“The Selective Service Medal is a federal medal that never gets any respect,” Colonel Albert Gleim wrote in his New Medal Letter #46. Colonel Gleim, who was one of the first to seriously study United States medals and decorations, continued “There is much more that needs to be learned about these medals, to include designer, manufacturer, quantities issued, and how long issued.” In the seventeen years since these words were published, not much new information has surfaced. Of all the currently available references on United States medals, for example, only two (Evans E. Kerrigan’s Guidebook of US Medals and David Borthick and Jack Britton’s Medals: Military and Civilian of the United States) even mention the Selective Service Medal. This article will provide information on this medal and on other awards of the United States Selective Service System.

THE SELECTIVE SERVICE MEDAL

Despite being neglected, the Selective Service Medal is the best known award of the United States Selective Service System. It was the first medal issued by the agency and was widely recognized when first awarded.

As World War II wound down, more and more Americans were being recognized for their bravery and service during the conflict. Returning soldiers wore colorful ribbons denoting their decorations and service medals. And, for the first time in United States history, civilians who had significantly contributed to the war effort were recognized with the Medal of Freedom and the Medal for Merit. Perhaps it is not surprising that a medal was proposed and authorized for volunteers in the Selective Service System.

The Selective Service System was the agency that administered the military draft during World War II. More than 100,000 people served in the Selective Service System, most as volunteers. Selective Service personnel served on local draft boards, advisory boards, appeal boards, medical advisory and registrant advisory boards, and state boards. They served as directors, clerks, and examiners. They worked as government appeals agents, reemployment committeemen, examining physicians, dentists, medical field agents, social workers, and many other positions. By the end of the war, it was estimated that volunteers spent an average of ten hours a week fulfilling their Selective Service duties, often in the evenings and on weekends. Their contributions to the war effort were significant and public sentiment demanded national recognition. Their decisions sent their neighbors to war, interrupting and sometimes ending their lives.

In June 1945, the House of Representatives passed House Resolution 1812 “to authorize an award of merit for uncompensated personnel of the Selective Service System.” This resolution went to the Senate, was quickly passed, and became Public Law 112 (Chapter 219, 1st Session, 79th Congress) when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed it on July 2, 1945.

Public Law 112 had four sections. Section 1 commended all members of the Selective Service System and stated “uncompensated personnel of the Selective Service System who have given faithful service should be awarded a certificate and medal in recognition of their patriotic service.” Section 2 authorized the award for those “who have faithfully served more than two years and such others who have served faithfully as may be selected by the Director of the Selective Service...” (italics added). This language gave Major General Lewis B. Hershey, Director of the Selective Service System, enormous latitude in awarding the medal (Figure 1).

Section 3 said “the medal authorized by this law shall be known as the Selective Service Medal and shall be...”
in such form and of such design and material as shall be prescribed by the Director of Selective Service.” Section 4 stated that all expenses for the medal and certificate were to be from appropriations for the Selective Service System. Before its passage, President Harry S Truman sent a copy of the Bill to General Hershey for comment. Hershey, who had been instrumental in the writing of the Bill, replied on June 25, 1945 that he favored passage and estimated it would cost the Selective Service System about $250,000. Funds were available to cover the costs.

The Selective Service Medal is a round bronze pendant, one and one quarter inches in diameter, with an integral knob suspension. It is suspended from the ribbon by a single ring. The obverse bears the seal of the Selective Service System, an eagle facing left, a shield on its breast bearing the letters S S S. The eagle holds arrows in its left claw and laurel leaves in its right. Above the eagle are thirteen stars, representing the original colonies. Around the perimeter are the words SELECTIVE SERVICE SYSTEM across the top and WORLD WAR II across the bottom. Two stars flank the bottom inscription. The reverse has the incuse inscription AWARDED IN THE NAME OF THE CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES FOR FAITHFUL AND LOYAL SERVICE in six lines. Space is left blank at the bottom, suitable for engraving (Figure 2).

The ribbon is standard size, one and three-eighths inches wide. In the center is a navy blue stripe, three-eighths inch wide. On either side is a yellow stripe, one half inch wide. In the middle of these yellow stripes is a narrow sixty-fourth inch stripe of navy blue. The colors are symbolic. The navy blue represents the United States, as blue has been the national color since 1821. Yellow represents achievement and high ideals. Navy blue and yellow are also the official colors of the Selective Service System.

