

united states military medals

United States military medals are a vital aspect of the nation's military tradition, serving as symbols of honor, bravery, and service. These medals recognize the sacrifices made by service members across different branches of the armed forces and commemorate various achievements, campaigns, and acts of valor. Understanding the array of military medals awarded in the United States provides insight into the rich history and values upheld by the military community. From combat decorations to service awards, each medal carries a unique story and significance, reflecting the dedicated efforts of those who serve in defense of the nation.

Overview of United States Military Medals

The United States military awards medals to recognize exemplary service, heroism, and participation in specific campaigns or operations. These medals are classified into several categories, including decorations for valor, service medals, campaign medals, and unit awards. Each category has its own criteria, design, and significance, making the medal system a comprehensive way to honor military personnel.

The process of awarding medals is governed by strict regulations and military protocols, ensuring that each award accurately reflects the recipient's contributions. The medals are often worn on the uniform, displayed in ceremonies, and kept as treasured keepsakes by service members and their families.

Major Categories of U.S. Military Medals

The medals awarded by the U.S. military can be broadly categorized into the following groups:

1. Decorations for Valor

These medals are awarded for acts of heroism and valor above and beyond the call of duty. They are the highest honors that recognize individual bravery in combat or dangerous situations.

2. Service Medals

Service medals acknowledge participation in specific military operations, campaigns, or for completing certain periods of service.

3. Campaign Medals and Ribbons

Campaign medals recognize participation in particular military campaigns or wars, often accompanied by service ribbons.

4. Unit Awards

These medals honor entire units for collective achievements or performance in specific operations or campaigns.

5. Special Recognitions and Foreign Awards

Occasionally, service members receive medals from foreign governments or special awards recognizing unique contributions.

Key U.S. Military Medals and Their Significance

Below is an overview of some of the most prominent and widely recognized U.S. military medals, including their purpose, eligibility, and symbolism.

1. Medal of Honor

The highest and most prestigious U.S. military decoration, awarded for personal acts of valor above and beyond the call of duty.

- **Eligibility:** Members of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard.
- **Significance:** Recognizes conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life.
- **Appearance:** Varies by service branch, but generally features a star-shaped medal with symbolic imagery.

2. Distinguished Service Cross / Navy Cross / Air Force Cross

These are the second-highest awards for heroism, awarded for extraordinary heroism in combat.

- **Distinguished Service Cross:** U.S. Army
- **Navy Cross:** U.S. Navy and Marine Corps
- **Air Force Cross:** U.S. Air Force

3. Silver Star

Awarded for gallantry in action against an enemy of the United States.

- **Criteria:** Acts of valor that do not meet the threshold for the Medal of Honor.
- **Appearance:** Silver star-shaped medal with a ribbon featuring a distinctive pattern.

4. Bronze Star Medal

Recognizes heroic or meritorious achievement or service in a combat zone.

- **Criteria:** Heroism or meritorious service in a combat area.
- **Special Award:** When awarded for valor, it includes a "V" device.

5. Purple Heart

Awarded to those wounded or killed in action.

- **Criteria:** Wounded or killed in combat or as a result of enemy action.
- **Appearance:** Heart-shaped medal with a profile of George Washington.

6. Defense and Service Medals

These medals recognize participation in specific military operations or service periods.

- **National Defense Service Medal:** For service during designated periods of national emergency.
- **Global War on Terrorism Service Medal:** For service in the GWOT.
- **Vietnam Service Medal:** For service during the Vietnam War.

7. Campaign Medals

Recognize participation in specific military campaigns.

- **World War II Victory Medal:** For service during WWII.
- **Korean Service Medal:** For participation in the Korean War.
- **Persian Gulf War Medal:** For service during the Gulf War.
- **Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal:** For deployment to designated areas in the GWOT.

8. Unit Awards and Medals

These recognize collective achievement.

- **Presidential Unit Citation:** For extraordinary heroism in action against an armed enemy.
- **Valorous Unit Award:** For extraordinary heroism in action against an armed enemy.
- **Meritorious Unit Commendation:** For outstanding performance in non-combat activities.

9. Foreign Medals and Awards

Service members may also receive medals from allied nations, such as the British Distinguished Service Medal or the French Croix de Guerre, often awarded for joint operations or acts of valor.

Design and Appearance of Military Medals

Each medal's design reflects its purpose and the values it symbolizes. The medals often feature symbolic imagery such as eagles, stars, flags, or historical figures. The colors of ribbons associated with medals carry their own meanings, often representing valor, sacrifice, or the specific campaign.

For example:

- The **Medal of Honor** typically features a star-shaped medal with a ribbon that varies by branch.

- The **Purple Heart** features a heart with a profile of George Washington, with a purple ribbon.
- The **Vietnam Service Medal** has a green and yellow ribbon symbolizing the jungle environment.

The presentation of medals is often accompanied by a formal ceremony and is considered a significant honor for service members.

How Medals Are Awarded and Worn

The process of awarding medals involves multiple levels of approval, often initiated by commanding officers and verified through official military channels. Medals can be awarded posthumously or to living personnel, depending on the circumstances.

