May 9, 2013

Dear House Rules Committee,

Reference Support for HJM 17, The Leonard DeWitt Memorial Bill

As the Command Historian for the Oregon National Guard, I wholeheartedly support this bill. In 2007, I started to create an "Oregon's Role in WWII" presentation to take out to schools to teach kids what Oregon did during WWII.

A large part of that program told the story of the 41st Infantry Division, an Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Montana National Guard Infantry Division considered the best National Guard infantry division in the United States prior to WWII. Because of that distinction it was one of only four National Guard infantry divisions activated for WWII on September 16, 1940 over a year before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The 41st trained at Fort Lewis and at Hunter Liggett in California under an amazing commanding general, MG George A. White who died shortly after the training at Hunter Liggett. His philosophy was that a well trained division would perform best in combat so the 41st trained and trained and trained beating any other infantry division in any war games that the 41st participated in during this time in case the United States should have to go to war.

On December 7, 1941, the 41st was at Fort Lewis and was sent immediately to guard the Oregon and Washington coast lines in anticipation that the Japanese would continue to the west coast of the United States. They were needed to fight, relieved of coastline duty and sent to Australia, the first American division to arrive there. The Australian men had been sent off to fight in North Africa for England and the Japanese had already started to attack Australia so the 41st was warmly welcomed by the Australians.

The 32nd Infantry Division, a National Guard infantry division from the Great Lakes area was the second American division to arrive shortly afterward. The 41st trained in Rockhampton and was sent to Port Moresby in New Guinea where the 163rd Regiment of the 41st staged from to fight the Japanese at Buna and Gona bailing the 32nd Infantry Division which had sustained over 100% casualties in their first encounter with the Japanese.

Leonard DeWitt's company was part of the 162nd Regiment of the 41st. Their first real fight happened when they were part of the first amphibious landing in WWII at Nassau Bay near Sananda still on the island of New Guinea. I Company was given the mission of holding a ridge near the village of Boisi. This was I Company's first real mission so it was a test of how the men would hold up in a real firefight.

During the evening of July 28, 1943, I Company set up a perimeter. The Japanese had a large unit that attacked during the night up a ravine on one side of this ridge. Leonard DeWitt as the communications sergeant was to be in the center of the perimeter to man the radio and communications with higher headquarters and the squads in the company. He noticed the attack and volunteered to take additional ammunition to the men in the beleaguered fox holes. On his way to take the ammunition, it was evident that the men in the foxholes were rapidly departing the area. This made him angry, but determined to not let the Japanese infiltrate I Company's perimeter because if they infiltrated the company could be wiped out.

Leonard rapidly moved forward and fully exposing himself fired his BAR into the ravine until it ran out of ammunition. He then threw his first Australian grenade, now when a grenade is armed it makes a very distinctive "click". The Japanese recognized this "click" and rapidly took cover. A very loud Japanese then exhorted his men to continue up the ravine. SGT DeWitt then came up with a brilliant plan, he threw his second grenade and when it exploded, he threw his third one disguising the sound of the arming of the third one. He didn't hear the loud Japanese any more after that grenade was thrown.

SGT DeWitt then saw a Japanese grenade coming towards him. Now a Japanese grenade has a very distinctive sparkle when it is thrown in the middle of a very dark jungle night. SGT DeWitt saw this sparkle and did what any infantryman would do. He hit the ground and rolled. Unfortunately he rolled into the ravine landing between a couple of Japanese soldiers who didn't realize he was there because it was so dark. SGT DeWitt then took his bayonet and stuck one Japanese and hit the other with his helmet causing them both to protest loudly as they descended back down the ravine. He then crawled to the top of the ravine and in frustration because he was completely out of ammunition, he threw his helmet into the ravine.

The Japanese seemed to think this was a satchel charge and quickly departed the area. SGT DeWitt then quickly notified the company commander and first sergeant that the foxholes on that side of the perimeter needed to be manned. He assisted in moving soldiers to those positions.

The next morning SGT DeWitt's company found evidence of at least 20 Japanese casualties and SGT DeWitt's helmet in the ravine. SGT DeWitt singlehandedly and without regard to his own safety held off a large Japanese invasion of his company's perimeter saving the lives of every soldier within that perimeter. For this action SGT DeWitt was put in for a Medal of Honor.

Every military leader signed off on this award until it got to General MacArthur's desk where it sat according to the book The exclusion of Black soldiers from the Medal of Honor in WWII edited by Elliott V. Converse, "The Medal of Honor recommendation for Sergeant Leonard C. DeWitt had been in MacArthur's headquarters since the summer of 1943". Finally the War Department asked General MacArthur if he was going to submit any awards during the war.

