Purple Hearts For Domestic Terror Victims?

Some Lawmakers Say It's Time For The Recognition

BY RICHARD SIMON

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WASHINGTON — The Purple Heart dates back to 1782 when Gen. George Washington created the Badge of Military Merit to recognize meritorious action. The medal, which features a likeness of Washington, fell into disuse after the Revolutionary War but was brought back in 1932 and is awarded to members of the military killed or wounded in combat.

Bipartisan legislation has been introduced in Congress to expand the eligibility for the medal to include members of the armed forces killed or wounded in a domestic terrorist attack — an effort to recognize military victims of the 2009 shootings at Fort Hood, Texas, and at a Little Rock, Ark., military recruiting station.

"The unfortunate fact is that members of our armed forces are at risk of being attacked by the enemy — al-Qaida and its adherents — not only when deployed overseas but also while stationed here at home," said Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y., chairman of the Homeland Security Committee, who has introduced one of the bills.

Purple Hearts were awarded to military victims of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Currently, members of the armed forces can receive the medal if they were killed or wounded "to an extent requiring treatment by a medical officer; in action against an enemy of the United States; as the result of an act of any hostile foreign force; or as the result of an international terrorist attack against the United States, provided the secretary of the military department concerned recognizes the attack as an international terrorist attack," according to the Defense Department.

King's bill would remove the distinction between domestic and international terrorism by expanding eligibility to military victims of "a terrorist attack within the United States perpetrated by an individual or individuals expressing a political, religious or ideological obligation to engage in unlawful violence directed against United States military operations or foreign policy."

A similar bill has been introduced in the Senate by Sen. Joe Lieberman, I-Conn., chairman of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee.

"Congress has historically acted to ensure that the recognition we award to our service members keeps pace with the threats they face," Lieberman said in a statement.

"The shootings outside the Little Rock recruiting center underscore that there are no front lines when it comes to terrorism," said Sen. Mark Pryor, D-Ark., a co-sponsor of the bill. "When a soldier signs up to serve and becomes a target of terrorism as a result, the least we can do is ensure he or she receives the proper honors and recognition."

According to Arkansas' senators, the Army did not recognize the Little Rock shootings as an international terror attack because federal charges were not filed against Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad, sentenced last year to life without parole for killing one Army soldier and wounding another. Police said Muhammad told them he carried out the shootings to protest the U.S. military and "what they had done to Muslims in the past."

Separately, language has been written into a defense bill headed to the House floor that would award the medal to the military victims of the Fort Hood and Little Rock shootings.

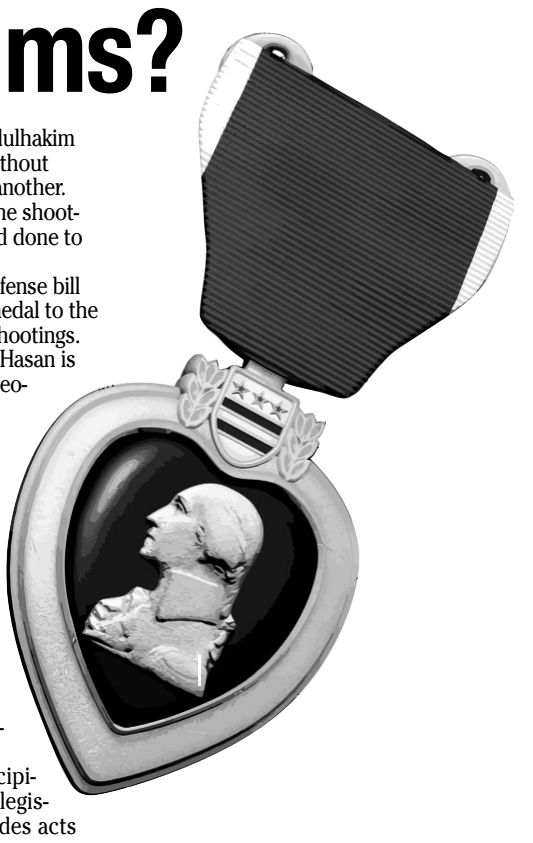
In the Fort Hood attack, Army Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan is due to go on trial in August, accused of killing 13 people and wounding 32.

There have been changes in the eligibility for the award over the years.