Service members typically wear their medals in order of precedence on their uniforms during official ceremonies. Ribbons representing medals are also worn on daily uniforms, allowing for easy recognition of a service member's achievements.

Conclusion

United States military medals serve as enduring symbols of courage, sacrifice, and service. They honor the dedication of the men and women who defend the nation and highlight the valor and commitment embedded within the military community. Whether recognizing acts of heroism, participation in significant campaigns, or exemplary service, these medals tell a story of sacrifice and patriotism. Understanding the different types of medals, their significance, and the history behind them enriches our appreciation for the service members who wear them and the values they represent.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the most prestigious military medals awarded by the United States?

The most prestigious U.S. military medals include the Medal of Honor, the Silver Star, the Distinguished Service Cross, the Navy Cross, and the Air Medal, each recognizing extraordinary bravery and service.

How does one qualify to receive the Medal of Honor?

The Medal of Honor is awarded for personal acts of valor above and beyond the call of duty, often requiring eyewitness accounts and thorough review by military authorities to confirm the recipient's heroic actions.

What is the difference between a campaign medal and a service medal?

Campaign medals recognize participation in specific military campaigns or wars, while service medals are awarded for a period of service or specific duties, regardless of combat involvement.

Can military medals be worn on civilian clothing?

Yes, military medals can be worn on civilian clothing, typically during formal events or ceremonies, following proper regulations on how to display and arrange them.

Are military medals hereditary or can they be passed down through families?

Military medals are awarded to individuals for their service and are generally personal; however, family members may inherit medals after a service member's death, often kept as heirlooms or for display.

How does the process of awarding a military medal work?

The process involves a recommendation from a commanding officer, documentation of the act of valor or service, review and approval by military authorities, and finally the presentation of the medal during a formal ceremony.

What are the criteria for receiving a Purple Heart?

The Purple Heart is awarded to service members who are wounded or killed in action against an enemy of the United States or as a result of enemy-related violence.

How can veterans obtain their military medals if they lost them?

Veterans can request replacement medals through the appropriate military branch's awards and decorations office, providing proof of service and completing the required documentation.

Additional Resources

United States military medals serve as enduring symbols of valor, dedication, and service within the armed forces. These medals not only recognize individual and collective acts of heroism but also reflect the rich history, evolving values, and organizational structure of the U.S. military. From the earliest days of the nation to the modern era, medals have played a pivotal role in honoring those who have distinguished themselves in times of conflict and peace alike. This comprehensive review explores the history, types, significance, and criteria associated with U.S. military medals, providing a detailed understanding of their importance within the military tradition.

Historical Overview of U.S. Military Medals

Origins and Early Recognitions

The tradition of awarding medals in the United States dates back to the Revolutionary War, although formalized decorations were scarce during that period. Early recognitions were primarily in the form of ribbons or badges, with medals becoming more standardized during the 19th century. The Civil War marked a significant turning point, as the Union and Confederate armies began issuing medals to honor bravery and service, with notable examples like the Medal of Honor being established during this era.

Medal of Honor: The Pinnacle of Valor

Established in 1861, the Medal of Honor is the highest and most prestigious military decoration awarded by the United States government. Its origins trace back to the Civil War, initially created to recognize Union soldiers who displayed extraordinary heroism. The medal's design has evolved over time, but its core purpose remains unchanged: to honor acts of valor above and beyond the call of duty.

Evolution Through the 20th and 21st Centuries

Throughout the 20th century, the U.S. military expanded its medals and decorations to recognize a broader spectrum of service and achievements. World Wars I and II saw the formalization of numerous awards, including campaign medals and service ribbons. In recent decades, the focus has extended to recognizing excellence in leadership, meritorious service, and specialized skills, reflecting the complexity of modern military operations.

Categories and Types of U.S. Military Medals

The U.S. military awards a diverse array of medals, each serving distinct purposes and honoring different types of service or achievement. These can be broadly categorized into personal decorations, unit awards, service medals, campaign medals, and foreign awards.

Personal Decorations

Personal decorations are awarded to individual service members for acts of heroism, bravery, or meritorious service. They include:

- Medal of Honor: The highest decoration for valor.
- Distinguished Service Cross, Navy Cross, Air Force Cross: Recognize extraordinary heroism in combat.
- Silver Star: Awarded for gallantry in action.

- Bronze Star Medal: For heroic or meritorious achievement in a combat zone.
- Purple Heart: For those wounded or killed in action.

Unit Awards

These medals recognize entire military units for collective achievement, such as:

- Presidential Unit Citation: Awarded for extraordinary heroism in action against an armed enemy.
- Valorous Unit Award: Recognizes units for collective gallantry.
- Army Valorous Unit Award and others specific to branches.

Service Medals and Campaign Medals

Service medals acknowledge participation in specific military campaigns or periods of service. Common examples include:

- National Defense Service Medal: For service during designated periods of conflict.
- Vietnam Service Medal: For service in Vietnam.
- Global War on Terrorism Service Medal: For service in the post-2001 conflicts.
- Korean Service Medal, Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal, among others.

