampant? Well, I don't have the figures, but because of the methodology of handing out medals, the potential for abuse was certainly there. Here's how the system worked (at least in the Naval Service) back in the late 1960s.

THE INFAMOUS TRILATERAL CONNECTION:

In order to be recommended for an award, it was necessary to have two willing witnesses who would attest to your bravery (or at least deeds). In the normal day to day actions, this was a non-problem with individuals who did not seek to abuse the system. Where the rub came was from those we used to call "career planners," and/or consisted of what might be called the "career enhancement" groups.

Those involved in such reprehensible behavior would usually divide up into three man groups and start a round-robin of award recommendations. In its simplest format, two of the three man group would write up guy # 1. He of course, would look sheepish, drag his toe in the dirt, and accept his "dangler" with appropriate modesty. When a period of time elapsed to avoid looking too obvious, guy # 1 would then team up with say, guy # 2 and write up guy # 3 for an appropriate career enhancing dangler to be added to his record book and his uniform. Then of course, guys # 1 and # 3 would write up guy # 2 and so it would go! These award "ring around the rosy" machinations were most commonly confined to individuals on appropriate staff levels to preclude having to find vast numbers of enlisted personnel to verify their heroic actions.

These awards were usually timed so that the awards would be presented AFTER the individual(s) had returned to the States to avoid close scrutiny by others of the unit who were familiar with each individual's actions in the time period(s) set forth in the awards. Needless to say, this system had the potential for abuse. Mercifully, such abuse wasn't rampant, as most officers (or for that matter, NCOs), would rather have been shot than participate in any such shenanigans. The shame would have been too great to endure.

AN EXAMPLE OF APPROPRIATE HUMILITY:

I have seen truly deserving lads, mostly enlisted folks, actually turn down even the suggestion that he or they might have done something worthy of an award, especially when so many acts of bravery and self sacrifice went unnoticed. One such case comes to mind, that of Carlos Hathcock, the sniper of some note in later years. During his last operation, Carlos was riding on top of an Amtrac on his way to his assigned Area of Operations. The Amtrac ran over a command detonated mine setting off the fuel cells in the bottom of the craft. Hathcock was blown off the Amtrac, but was not trapped inside. While the explosion rang Hathcock's bell, it simply threw him into the weeds and he could have simply stepped aside shaking his head and no one would have said a word. Instead, Carlos got the doors open getting burned severely, and then making several trips back into the burning vehicle to

rescue the trapped Marines. Interestingly enough, most of those he rescued sustained only relatively minor injuries. Hathcock on the other hand received 3rd degree burns on over 50% of his body. Some of the troops he had rescued visited him in the hospital asked him if he would like them to write him up for an award? Now the kind of Marines I am/was used to dealing with would rather take a fanny kicking than ask anybody to write them up for ANY sort of medal – it comes with being a professional who simply thinks he is or was simply doing his job. Needless to say, Carlos declined the offer, and the troops willing to accede to Carlos', wishes never wrote him up for anything.

It was many years later when Carlos was recommended for the MOH and the recommendation ricocheted around the Congressional Halls only to be bounced back to HQMC where Krulak (the younger) was then ensconced as the Commandant. While his Daddy had been an officious prick, he was at least all Marine. Alas, the son had become a politician. Little Krulak was outraged, and several friends of mine at HQMC saw the recommendation with Krulak's personal handwriting on the "write-up" stating that in HIS Corps, this (Carlos' actions) wouldn't have even rated a Navy Commendation Medal! I noticed however that young Krulak had a Silver Star awarded for a tour in RVN that had the suspicious fingerprints of an award to schmooze his Daddy who at that time was a Lieutenant General and CG of FMF Pacific. No way to prove it of course, but sometimes when it quacks like a duck and waddles like a duck, you just have to assume that it at least has some water-proof feathers! Carlos was eventually awarded a Silver Star however even though it was almost 28-years after the fact. With all the BS boiled out of it, these sorts of self effacing folks were those who personified the Corps I knew and loved. NOT the one inhabited by a few career planners.

