The history of military awards is a tapestry of high adventure and heroic deeds commemorated in pieces of metal and bits of ribbon. It is not only the story of great battles and ignominious defeats that were civilization's turning points, but it is also the panoply of history sketched out, not in broad brush, but in an individual's actions and his participation in those events.

But where did it all begin? There have always been the spoils or trophies of battle: the opponent's armor, his helmet, etc., carried home to commemorate the victory. However, where did the first system of awards for valor and service originate? The answer lies in the very beginning of the Roman Empire and surrounds her Legions, their eagle standards, and the men who brought Pax Romana to the world.

The Roman Army, during the first centuries of the Empire, has served as the model for many things from field sanitation to veteran's benefits. The backbone of this army was the Legion, each composed of approximately 5000 men, divided into centuries (platoons) and cohorts (companies). The first cohort was larger than the others and held the position of honor within the legion. The number of Legions varied from 25 in A. D. 23 to a high of 33 in about A. D. 200. Thus, simple arithmetic shows us that the entire known civilized world was kept at relative peace by a force of between 125,000 to 185,000 legionnaires. The manner in which this miracle was performed is the central part of our story. The Roman soldier enlisted for a minimum of 20 to 25 years, was forbidden to marry, fought foes many times greater in number, and

*The legionnaires of this period received donatives, or gifts, from the Emperor from time to time to commemorate royal accession, births, etc. Soldiers received both an honorable discharge, honesta missa, and a grant of land or money at the end of their enlistment.

**At some periods there was also a maniple composed of 2 centuries, 6 maniples per cohort.

***The last four years were spent in a special status, immunes, which excluded these long-service soldiers from menial details.

****In practice this rule was ignored. The soldiers often took up family ties, which were not legitimized until their formal discharge.
was stationed at the very frontiers of the Empire. His life was severe, discipline harsh, and rewards few. But rewards there were, used as recruiting tools and to recognize bravery within the small circle of the professional army.

THE BEGINNINGS OF MILITARY AWARDS

The earliest military decoration was the Phalerae, a round disk, originally part of the bridle bit used on horses. Apparently, when the Romans and Greeks clashed these Phalerae were brought back by the Romans as symbols of their victories. Since they were relatively small they could be worn or affixed to the Roman's armor or his leather harness (lorica). Torques, or bracelets, began as booty stripped from the bodies of dead barbarians and worn by the Roman victors. The same held true for armillae, or arm bands. These items were ornaments of Rome's enemies, which became symbolic of victories over them. Various crowns (coronae) were recognized even before Imperial Rome as significant of achievement or heroism.

THE AWARD SYSTEM OF THE IMPERIAL ROMAN ARMY

In the first several centuries of the Roman Empire a system of military awards developed along with the rise of a professional army. The following awards, in ascending order of precedence, were available:

Torques - originally Celtic neck rings, often attached to the scarf the legionnaires traditionally wore to prevent their armor from chaffing their necks. These rings were thick and heavily ornamented, awarded for deeds of valor, and open to all ranks. This was the lowest ranking award for valor (see Figure 1).

Armillae - broad bangles of metal, designed to be worn on the upper arm or wrist. They were awarded for bravery in the field and open to all ranks.

Phalerae - round metal disks bearing the face of a particular god favored by the Legion, the face of the current Emperor, or some mythological character. They were either mounted directly on the metal or leather breast plate of the soldier or suspended from a special holder made of leather straps. This decoration was available to all ranks.

Corona Muralis - The "Crown of the Wall" was awarded to the first soldier to set foot on the wall of an enemy camp or city. A naval version also existed in the Corona Navalis Rostrata or Corona Classica, which was awarded to the first sailor or marine (classe-tarius) to board an enemy vessel. These decorations were available to all ranks and were keenly competed for.

*The Roman Navy was primarily used against pirates after the civil war ended. Based at Misenum in the Bay of Naples, it was composed of fast oar-driven ships. Attached to each one was a complement of marines, who actually did the fighting once the battle was joined.
FIGURE 1

This Roman officer is wearing a leather corselet or cuirass (lorica) over his standard woolen tunic. His chest is decorated with two coronae and five phalerae attached to a holder made of leather straps. On his head he is wearing the Corona Civica, a wreath of gilded oak leaves and acorns and he is carrying the hasta pura in his right hand. Around his neck is a torque worn over his scarf, and on his arms are various armillae. His cloak (sagium) is attached to a clip on the lorica and drapes toga-like around his body.