SGT DeWitt's Medal of Honor request was downgraded to a Distinguished Service Cross and sent forward where it was approved by the War Department.

It is interesting to note that the 41st Infantry Division one of the longest serving (45 months of active duty) infantry divisions fighting in some of the fiercest battles in WWII received 0 Medals of Honor and only 25 Distinguished Service Crosses. A direct comparison would be the 32nd Infantry Division also under by General MacArthur's command which received 11 Medal of Honors and at least 157 Distinguished Service Crosses.

The question is why. Obviously 41st and 32nd were there about the same amount of time, served in some of the same battles, both fought fiercely to move the Americans closer to Japan. Why would one get so many more medals than the other? Is it because MacArthur didn't like 41st? Was 32nd better about getting awards done and through the process? We may never know the true reason, but it remains obvious that 41st should at least have one Medal of Honor. Leonard DeWitt is the only living Distinguished Service Cross recipient left. He was put in for the Medal of Honor which easily made it through military channels until it reached General MacArthur. His actions are truly why a Medal of Honor is given. He deserved the Medal of Honor both then and still today.

Also note that the Oregon National Guard has not received a Medal of Honor since the Philippine Insurrection that directly followed the Spanish/American war in 1898. Oregon needs to have a hero for our kids to look up to. Please help us get Leonard DeWitt's Medal of Honor back for him, for our kids, for our National Guardsmen, for our nation and for our state.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. I hope you also support the passage of HJM 17, The Leonard DeWitt Memorial Bill.

Alisha Hemel

LTC Alisha Hamel
Command Historian
Oregon National Guard

Full excerpt from The exclusion of Black soldiers from the Medal of Honor in World War II: Chapter: Medal of Honor Policy and Practice in Pacific Commands

Medal of Honor Policy and Practice in Pacific Commands

Soldiers and airmen fighting in the Pacific received 80 Medals of Honor, over 1,200 Distinguished Service Crosses, and nearly 14,000 Silver Stars—figures roughly comparable to the Mediterranean Theater's totals but well below those for the European Theater. Since most African-American combat units, particularly the 93rd Infantry Division, belonged to forces under General Douglas MacArthur, this analysis focuses on decorations policy and practice in his command. Although a commander's attitudes and personality everywhere influenced awards, possibly in no case were these factors more pronounced than with Douglas MacArthur in the Pacific.

Probably recognizing that his forces would soon have their backs to the wall and knowing what the value of awards could mean in such circumstances, MacArthur issued his decorations policy less than a week after the Japanese attack. A series of policy letters coalesced into regulation form in August 1943, and a new version was issued each thereafter. The late 1945 edition was longer and contained more details than even AR 600-45. These formal policy instruments were faithful to War Department guidelines; but what distinguished MacArthur's decorations policy was how tightly he controlled it and how jealously he guarded his own authority over Medal of Honor recommendations and Distinguished Service Cross awards. MacArthur did not establish a decorations board at his headquarters until after January 1945. He retained sole authority to award the Distinguished Service Cross, delegating it under very limited circumstances only to the Tenth Army commander late in the war. Finally he withheld from the War Department those Medal of Honor recommendations that he had disapproved, releasing them on only two occasions, after formal requests from Washington.

In its initial decorations policy letters, MacArthur's headquarters spread the fuzzy language infecting AR 600-45 to subordinate commands. Almost immediately, MacArthur's command tried to deal with the lack of definition in the terms "extraordinary heroism" and "gallantry in action." Simply stating that an individual had been heroic or gallant was not sufficient, asserted the January 1942 policy letter. "The act or acts which constitute heroism or gallantry must be described in detail." After almost a year's experience with award recommendations received from the field commands, MacArthur's headquarters staff had to confront the conundrum of "personal knowledge" and eyewitness testimony. The headquarters declared that proposed awards for heroism containing such statements as "I have personal knowledge of the mission of July 28, 1942," were inadequate; it told subordinate units that "the only 'personal knowledge' must of necessity be that of an actual eyewitness" and added that the testimony of one or more eyewitnesses had to be attached to each recommendation.

Policy in MacArthur's commands regarding the transmission of award recommendations remained constant from 1941 through 1945. Each decoration case was to be submitted separately through command channels and was to state either the favorable or unfavorable views of the commanders through whom it passed. In May 1942, lower echelons were told that only the War Department could award the Medal of Honor and that recommendations for it were to be "forwarded through this Headquarters." That was the first and last time MacArthur's decorations policy instruments said anything about the Medal of Honor recommendations passing through

his headquarters on the way elsewhere. In fact, General MacArthur did not forward to the War Department those Medal of Honor recommendations that he disapproved.