BACK TO THE CAREER PLANNERS:

There was an even greater evil than that of having a "ring-of-three" engaged in record book/career enhancement. That was the "sometimes abused" awards policy that existed in some of the small commands, who lacked daily supervision to ensure that no one was simply decorating himself with no chance of getting caught. This would of course need the collusion of at least two other people to attest to your "Ramboesque" conduct. Not that I am suggesting anything untoward of course, but if you will note the picture of Kerry on his Swift Boat standing there with his khaki shirt, wearing his decorations, flanked by two of his crew, each wearing (as best I can tell from the pictures) a Navy Commendation Medal with Combat Distinguishing Device (Combat "V"). Obviously these were two very proud young sailors, most gratified that their Skipper would have seen fit to write them up for their bravery... Hummm... Not that I see a pattern there or anything, but it certainly is suggestive.

In similar circumstances, I know of at least one Marine (former enlisted) Captain who came home with two Navy Crosses awarded while he was on "detached duty" with a sister service. No one, to my knowledge, has ever figured out how he got them.

I personally witnessed a Navy Lieutenant in charge of a famous (but mercifully unnamed) amphibious-type unit (named for a sea-going mammal and chronicled at least once in a movie with Charlie Sheen playing in it) coming around after one of the most #\$\$%& up attempted prisoner snatches of all times. These yahoos withdrew to the beach claiming they had been ambushed (interestingly enough, the tracers were all red – the zips normally used green, and this was in the north country, not VC territory). The wounded were loaded aboard the boats and the withdrawal was completed. On the positive side, the wounds were not serious but strangely were all appeared to be rear entrance penetrations. No way to tell of

course, but it would appear that someone got trigger happy, loosed an inadvertent burst of fire thus starting what amounted to a “feeding frenzy!” The next morning the unit commander was going around with his note-pad taking recommendations decorations for acts of bravery during this idiotic display of tactical incompetence. All Marines declined (with something of a controlled snicker), but it was pretty obvious that someone was trying to justify the mission failure to his OIC as having been compromised and ambushed, with only their daring and skill allowing them to pull back! Holy Catfish Batman! This instance was more in the nature of cover your @\$@ than true career enhancement. I would have loved to see what those guys recommended themselves for! Needless to say, no one was about to blow the whistle on this maneuver, as it would have looked bad for all hands!

THE PURPLE HEART:

Purple Hearts were a whole ‘nother kettle of fish. For the most part, the purple hearts were handed out for everything from a hang-nail to having your head blown off. During one period of time, they were actually awarded for BRUISES using the excuse that it was actually “internal bleeding” and if caused by hitting your head going into a bunker during a mortar or rocket attack, this was a perfectly legitimate Purple Heart caused by enemy action (after all he wouldn’t have hit his head if someone hadn’t rocketed [or mortared] the base, right?).

When General Bruno Hochmuth arrived to take charge of the 3rd Marine Division, he was awarded such a Purple Heart. Upon receiving his award, he demanded to see the paperwork and authorization. He immediately stopped the awarding the Purple Heart for bruises, but some who were stationed in the Division Headquarters noted that he didn’t give his back. Payback is sometimes a bitch however, as he and many of his staff (including one good friend of mine) were killed when his chopper was struck by Arvin artillery fire. Being somewhat of a blue nose, Hochmuth had instituted a limit of two beers per man per night when he arrived. Some sacrilegious clowns wondered if his untimely demise was payback for his alcohol prohibitionist policies? Or, perhaps it was “friendly” artillery fire! Hummm...

Purple hearts as denoted above, came in all flavors, and it wasn’t unusual to have someone “find” a forgotten(?) wound tag in his medical record when he returned home or changed units! Forgotten? Dear Allah! I saw this one more than once, and many times an obliging Corpsman would “wound” an individual on paper to put the kibosh on any such “found” tags that suddenly appeared in his own (the Corpsman’s) health record. Was this rampant? Not really, as most of those guys were angles of mercy when the bullets were flying and would never have gone along with such trash! HOWEVER, some acceded to the thinly veiled suggestions by their Officer in Charge to make sure that his (the officer’s) wound was duly recorded in the paperwork! Common? Nope, but it DID happen, and I know of several such recipients myself, however none of them have ever had aspirations for public office. In the “career planners” circles however, it was considered to be necessary to have an appropriate wound to go with their highly imagined acts of bravery – made them ever so much more believable don’t ya’ know?