President John Kennedy in 1962 signed an executive order expanding the eligibility to service members wounded in any armed conflict in which the U.S. is engaged, making it possible for service members to receive the medal for wounds suffered in Vietnam. Before that, eligibility was limited to declared wars.

Later that same year, Army policy was modified to allow prisoners of war to receive the medal if wounded or injured by their captors.

John Bircher, national director of public relations for the Military Order of the Purple Heart, an organization of about 45,000 Purple Heart recipients, said in an interview that he considers the legislation "not necessary. The criteria already includes acts of terrorism."



All Is Not Fair In War, Veterans Of Past Conflicts Declare

BY GARY PETERSON

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WALNUT CREEK, Calif. — Robert Hooker was an infantry soldier during the Korean conflict. He survived the infamously bloody defense of Outpost Harry. He understands as well as any man that war is hell.

"I was wounded three times in one night," said Hooker, a retired car salesman who lives in Concord, Calif. "A lot of my friends died there."

But he and other Bay Area combat veterans of past wars had a similar reaction to photos recently published in the Los Angeles Times depicting American soldiers posing with bodies — and body parts — of dead insurgents:

That's crossing a line.

"What the soldiers are doing," Hooker said, "is inexcusable."

That sentiment was expressed last week by U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta to soldiers at Fort Benning, Ga., whom he cautioned against lapses in judgment that can affect how the United States and its troops are viewed by friend and foe alike.

"It takes only seconds — seconds — for a picture, a photo, to suddenly become an international headline," Panetta said, according to The Associated Press.

It's not just the soldiers in the L.A. Times photos. It's the military police who were photographed humiliating prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison. It's the U.S. staff sergeant found guilty in a court-martial in November of operating a kill team that hunted Afghan civilians for sport. It's American troops videotaped urinating on Afghan corpses. It's the burning of the Quran (accidental, according to the military). It's the Army sergeant alleged to have murdered 17 Afghanistan villagers in a pair of overnight raids in March.

"When you're in combat, things get a little different," said Castro Valley's Jake Dalton, an Army paratrooper in World War II. "You actually have to hate the guy you're shooting at. But when it comes to urinating on bodies, no, I wouldn't have done it. I wouldn't condone that kind of behavior. Even though all's fair in love and war, some things don't make sense."

According to military historian Victor Davis Hanson, a senior fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution, senseless acts have always been part of war. He contends, despite what seems like ceaseless anecdotal evidence to the contrary, that "it's a lot less common now than it used to be."

Some of the incidents that have occurred in the eight years since the U.S. invaded Iraq evoke memories of such atrocities as the Bataan Death March, German concentration camps and the My Lai Massacre. Others, Hanson said, are "something more like a lack of respect of the dead, of a sacred document. I think I'd come up with another name."

By any name, they don't sit well with a culture that, Hanson said, is more sensitized to the horrors of combat than, say, the "tragic society" that struggled through the Great Depression.

One example of the change in attitude: The L.A. Times photos drew quick and strong reaction from both Panetta, who issued an apology, and the White House. President Barack Obama's chief of staff called them "reprehensible."

Compare that to the World War II-era photo of a 20-year-old woman seated at a desk and examining the Japanese skull her soldier boyfriend had sent her from New Guinea. Life magazine chose it as its "Picture of the Week" for May 22, 1944.

The incidents reported from Iraq and Afghanistan clearly bother the combat veterans, who aren't unsympathetic to the plight of the contemporary soldier.

"Let's start with examining the boys in combat today," said Alamo's Bill Green, an infantryman in the Vietnam War. "These young people are serving multiple tours into a combat zone. To be told I had to go back, I don't know how I would have handled that."

"They've been over there too long," said Hooker, who visits wounded Iraq and Afghanistan soldiers at VA facilities. "Their minds are scrambled. They get fatigued."

Ultimately the veterans and the historian concur it is difficult to legislate morality in a combat zone.

"You go through the finest training in the world to kill," Hooker said. "It's not, 'Halt, who goes there?' when you're in the middle of the night in a hot zone."

"Society doesn't have any idea what Helmand province is like, or what the Taliban is like," Hanson said. "These soldiers know that if they get caught, they're going to wind up on a tape with their head cut off. Then they're told, 'Don't ever conduct yourself in a way that would reflect poorly on the United States.' It's a noble goal that works 95 percent of the time. The 5 percent breakdown, we should seek to correct it instead of vilifying the whole system."

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