

# 'V' device under review for consistency

## Pentagon seeks to ensure decoration has same meaning in all services

BY LISA BURGESS  
Stars and Stripes

ARLINGTON, Va. — The working group that is revising the Pentagon's medals and awards policy say top leaders must standardize the use of the "V," or "valor" device on decorations, according to a defense official.

For servicemembers, awards and decorations "are a palpable source of pride," said Bill Carr, acting deputy undersecretary for Military Personnel Policy, who is heading the working group.

"That is why you celebrate valor, participation, exposure to danger and success. All of those matter. But they matter only if they're consistently defined and equally difficult to qualify for over time," Carr told Stars and Stripes on Friday.

Carr is overseeing the first major review of Department of Defense Instruction 1348.33-M, the Manual of Military Decorations and Awards, since 1996.

The problem, Carr said, is that each of the services has developed different interpretations of exactly what the "V" signifies.

In the Army, for example, "a 'V,' to a soldier is going to mean valor ... audible, palpable valor," he said.

"But that's not the case in the Air Force," Carr said, "where a 'V' device could be for meritorious accomplishments while in harm's way."

The Marine Corps and Navy definitions of the "V" device "are murkier, but more closely akin to the Army" than to the Air Force, Carr said.

Servicemembers sitting down at the same table together and looking at one another's medals should have a common understanding of what was sacrificed in order to earn the decorations, Carr said.

Pentagon officials announced the review Sept. 8, although Carr told Stars and Stripes the working group actually began meeting in July.

The new review involves only decorations and awards that are offered by all the services, such as



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**An Army Commendation Medal is shown with a "V" device for valor.**

the Purple Heart and Bronze Star, and not those that are unique to a particular service, such as the Army's Combat Action Badge, Carr said.

Topics of discussion include looking at all of the jointly awarded medals to "make sure our policies are consistent and understood," from the Medal of Honor and Purple Heart all the way to the Military Outstanding Volunteer, Carr said.

But Carr said it is the awarding of the Valor device that has raised particular concern among many military constituents.

The issue is that under the current regulations, "there was never a moment when a shining line was defined that said the 'V' should personally demonstrate valor," he said.

The "V," also known as the Combat V and the Combat Distinguishing Device, is a tiny brass signifier that can be added to the ribbon of medals at or below the Bronze Star to give an award extra meaning.

The joint "V" device is also used on service-specific ribbons, including various service Commendation Medals, Achievement Medals, Air Medals and even certain unit awards.

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## Defense Department instructions on use vague

The Defense Department's instructions don't specify how the services should award "V" devices for valor, so the services have developed their own rules. Here are excerpts from the various regulations:

■ From the Department of Defense Instruction 1348.33-M, "The Manual of Military Decorations and Awards":

"C10.1.4. "V" (Valor) Device ... is worn on ... the JSCM [Joint Service Commendation Medal] when the medal was awarded for acts or service involving direct participation in combat operations on or after June 25, 1963."

■ From Air Force Policy Directive 36-28, "Awards and Decorations Program":

"A3.8. The 'V' (Valor) Device is ... [w]orn on the BSM [Bronze Star Medal] service and suspension ribbons when awarded for heroism. Worn on the AFAM [Air Force Achievement Medal] and AFCM [Air Force Commendation Medal] ... when awarded to appropriately recognize the noteworthy accomplishments of Air Force personnel placed in harm's way during contingency deployment operations."

■ From Army Regulation 600-8-22, "Military Awards":

"The 'V' device is ... worn to denote participation in acts of heroism involving conflict with an armed enemy. It was original-

ly worn only on ... the Bronze Star Medal to denote an award made for heroism (valor). Effective 29 February 1964, the 'V' device was also authorized for wear on the Air Medal and Army Commendation Medal for heroic acts or valorous deeds not warranting awards of the Distinguished Flying Cross or the Bronze Star Medal with 'V' device. Effective 25 June 1963, the 'V' device was authorized additionally for wear on the Joint Service Commendation Medal when the award is for acts of valor (heroism) during participation in combat operations."

■ For both the Marine Corps and Navy, from the Navy's Secretary of the Navy (SECNAV) INSTRUCTION 1650.1G, "Navy and Marine Corps Awards Manual":

"2. Letter Devices, d. Bronze 'V' ... is authorized for wear on these decorations if the award is for acts or services involving direct participation in combat operations ... Eligibility for the Combat Distinguishing Device [the 'V'] shall be based solely on acts or services by individuals who are exposed to personal hazard due to direct hostile actions, and not upon the geographical area in which the acts or services are performed. Each case must be judged on its own merits."

—Lisa Burgess

## Comedy in combat

### Jokesters supply troops with laughs

BY ANITA POWELL  
Stars and Stripes

BAGHDAD — Even self-professed funny man Keith Alberstadt has his serious moments.

Like earlier this month, when a comedy performance at a Baghdad-area base ended with an hourlong mortar attack on the base. Alberstadt and his four fellow comedians — all members of Comics on Duty, a stand-up comedy troupe currently on tour in Iraq and Kuwait — scurried into a bunker and waited for calm to prevail.

Days later, in the gaudy comfort of Saddam Hussein's former hunting lodge on Camp Victory, Alberstadt and his colleagues joked — lamely — about their close call.

"The terrorists were very nice about not interrupting the show," said Alberstadt, 33, a Nashville, Tenn., native.

Such is the life of a roving comedian in Iraq: Onstage, the comedians elicit laughter and a flood of gratitude from soldiers. Offstage, chaos, uncertainty and the very unfunny realities of Iraq intrude.

The men say they shy away from discussing political issues when entertaining servicemembers.

"We don't want to make this a soapbox," Alberstadt said.

Instead, he said, he focuses inward.

"I have this one joke about my naiveté," he said. "Like they told me, 'You're going to leave CONUS on this date,'" he said, referring to the acronym for "continental United States."

"And I'm like, 'Fine, how do I get to CONUS?'"

Another comedian, 45-year-old West Virginia native Tom Foss, said he directs his jabs at his home state.

"I come right out and say I'm happy to be here," he said. "I'm from West Virginia. This is nice. My tent has lights in it. I don't have to take the shotgun to the bathroom."

Alberstadt also chooses to gnaw on that old chestnut: Army food.

"I love the food," he said. "Because I'm a starving artist. I'd eat a gravel sandwich if it came for free."



ANITA POWELL/Stars and Stripes

**From left, comedians Keith Alberstadt, Dave Mishevitz and Tom Foss relax at Saddam Hussein's former pleasure palace in Baghdad. The three have found plenty to laugh about amid the seriousness of Iraq.**

Fellow comic Dave Mishevitz, 33, of Ann Arbor, Mich., said he notes the absurdity of his surroundings.

"I wish my name was Hesco," he said, referring to the manufacturer whose name is on the sand-filled barriers that seem to surround every structure on the

camp. "That would be awesome."

Alternately, he joked, he wouldn't mind going into the gravel business.

"There couldn't possibly be more gravel to walk on," he said.

But all agree that the basic absurdity of Iraq is beyond any stand-up routine.

"We're sitting in a bunker," Alberstadt said. Mortars were flying. "And a guy comes by in full body armor, pokes his head in, says, 'Hey, thanks for coming out.'"

"I'm like, 'Are you kidding me?'"

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