ONE EXAMPLE:

An officer who shall mercifully remained unnamed, was located in a position adjacent to mine during a rather spirited firefight one night. His unit was located about 1000-yards distant across a wet rice paddy that was about waist deep in water, making it extremely difficult to send any meaningful help to the Company. I personally was heavily engaged and had my own hands full, but I kept track of the progress of his firefight via radio. He had a platoon

engaged in a long wood line that was really catching hell. He left them to their own devices until the morning light when he went in and extracted what was left of the unfortunate unit. We pulled out the following morning (having subdued the enemy in fine fashion on our side of the rice paddies), and since no further radio traffic was received from my compatriot in the adjacent tree line, I could only assume that his mission had been accomplished. Following my company's final assault and mopping up we awaited his arrival the next morning by helicopter so he and his company could follow (us) in trace down the infamous "*Street Without Joy*". I was with this gent all day off and on, and he didn't appear to have a single scratch! The platoon he had left stuck in the tree line all night wasn't as lucky of course, but we didn't question each other's tactical maneuvering as neither of us had been in a position to observe the other's battles. Time passed, and the entire incident would have been forgotten until some months later.

I was in the Officer's Club in Okinawa (on my way home), having a beer with the former Company Commander of the night in question. I had heard that the individual had been awarded a Bronze Star for his actions which raised my suspicions, as I had listened while he apparently left his platoon to their own devices during the firefight. We were discussing decorations, etc. and he told me that the (our) Battalion Adjutant had been awarded a Bronze Star (with Combat V) for his performance in running the administration of the Battalion. In order to understand this one, you have to remember we had been on the SLF for a period of 8+ months, and the Battalion Adjutant had performed his valorous deeds while ensconced aboard ship with three squares and hot showers! I remarked to the gentleman sharing a beer with me that I thought that such an award was unwarranted for a ship-bound REMF. My friend said that yes, but the Adjutant HAD done a marvelous job. I pointed out (being as sarcastic as I dared without starting a fist fight) that yes he had, but such an award cheapened the Bronze Star for those who had REALLY earned them (with reference to my erstwhile buddy who had left his platoon to their own devices during a spirited firefight!). He stared off into space saying "Yes, I suppose I DID earn mine!"

Only the possible hate and discontent of the barkeep kept me from throwing up on the bar! I made my excuses and left to regain what was left of my sanity. This clown was one of a gang of three "career planners" who had decorated each other appropriately at discrete times to avoid arousing suspicion. This gent had been the S-3 Alpha (Operations Officer's chief assistant) for most of his tour, and had taken over the company when the original Company Commander had been med-evaced for a wound from a friendly [and self-thrown] grenade). The med-evaced Company Commander received a Silver Star (could have been legitimate, but I wasn't there!?) and the S-3 (my "hero's boss") got a Bronze Star. The S-3 was a walking incompetent who never deliberately left the CP but was always full of gungy advice for the Company Commanders in the field. This idiot actually told Reggie Ponsford (probably the most knuckle dragging Company Officer I knew) that he was going to have to be more aggressive! Dear Allah. The last time I heard of the S-3 he had left the Corps (mercifully) and was selling bikini bathing suits – I'm surprised he hasn't been considered as Kerry's running mate!

BUT IT AIN'T OVER YET!

I wound up at the Rifle Range at Camp Lejeune, and my career planning buddy wound up at Headquarters Marine Corps. One day I got a letter in the mail (I still have it) written on a yellow lined pad from this guy telling me he had been talking to a Colonel at HQMC about his Bronze Star, and the Colonel was convinced that it should really have been a Silver Star since he was wounded in the battle! Huh?? Wounded? I was with the clown the next day, and

I never saw a scratch on the blighter. Seems it was one of those “found wound tags” in his medical records that hadn’t been noticed! My Gawd, here we go again! This guy (having remembered our conversation at the bar where I told him that he really EARNED his medal – a bit sarcastically of course), now wanted me to write a letter to HQMC recommending that his award be upped to a Silver Star! I seriously considered putting a routing stamp on the damned thing and sending it to HQMC with an explanation! Better sense prevailed (they always shoot the messenger), and I simply ignored his request. What happened? Why his Bronze Star was upped to a Silver Star of course, what did you think would happen? Happy endings are always confined to fairy tales! I later told the story to an old mustang 1st Lieutenant who had been with us in RVN. He said he too had received such a letter. I asked him what he did with it (bear in mind this guy was nowhere close to where the action had taken place)? He told me that, “I recommended him of course, I might want to drink a beer with him sometime!” To say that I was disappointed with the old former 1st Sergeant is an understatement! I personally wouldn’t drink a beer with that self decorating @\$shole (the Captain, not the Lieutenant) if I were dying of thirst!