Thomas Hudson Jones of the Institute of Heraldry designed the Selective Service Medal. With input from Hershey and Arthur DuBois, he also created the plaster model used to make the hubs and dies. Undoubtedly, Hershey had input on the final design, as under section 3 of the law, he had the power to determine the design.

The use of the Selective Service seal for the obverse design was perfect. It was readily recognizable to most Americans at the time and anyone seeing the medal would know it was for Selective Service work. Bastian Brothers struck all the Selective Service Medals. More than 100,000 were produced.

CRITERIA FOR AWARD

Just who was eligible to receive the Selective Service Medal? The intent of the law creating the medal was “to authorize an award of merit for uncompensated personnel of the Selective Service System” (italics added). To the majority of Congressmen, who had overwhelmingly authorized the medal, uncompensated meant unpaid. Congress intended that this medal would honor those...
who had volunteered their time and services at the local and state levels. This was clear during Congressional discussion of the bill. Section 2 of the Act, however, authorized the award to “such others who have served faithfully as may be selected by the Director of the Selective Service...” This led to uncertainty about who could and who did receive the medal.

This uncertainty concerned both civilians and military personnel. For civilians, the uncertainty involved compensation. A number of compensated civilians received the Selective Service Medal, starting with President Harry S Truman. These civilians included governors, congressmen, businessmen and many local board clerks. Even J. Edgar Hoover received the medal (Figure 3). At times, it appeared that Hershey awarded the medal to any civilian he felt had helped the Selective Service System in any way during the war.

The Army, however, had different ideas about awarding the medal. In a memorandum to the Adjutant General dated December 6, 1945, Hershey sought approval to award the medal to military personnel. He stated that paragraph 2 of the original legislation gave him this discretion. In response, on December 18, 1945, the Quartermaster General wrote “The phrase, ‘such others who have served faithfully’ contained in Section 2 of the Act is apparently construed quite liberally by the Director of Selective Service.” Stressing that the intent of the Act was to reward uncompensated personnel with less than two years service, the Adjutant General said that awarding this medal to military personnel “would be contrary to the spirit of the Selective Service System in that its administration was intended to be essentially civilian in character.”

Hershey persisted and again requested permission to award the medal to military personnel. The Adjutant General responded in another memorandum, dated January 15, 1946. He stated “None of these War Department civilian ribbons or medals are now or will be recognized as awards for military personnel and will not be authorized for wear on the uniform.” In a separate memo, also dated 15 January 1946, the Adjutant General went so far as to state, “Section 1 and 2, Public Law 112, 79 Congress, approved July 2, 1945 preclude and make illegal the award of the Selective Service Medal to members of the armed forces.”

The Adjutant General’s opinion, like the issue of compensation, was pretty much ignored. Hershey awarded Selective Service Medals to a number of military personnel, often in public ceremonies. One example is the award to Fleet Admiral William D. Leahy at the White House on December 11, 1946 (Figure 4). He presented medals to all district directors and assistant directors, the vast majority being military men. In fact, most if not all members of the military who were permanently assigned to the Selective Service System were awarded the medal. It is interesting to note that there are no known cases of a Selective Service Medal being awarded to a senior Army officer.

Figure 4: Admiral Leahy receiving the Selective Service Medal at the White House, December 11, 1946.

AWARDING THE MEDAL

The Selective Service Medal got plenty of respect in late January and early February 1946, when the medals were first awarded. The first ceremony was held at the White House, followed by ceremonies in each of the 54 Selective Service districts (the 48 contiguous states, New York City, the District of Columbia, and four territories, Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands). News of these awards was carried on the front page of many newspapers across the country. In fact, news of the medal continued sporadically through March 1947, primarily when the medal was awarded to someone famous.

The morning of January 21, 1946 was damp and cold in the nation’s capital. Snow flurries were changing to ice pellets as 54 uncompensated members of the Selective Service System, each representing one of the Selective Service districts, gathered at the National Selective Service Headquarters. Each representative had at least five continuous years of service and was currently serving. Major General Hershey greeted them at a luncheon held in their honor, where he briefed them in preparation for their visit to the White House.