



Saddle Up... Tonight We Ride

"Civilians may think it's a little juvenile to worry about ribbons, but a civilian has a house and bankroll to show what he's done for the past four years." — Bill Mauldin

Want to start a good argument? Introduce the topic of awards into a conversation with military folks. Just about everyone, past and present military, can furnish a tale of some gross injustice involving the awards system. Look to recent events, specifically the controversy over the Air Force and Navy's awarding of Bronze Stars to colonels who waged the battle that was Kosovo from hot spots like: Whiteman Air Force Base, Mo.; Ramstein Air Base, Germany; and Naples, Italy. Let's not enter into that fray: the Army did not award any Bronze Stars. But take note of one disturbing trend from that affair — of the 185 Bronze Stars awarded by the Air Force since the conflict in Kosovo stabilized, eight out of every nine medals have gone to officers, mostly lieutenant colonels and above. Kinda makes you go hmmm...

In the litany of gripes lodged against the award system, one complaint resonates, and that is the appearance of varying standards, not only between different organizations, but often within the same organization. A previous company commander of mine aggressively awarded medals, arguing that if he were a civilian employer he could reward his subordinates with raises or cash bonuses. Since these tools were not available to him, he utilized awards to recognize deserving soldiers. But many commanders view this practice differently, toeing the line with a tough stance on awarding medals, fearing a diluted awards system. (In 1998, the Army recognized one in every 2.2 soldiers for distinguished achievement or service, awarding either the Legion of Merit, Meritorious Service Medal, Army Commendation Medal, or the Army Achievement Medal.) However, when soldiers of a like rank gather at schools, they often find a disparity in medals earned for similar achievements. Commanders have a tough task in striking a balance while preserving the worth of an award.

The awarding of commander and CSM coins has also spurred controversy. The *Army Times* noted that the Army is preparing a service-wide policy that will govern who can issue coins and how much they can spend coining deserving soldiers. The article led soldiers to write angry rebuttals, pointing out many soldiers value a coin more than an award, and questioning the wisdom of fixing something that was not broke.

I side with the letter writers and vote against any policy that would impede a commander's or CSM's ability to award a coin on the spot to a worthy soldier — I suspect those coins become quite special to the awardees.

Which brings us to my reason for raising this topic — the U.S. Armor Association's Saint George Award program. There are few excuses for failing to plan or forecast an award to allow its presentation before the awardee departs, yet this happens all the time. Offenders recoil in horror at the association's inability to process the award immediately, "This is a great soldier and we need to get him the award!" Suddenly, the Association and the good ladies who process the award become the Great Satan and are blamed if the award is not presented on time. No one should get their award in the mail or at their next duty station. Of course, this means taking care of soldiers and insuring that the award is prepared, processed, and bestowed properly. I also object to soldiers paying for and writing their own award, a practice that tells a lot about a soldier's unit and chain of command. Unfortunately, we see this all too often.

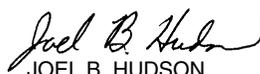
Finally, the criteria for the Saint George awards are clear. Please do not ask us to make an exception. We view our role as guardians at the gate, protecting the award for those who wear it. Bending or violating the criteria to gain the St. George Award does a disservice to all those who have earned it.

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