A HISTORY OF THE LEGION OF MERIT

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Introduction

The Legion of Merit, today often given as a retirement award to long-serving senior officers, and very senior warrant officers and noncommissioned officers, has a far more complex background than most people realize. It is rooted in the American Revolution; it is the “first cousin” of the Purple Heart, and it was created during World War II to satisfy two purposes, one of which was so sensitive at the time that it was never publicly revealed. The Legion of Merit has now been awarded for over sixty-five years and has become one of the most respected medals in America’s system of military decorations.

This article traces the history of the Legion of Merit. It starts by explaining the lineage of the award, and the role of Ralph Townsend Heard in its development and design. The article then discusses the early difficulties faced by the Army and the Navy in adopting procedures for the award of the then new Legion of Merit. Next is an examination of Legion of Merit award procedures during World War II, followed by a discussion of the awards process during the Korean War up until the present, and a look at current award criteria for the Legion of Merit for both foreign and United States personnel.

The article next looks at an examination of the medal itself, including manufacturing specifications of the four degrees, numbering, award certificates, containers, and lapel pins. The article concludes with a look at recipients - both foreign and American - and finishes with a look at typical engraving styles and some conclusions about the award.

Lineage of the Legion of Merit

Most collectors know about the “Badge of Military Merit,” created by General George Washington in his order of the day on August 7, 1782. As he was “...ever desirous to cherish a virtuous ambition in his soldiers, as well as to foster and encourage every species of Military Merit,” Washington directed:

that whenever any singularly meritorious action is performed, the author of it shall be permitted to wear on his facings, over his left breast, the figure of a heart in purple cloth, or silk, edged with narrow lace or binding. Not only instances of unusual gallantry, but also of extraordinary fidelity and essential service in any way shall meet with a due reward.

Only three awards of the Badge of Military Merit are known to have been made, and it fell into disuse after the American Revolution. Its rebirth was the result of considerable study and discussion during the period between World Wars I and II when a number of proposals were made for additional military decorations --- to include reviving the Badge of Military Merit as the Purple Heart Medal.

In 1921, Colonel John W. Wright of the Historical Section of the War College felt the Army needed another decoration to complement the Medal of Honor, Distinguished Service Cross and Distinguished Service Medal. He believed that a medal for distinguished service below the Distinguished Service Medal was needed, especially “…where the man is in a position of responsibility; in other words, covering younger officers.” In Wright’s words:

As the [proposed] Purple Heart has its own history it will be a decoration that will have high standing. I would not call it a second D.S.M. It should stand alone as the decoration reserved for all officers and men, not being in positions of great responsibility, yet who perform services calling for recognition. It will be the decoration within the grasp of younger officers; afterwards they may also receive the D.S.M. but that could come only with high rank and very responsible duty.

The Army General Staff ultimately recommended that the Secretary of War revive Washington’s old award as the “Order of Military Merit” and award it for exceptionally meritorious service not involving great responsibility. The staff also recommended that: the new decoration be available in both peace and war; that it be awarded for heroic acts not performed in actual conflict; and that it be limited to members of the Army.

Not all of these recommendations were adopted but, when General Douglas MacArthur resurrected the Purple Heart on February 22, 1932, its lineage to the original Badge of Military Merit was evident from the raised inscription on the new decoration’s reverse, FOR MILITARY MERIT, and in the color of its ribbon.

The Purple Heart was originally intended to be “awarded to persons who, while serving in the Army of the
United States, perform any singularly meritorious act of extraordinary fidelity or essential service.” The words “essential service” were interpreted to include combat wounds, provided that the wound required “treatment by a medical officer, and . . . is received in action with an enemy of the United States, or as a result of an act of such enemy, may, in the judgment of the commander authorized to make the award, be construed as resulting from a singularly meritorious act of essential service.”

The result was that awards of the Purple Heart for wounds quickly outstripped awards for meritorious service. Shortly after the start of World War II, Purple Hearts for meritorious achievement were prohibited and the decoration was now exclusively used for combat wounds. This, however, meant that the original desire for a medal junior to the Distinguished Service Medal was again unsatisfied. As a result, by 1938 both the Army and Navy agreed on the need for a medal for meritorious service. It was at this point that the key personality in the development of the Legion of Merit entered the picture.

Ralph Townsend Heard (1897-1993)

R. Townsend Heard was a fascinating character. He was born on August 15, 1897 and left Stanford University in 1916 to enter the Army. He held a commission as a Field Artillery officer and, on October 5, 1917, Heard fired the first artillery round by an American during the First World War. Although he was independently wealthy (he never accepted his Army pay), he remained on active duty after World War I and was involved in intelligence matters. Heard served as military attaché, with postings in such major European capitals as Berlin, Paris, and Rome.

He had an interest in military decorations because his father, John W. Heard, received the Medal of Honor while a cavalry lieutenant during the Spanish-American War. Heard himself later received the Silver Star for his gallantry in action in the First World War, and in the course of his service with the French during war and through his diplomatic postings, he became familiar with the principal European orders and decorations. This interest was to provide a subsequent foundation for the development of the Legion of Merit.