And so it goes, ...and you wonder why Kerry’s former associates are hesitant to criticize their former Skipper and now Senator from Massachusetts? Sometimes I am at a total loss to explain human nature!

AND FINIS:

To say that I was a disillusioned individual when I got home doesn’t cover it. McNamara had tried to get us killed with a weapon that hadn’t been properly tested, and then tried to tell us that it was OUR fault. This was followed by watching the career planners decorate themselves while often neglecting to write up their own troops for deserved decorations, was beginning to give me a rather jaundiced take on my fellow human beings.

A call from the Commanding General’s Staff Secretary about topped it off. I was called one morning and told to report to the flagpole in front of the Base Headquarters at 0800 for an awards presentation. I was forced to ask him exactly what they had in mind? He informed me that they were planning on kissing me on both cheeks and pinning a dangler on my skuzzy fanny. Now I had heard rumblings about this before I left country, and had snuck into the Battalion Office and personally torn up the paperwork, not once but twice! Apparently a third attempt had been successful. My troops had done this one, and I felt bad about thwarting their efforts, but after what I’d seen, I wanted no reminders of the convoluted system that had awarded such dangles on individuals that wouldn’t make a pimple on a good Marine’s fanny. I told the Staff Secretary where to stick the thing, and forget it! He was aghast, but told me to stay available as he had to check with the Commanding General. I got a call back telling me to BE there on Friday morning or be cited for disobeying a direct order. Seems that they had a visiting Naval Academy Class and I was scheduled as the entertainment for that particular time slot.

The Commanding General was one of God’s true noblemen, and after the ceremony told me to repair to his office. We had a long discussion during which he attempted to smooth my ruffled feathers. He offered me a “fine” cigar, and told me how things really worked, and that I should take off my pack and relax. Not only that, but he would call me (personally) about once a month and have me come to his office for a chat (almost like my psychoanalyst I thought) and we’d talk. He finally admitted to me that he enjoyed asking my opinions on things as he felt that anyone who’d tell the CG to stuff a medal up his posterior was likely to give him honest answers! I developed a genuine fondness for that fine old gentleman, and

came to think of him as a sort of father figure. We got to be friends, and I always got a first rate cigar out of my visits. My commanding officer (at the Rifle Range – a typical REMF-type) however always wondered what we talked about during our visits, and could be seen visibly sweating when the call would come in from the Commanding General. I never explained and he never had guts enough to ask... Sometimes life is good! Hee, hee, hee...

One final footnote to this came at the end of my tour with the Air Force at Hanscom AFB in Massachusetts. The Air Force was conducting tests on their (then) new computerized intelligence system, "TIPI" (Tactical Information and Processing and Intelligence), and we were working on a sister system we called "MAGIS" (Marine Air Ground Intelligence System). The entire evolution was considered a joint project. It was fun, but mainly we were simply keeping the civilian contractors honest and making sure they didn't short the Government.

When it came time to leave, my (Air Force) Colonel called me in and told me he was recommending me for an Air Force Commendation Medal. Now the Colonel was a fine gentleman, and virtually everyone who left the unit without shooting themselves in the foot, was so decorated. My tail feathers were still ruffled remembering my experiences in Vietnam, and I asked that he not write up such an award. He asked if I would explain, and I told him that the blue and yellow ribbon would clash on a Marine Corps green uniform. He laughed, agreed, and we parted good friends, but old experiences run deep!

I still look with suspicion on those who look like walking Christmas trees. Just ingrained I guess, but I can remember when I was a kid that General Officers with a reputation of great daring and deeds often had only two rows of ribbons after 30-years of service! Now they give you foreign service ribbons, deployment ribbons, and in some services, ribbons for completing NCO Academies. Dear Allah, what have we come to? By getting a higher peak on our frame covers, we could look like South American Generals. Gawd I miss the Corps I grew up in!

Semper Fi,

Dick