Specialty and Qualification Medals

These recognize specialized skills or qualifications, such as:

- Parachutist Badge
- Marksmanship Medals
- Combat Action Badge

Foreign and International Awards

The U.S. military also recognizes foreign medals and awards, often as part of joint operations or alliances like NATO. These include medals from allied nations and international organizations acknowledging cooperation and joint efforts.

Design and Symbolism of U.S. Military Medals

Understanding the design and symbolism embedded in U.S. military medals offers insight into their significance and the values they represent.

Design Elements

Most medals feature intricate symbols, eagles, stars, and other motifs rooted in American iconography. For example:

- The Medal of Honor features a five-pointed star with a suspending ribbon, often with an eagle in flight.
- The Purple Heart includes a heart-shaped medal with a profile of George Washington.
- Campaign medals typically feature images of the conflict's emblem or relevant symbols, such as the Statue of Liberty for the Vietnam Service Medal.

Colors and Ribbons

The ribbons attached to medals often convey additional meaning through their colors:

- Red, white, and blue dominate, symbolizing patriotism.
- Specific color combinations denote particular campaigns or service branches.
- The design of ribbons serves both aesthetic and functional purposes in distinguishing awards.

Criteria and Process for Awarding Medals

The process of awarding U.S. military medals involves rigorous criteria, documentation, and approval procedures to ensure integrity and fairness.

Eligibility and Criteria

Each medal has specific eligibility requirements. For example:

- Medal of Honor: Awarded for personal acts of valor above and beyond the call of duty, verified by credible witnesses and command recommendation.
- Service Medals: Usually awarded based on participation in designated campaigns or periods of service.
- Unit Awards: Based on documented collective achievement and command recommendation.

Nomination and Approval Process

The general process involves:

- Submission of a recommendation by the service member's commanding officer.
- Collection of supporting documentation, witness statements, and event details.
- Review by appropriate military boards or authorities.
- Approval by the service branch's commanding general or designated officials.
- Presentation ceremonies often held to honor recipients.

Posthumous Awards and Special Considerations

Many medals can be awarded posthumously, recognizing sacrifices made by fallen service members. The process ensures that even in death, their bravery and service are formally acknowledged.

The Significance and Impact of Military Medals

Medals serve multiple roles beyond mere recognition. They embody military values, boost morale, and foster a sense of pride and tradition within the armed forces.

Morale and Motivation

Recognition through medals encourages service members to uphold high standards of conduct, bravery, and professionalism. It fosters a culture of excellence and inspires others.

Historical and Cultural Legacy

Medals function as tangible links to history, commemorating pivotal moments, conflicts, and achievements. They help preserve the collective memory of the military's sacrifices.

Public Perception and Civil-Military Relations

Medals also serve to communicate military values to the civilian population, reinforcing respect and appreciation for service members' dedication.

Controversies and Challenges

While medals are symbols of honor, their awarding process has occasionally faced scrutiny.

- Perceived favoritism or inconsistency in awarding criteria.
- Debates over the value or significance of certain medals.
- Recognition disparities among different service branches or ranks.
- Evolving standards for valor and service recognition as warfare and technology change.

Efforts continue to ensure transparency, fairness, and relevance in the awarding process.

Conclusion

United States military medals encapsulate the nation's appreciation for its service members' courage, sacrifice, and dedication. They serve as symbols of individual heroism, collective achievement, and national pride. Understanding their history, categories, symbolism, and awarding processes enriches our appreciation of the military's traditions and the profound significance these medals hold. As the U.S. military continues to adapt to new challenges and conflicts, its medals will undoubtedly evolve, reflecting both enduring values and the dynamic nature of military service.

By delving into the rich tapestry of U.S. military medals, we gain not just an understanding of awards and decorations but also insight into the core principles that underpin American military service—valor, sacrifice, and unwavering commitment to the nation.

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The Medal of Honor may be America's highest military decoration, but all Medals of Honor are not created equal. The medal has in fact consisted of several distinct decorations at various times and has involved a number of competing statutes and policies that rewarded different types of heroism. In this book, the first comprehensive look at the medal's historical, legal, and policy underpinnings, Dwight S. Mears charts the complex evolution of these developments and differences over time. The Medal of Honor has had different qualification thresholds at different times, and indeed three separate versions—one for the army and two for the navy—existed contemporaneously between World Wars I and II. Mears traces these versions back to the medal's inception during the Civil War and continues through the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—along the way describing representative medal actions for all major conflicts and services as well as legislative and policy changes contemporary to each period. He gives particular attention to retroactive army awards for the Civil War; World War I legislation that modernized and expanded the army's statutory award authorization; the navy's grappling with both a combat and noncombat Medal of Honor through much of the twentieth century; the Vietnam-era act that ended noncombat awards and largely standardized the Medal of Honor among all services; and the perceived decline of Medals of Honor awarded in the ongoing Global War on Terror. Mears also explores the tradition of awards via legislative bills of relief; extralegislative awards; administrative routes to awards through Boards of Correction of Military Records; restoration of awards previously revoked by the army in 1917; judicial review of military

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