In 1940, now Colonel Heard was assigned to the War Department’s General Staff Corps, and among his other duties he began work on a proposed Meritorious Service Medal. Heard had definite ideas about the shape that any new decoration should take. He wanted: (1) Congress to create a decoration that would be linked to Washington’s Badge of Military Merit; (2) the new award to follow the same pattern as many of the key European decorations by being awarded in multiple grades; and (3) the decoration to capitalize on the prestige of the French Legion of Honor. Heard ultimately arrived at the idea of a Legion of Merit in four grades.

After the Second World War broke out the need for a “junior Distinguished Service Medal” became even more apparent, but events during the first seven months also produced another, different kind of need. Starting with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States suffered a series of stinging losses in the early months of the war in the Pacific. As the consensus was that America must have better intelligence gathering, the War Department’s Military Intelligence Division (MID) began operating the American Intelligence Command (AIC) in Latin America in June 1942. This was an effort to establish a network of undercover intelligence-gathering organizations run by the military attachés assigned to each diplomatic legation in Latin America. Heard ran the AIC for MID under the cover of his position as a General Staff Officer. He was especially interested in securing the cooperation of friendly foreign officials, particularly military officers and Heard realized that his proposed Legion of Merit would be an excellent vehicle for winning the cooperation of these officials. As a result, Heard proposed that a Legion of Merit be established with both Military and Naval divisions, with awards going to both military and civilians. The new decoration would not only fill the gap below the Distinguished Service Medal but could also be used by his intelligence organization to win support for the American war effort by securing the allegiance of its foreign recipients.

Development of the Design of the Legion of Merit

Before Congress enacted the legislation creating the Legion of Merit, much thought had already gone into the design of the new decoration. Heard wanted the medal to begin with the basic design format of the French Legion of Honor - a cross with five white-enameled arms. But, as he also wanted the design to be uniquely American, he borrowed from the Great Seal of the United States.

Under Heard’s guidance all previous proposals for a Meritorious Service Medal were withdrawn and the War Department instead drafted legislation to create Heard’s Legion of Merit. The original concept was to create it in four degrees. It was to be awarded by the President to personnel of the Armed Forces of the United States, to military personnel of friendly foreign nations, and to American civilians who had been directly involved with
national defense since the President’s proclamation of an emergency on September 8, 1939. The new decoration was to be awarded to those who distinguished themselves by exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding service, but at a level below that which would justify the award of the Distinguished Service Medal.

A problem arose, however, when Heard testified during the congressional committee hearings considering legislation to create the Legion of Merit. Committee members, echoing the Navy’s reservations, were reluctant to create a single decoration that would recognize both civilians and military personnel.

To address this concern, Heard now adopted the Navy’s earlier suggestion that Congress create separate medals for military personnel and civilians. The committee agreed. The legislation was reworded and, when Congress passed it in July 1942, the new statute created a Legion of Merit for military service and the Medal for Merit for civilian service. President Roosevelt signed an executive order implementing this legislation a few months later.

**Securing a Design**

Heard, acting on behalf of the War Department, had previously prepared and submitted proposed designs for the various degrees of the medal. His design followed the basic concept of the French Legion of Honor but included unique American components, and Heard described his design as a descendant of Washington’s Badge of Military Merit. Although the Navy did not agree with Heard’s design concept, its objections were disregarded.

On May 2, 1942, the Commission of Fine Arts considered the artistic merits of Heard’s Legion of Merit design. While the Commission recommended that the well-known artist Paul Manship be retained to sculpt the medal, the plaster model was done by Katherine W. Lane and sent for approval to the Commission of Fine Arts on July 20, 1942.

Gilmore D. Clarke, the Chairman of the Commission of Fine Arts, replied on August 3, 1942. In the commission’s view, “the design is an inferior imitation of the French Legion of Honor” and, in any event, “medals of the United States of America should be distinctive in form and character and not in any way resemble medals of other countries.” Given the significance of the star in United States heraldry, Gilmore thought it would be better to use a five-pointed star rather than a cross for the Legion of Merit.

Shortly thereafter Clarke met with Heard and others to discuss the proposed design. Heard explained that the project had been in the works for over two years and the design had been approved by both the War and Navy Departments and by the State Department. Both Heard and Gilmore were adamant in their positions, but they eventually reached a compromise by modifying certain features of the medal without significantly altering its overall design.

After the Commission of Fine Arts approved the Legion of Merit design, now Brigadier General Heard provided the necessary materials for making some sample medals to Bailey, Banks and Biddle of Philadelphia. On January 5, 1943, when a BB&B sample was presented to Secretary of War Stimson, he gave his approval and directed that a supply of the medals be procured as soon as possible. Shortly thereafter the Legion of Merit went into production but an unexpected problem quickly surfaced: the new decoration turned out to be “the most difficult medal ever offered the industry to produce.” This was because the enameling on both sides of the medal and on curved sections requires a high degree of skill, which has not been developed in this country to any great extent; and the skilled workers, of which there were only a limited quantity, have left the enameling industry ... for more vital war work.

![Figure 1: Legion of Merit with reverse enameling and pierced arrows.](image)