Several incidents in 1942-43 involving the Medal of Honor in the Pacific may explain MacArthur's actions. In March 1942, MacArthur himself received the Medal of Honor. Proposed and largely written by General Marshall, the award was controversial for two reasons. First, MacArthur had abandoned his troops in the Philippines to avoid capture and to continue the war from Australia. Though MacArthur had been ordered to leave the Philippines by Washington, many thought his leaving was an act of personal cowardice. Second, others questioned whether MacArthur's "gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life" actually met the standards for the Medal of Honor.

In 1942, MacArthur had left Lieutenant General Jonathan M. Wainwright in command of Army forces in the Philippines. Following their surrender that same year, the War department proposed that Wainwright be awarded the Medal of Honor and asked for MacArthur's views. MacArthur, who had already awarded a Distinguished Service Cross to Wainwright, fiercely opposed a Medal of Honor, telling General Marshall that Wainwright's actions "fell far short of the requirements for the award" and stating that he, MacArthur, could not recommend it without revealing information about Wainwright that might later lead to "embarrassing repercussions." Marshall and Stimson elected not to challenge MacArthur at that time, but in 1945, after Wainwright's release from confinement by the Japanese, President Truman presented the Medal to him at a ceremony in the White House.

The controversy over a Medal of Honor for Major General Robert L. Eichelberger, who commanded I Corps in New Guinea late in 1942 *(He was in charge of the 41st and the 32nd)*, also provoked MacArthur's undeniably territorial attitude toward the Medal. Originally submitted to MacArthur's headquarters by Eichelberger's chief of staff following the hard-fought victory at Buna, the recommendation was disapproved by MacArthur, who awarded the Distinguished Service Cross but did not forward the Medal of Honor recommendation to the War Department. Not to be denied, Eichelberger had another officer on his staff personally deliver the recommendation to the War Department. When queried about it by the Army adjutant general in August 1943, MacArthur reacted furiously, urging that no Medal of Honor be approved, threatening that he might have to reveal damaging information about Eichelberger, and ragin against officers who went out of channels to achieve their objectives. The Distinguished Service Cross stood.

Less than a month later, MacArthur received a message from Marshall pointing out that the Distinguished Service Cross citations for Lieutenant Commander Charles Pearson and Captain Charles Mike Smith, both of whom served as liaisons with guerilla forces in the Philippines, indicated that "these officers might be entitled to Medal of Honor. Request your views." Here was a direct affront to MacArthur's judgment, and he responded with charatistic forcefulness: "The service performed by them falls far below the standard maintained in this command for the award of the Medal of Honor." The Distinguished Service Crosses that MacArthur had awarded to Pearson and Smith were not elevated.

Whatever the merits of these cases, the fact was that MacArthur did not forward to Washington those Medal of Honor recommendations that he disapproved. General Marshall was not inclined to force the issue until the war was nearly over. On 28 July 1945, the Army chief of staff cabled MacArthur requesting that any Medal of Honor recommendations being retained by his headquarters, including those for which a Distinguished Service Cross had been awarded, be forwarded to the War Department. Ordered to do so, MacArthur complied and sent seven cases to Washington. The Medal of Honor recommendation for Sergeant Leonard C. DeWitt had been in MacArthur's headquarters since the summer of 1943 and First Lieutenant Leland Walker's since the summer of 1942. The War Department disapproved all seven, validating MacArthur's award of the Distinguished Service Cross in each case.

At this point, MacArthur's cooperation with the War Department stopped. No more disapproved Medal of Honor recommendations left MacArthur's headquarters for another year and a half despite a War Department message of May 1946 requesting them and despite a visit by a staff officer from the Pentagon seeking them out. In December 1946, the Army's G-1, Major General W.S. Paul, wrote Brigadier General W.A. Beiderlinden, his counterpart on MacArthur's staff:

The War Department on several occasions has directed [your headquarters] to send to the War Department all disapproved….MH cases which you have on file….Again, when Col. Hyzer of my office visited your headquarters he discussed the matter with Colonel Hackett and one of your Adjutant General officers explaining why it was necessary that the War Department have these cases…We still have not yet received this information although I believe The Adjutant General has written on several occasions since. Our lack of this information in the War Department is embarrassing. We receive many inquiries from outside the War Department, particularly from Congress, concerning recommended awards and some of the correspondence refers to these cases which we have never seen.