

Former POWs Have Earned Medal, Letter Writers Say

CLINTON, Conn. — This is a response to Col. L. Fred Belcher's letter on the new Prisoner of War Medal in the Aug. 11 issue.

The colonel owes an apology to the thousands of former POWs of this country and their families for his thoughtless, unpatriotic letter concerning the award of this medal. The fact that he has risen to the rank of colonel with his warped perspective concerning combat veterans who became prisoners of war is mind-boggling, to say the least. I am more than ever convinced that the Army officer promotion system is seriously flawed. Someone should take the man aside and explain to him that you can't get any closer to the enemy in combat than those who became POWs.

The vast majority of American POWs were taken during World War II, around 95,000 in the European Theater of Operations and 35,000 in the Pacific. The majority of ETO prisoners were fliers, shot down hundreds of miles behind enemy lines. The largest number of ground forces were taken during the Battle of the Bulge, as it came to be known. Incidentally, the most heavily decorated unit in the Army was one which was taken prisoner and only recognized a few short years ago.

The men from Bataan and Corregidor, it should be remembered, were surrendered by their officers, and then only after all hope of reinforcement was abandoned.

Prisoners of war suffered greatly from starvation, disease and cruelty by their captors, as well as by strafing and bombing from the Allies. No less figure than the President of the United States issues a proclamation each year for POW/MIA Recognition Day and the Congress designates a day each year to honor these veterans.

According to the proclamation of 1985, "The bravery, suffering and profound devotion to duty of our POWs and MIAs have earned them a preeminent place in the hearts of all Americans. Their heroism is a beacon to follow forever. Their spirit of hope and commitment to the defense of freedom reflects the basic tenets of our nation."

The governors of each state and the mayors of cities large and small issue similar proclamations. The date for this year's observance of National POW/MIA Recognition Day is Sept. 19. I urge all who read this letter, especially misinformed persons such as the colonel who wrote this disgraceful letter, to take part in the ceremonies which will be held in each state.

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American Ex-Prisoners of War

NAMPA, Idaho — In the Aug. 11 issue Col. Belcher complained about the POW medal, saying that "becoming a POW becomes none of the above" criteria of being "in recognition of heroism, meritorious achievement or meritorious service." Many former POWs acquitted themselves quite bravely under those circumstances of capture or captivity.

For example, during Vietnam, five POWs received the Medal of Honor for their POW activities alone. They were Marine Col. Donald G. Cook, Air Force Col. George E. Day, Air Force Capt. Lance P. Sijan, Rear Adm. James B. Stockdale, and Air Force Lt. Col. Leo K. Thorsness. They continually resisted exploitation and helped others to do the same. Their actions were no less brave than had they not been captured.

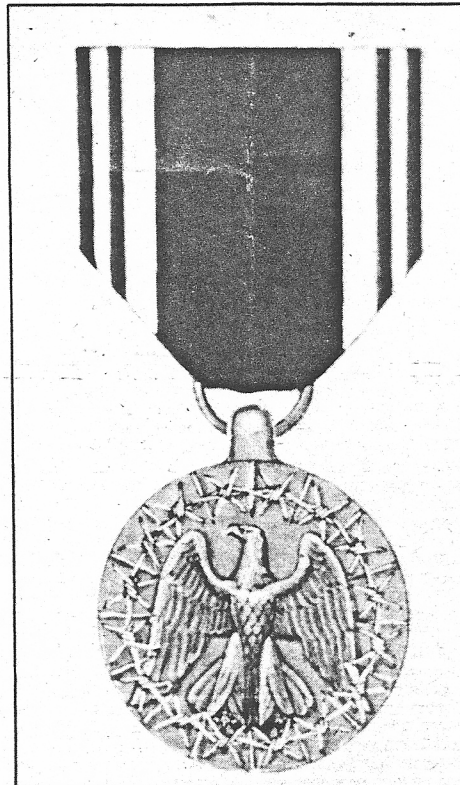
Many Vietnam POWs were pilots who were unable to successfully evade capture and be rescued. Others were captured in ground actions, again before they could evade capture.

There are exceptions who deserve no POW medal, such as former Marine Bobby Garwood. Such POWs either turned against their country and fellow POWs, aiding their captors in many ways, some by broadcasting propaganda, or else they sought special favors for themselves. Col. Belcher is correct in stating that such former POWs deserve no recognition.

On the other hand, I see no reason not to honor former POWs who acquitted themselves loyally, bravely and meritoriously during their captivity. Those loyal POWs simply continued the fight on another battlefield — their POW camps. Their weapons were loyalty, brains, ingenuity, compassion for fellow POWs, and constant efforts to thwart their captors' attempts to exploit them.

