



THE UNITED STATES WORLD WAR ONE CENTENNIAL COMMISSIONSM

Valor Medals Review Task Force: Executive Summary

In July 1918, as American forces plunged into the Second Battle of the Marne, Congress passed legislation altering the criteria for the Medal of Honor and creating a slew of new valor awards, including the Distinguished Service Cross. These drastic changes resulted in confusion and inconsistent standards among commanding officers. By November 11th, only four servicemembers had received the Medal of Honor. In a 1919 postwar review, over 100 more veterans received that distinction.

This review was colored by the same contemporary attitudes about race which led to the formation of segregated units. Despite comprising two combat divisions, including the 369th “Harlem Hellfighters” which logged more combat days (and casualties) than any other American regiment, none of the over 367,000 African-Americans soldiers who served in the Great War received a Medal of Honor. In 1925, the Commandant of the Army War College wrote a “Plan for the use of Negro manpower” which referred to African-Americans as a “sub-species of the human family” unfit for service as officers. Consequently, segregated units persevered into World War Two, where over 701,000 African-Americans served in the Army. Again, none received a Medal of Honor.

In the early 1990s, the Army paid Shaw University to conduct a systematic study of African Americans in WW2, which resulted in the awarding of seven Medals of Honor. Congress later enacted a series of laws expanding this impartial review to include Asian, Hispanic, and Jewish veterans of any military department who served between the Battles of Pearl Harbor and Tora Bora. However, no such systematic review has been authorized for WW1. Under current law, the exact same act of heroism would be eligible for study if it occurred in 1941, 1951, 1971, 1991, or 2001, but not 1918. We at the US World War One Commission, established by Congress in 2013, are aiming to rectify that.

Through language in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, we seek an expansion of existing review authority, and a waiver on the statute of limitations for awarding a Medal of Honor, to cover certain WW1 veterans. Our proposed text encompasses all of the armed forces and all four of the aforementioned groups of veterans, alongside Native Americans (who were largely denied citizenship until 1924). This precludes the need for further reviews of this nature. Our text adheres exactly to the stringent criteria established by previous studies of groups or individual servicemembers. To be considered, a veteran must have received a Distinguished Service Cross, a French Croix de Guerre with Palms (an analog to the Medal of Honor), or a recommendation for a Medal of Honor. All decisions for or against an upgrade will be made exclusively by review boards of serving military officers consulting only official military records, recommendations, and citations, using modern standards for the award.

Our proposal includes a requirement to consult with the “Valor Medals Review Task Force,” established in September 2018 by our Commission in partnership with Park University. This is a group of volunteer academics funded by private donations to the George S. Robb Centre for the Study of the Great War, a registered 501(C)(3). It is prepared to assist the Pentagon in completing the most noncontroversial and expensive* portions of the research. This includes identifying all veterans who meet the threshold for review, collating their records, and conducting genealogical studies to determine next of kin. Two of the three leading scholars are veterans, including Dr. Timothy Westcott (research lead) and Dr. Dwight Mears (author of *The Medal of Honor*). Based on the flexibility of the consultation mandate, each Service Secretary can choose which tasks to delegate to the Task Force and how best to engage with them.

In its first months of operation, our effort has been endorsed by the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, three retired flag officers, and the grandson of Sergeant York. They have each elected to stand up for our Commission’s belief that the Medal of Honor can never be diluted to make a political point—and that is precisely why every veteran who earned the award must receive it, regardless of the circumstances of their birth. For further questions, please visit ww1cc.org/valor or gsr.park.edu.

*: The Shaw Review lasted 2 years and cost DOD \$320,585. Adjusted for inflation, that is equivalent to \$557,741 in FY19. Efficient use of Task Force resources will reduce costs compared to previous efforts.