ROBERT T. DONALD
Chief Warrant Officer 2 (Ret.)

PORTLAND, Ore. — In response to the fulminations of



Proposed design for the Prisoner of War Medal.

Col. Belcher in the Aug. 11 issue on the proposed award of a POW medal, I would like to present another side of the coin.

As a corporal in Company E, 6th Armored Infantry, I was wounded and captured at Kasserine Pass in North Africa. Two and a half years later I was liberated by the Russian army, still a corporal. There was no automatic promotion at that time. Upon return to the states I was decorated with the Purple Heart with cluster and with the Combat Infantry Badge. Without me, the 6th Infantry fought the entire Italian campaign, with the regiment winning a Presidential Unit Citation, the battalion a second citation, and E Company winning still a third. I know of no other unit the World War II with such a sequence.

Despite the colonel's belittling remarks about getting captured, I would like to point out the following:
Nobody in his right mind voluntarily allows himself to be captured.

By being captured I was denied potential further promotion.

“The bravery, suffering and profound devotion to duty of our POWs and MIAs have earned them a preeminent place in the hearts of all Americans. Their heroism is a beacon to follow forever. Their spirit of hope and commitment to the defense of freedom reflects the basic tenets of our nation.”

By being captured I was denied the chance for potential winning of further decorations — although on sober reconsideration, the potential also existed that they might be posthumous since only 38 men survived from the 177-man company which invaded North Africa in November 1942.

Two and a half years is a very long time, and the last months of World War II is not a time to be remembered with any great relish. As anyone who served in the European Theater is aware, the winter of 1944-45 was, and still is, the most bitter of this century. Imagine if you can, the misery visited on POWs when, to avoid the advancing Russians, they were forced to spend bitter days and weeks on the road — marching ill-clad, ill-fed, lice-infested, and constantly harassed with bombing and strafing attacks by the Red Air force, while the temperature never rose above -15 degrees. On capture I was a healthy 190-pounder. Upon return to American control, I managed to muster a massive 114 pounds.

Do not deny us one small award which we who survived can claim as our own. Since that time, in other wars and other campaigns, I have earned other medals and citations. When and if the POW medal is issued, I will find room in the fruit salad for the ribbon. And anyone who will denigrate the award will get the classic answer — "At least I got close enough to the enemy to get captured."

JOHN G. LINDER
Lieutenant Colonel (Ret.)

SAN ANTONIO, Texas — Col. Belcher, who wrote about the POW medal in the Aug. 11 issue, apparently never served as a line officer in combat. Most former POWs were taken in large numbers as the result of a blunder by higher command or a surprise enemy attack. Americans captured at Corregidor are a case in point. The alternative was a dirty, useless death.

When the Germans blitzed at Kasserine Pass, Combat Command A, 1st Armored Division, was doubly decimated. The 168th Infantry, less one battalion not engaged, ceased to exist as a unit. Of 40 officers in its 3d Battalion, all but one were killed or captured.

Col. Thomas Drake, the regimental commander, and Lt. Col. John H. Van Vliet Jr., 3d Battalion commander, were among those taken. As Drake said while interned at Oflag 64, a German camp for American ground force officers, "Anyone who got close enough to the enemy to be captured was close enough to be killed."

The POW medal is not a decoration, but a service medal. The latter are awarded for service in designated areas during specified periods of time, just for being there. Surely, those who spent time in Japanese death camps or the Hanoi Hilton are as deserving of recognition as the GI who served in the Army of Occupation of Germany during the Korean War.

To those who have long since stopped wearing the uniform and ribbons, even to retiree functions, the POW service medal is meaningless except as a memento. But to any former POWs still on active duty, the ribbon will provide a means of recognition among those who endured a unique experience which cannot be shared or even understood by anyone who wasn't there.

ALAN WILLIAMSON

FORT DEVENS, Mass. — I am not surprised to see letters written condemning the new POW medal. It seems to me that most of the complaints are written by people who have never been a POW or people who have a chest full of armchair awards for spending their time in an assignment. Each week in the *Army Times* I read the awards given to soldiers throughout the Army. How many of these are given for having your life in danger or for being confined in a prison by someone who would just as soon shoot you as give you a drink of water?

Anyone who has ever been to a VA hospital and seen the patients who have been there since World War II, Korea or Vietnam, that have been injured for life as POWs, or to the outpatient clinics where they are being treated for problems relating to their capture, would say giving them a medal is very poor compensation for their sacrifice. Knowing some of them, they would be very proud to wear such a medal just knowing their country still cares enough to say thanks.

So, all you armchair medal wearers, get up and start pushing for support for this medal. Let's tell all the people who have given for their country, "Thanks. We are very proud of you for the things you endured for us."

NAME WITHHELD