

# Decorating our heroes

*If I have all the ribbons in the world to decorate the breast of my soldiers and all the titles in the world to bestow on my best field commanders I will conquer the world". — Napoleon*

The armed forces medal ceremony scheduled for June 21, 1994 has generated a mixture of reactions both from the members of the services and from the public. While some are pleased with the selection criteria others are disappointed.

Conferment of a medal is a sign of recognition. It honors the individual, recognizes the contribution, and motivates the person further. The aware of a bravery medal is also expected to motivate other fighting men.

The June 21, 1994 ceremony has unfortunately come under harsh criticism, particularly by men in the front. Many have publicly and privately protested and urged the government to re-examine the criteria for selection.

The heart breaking examples are numerous — some 20 officers who fought valiantly in Ampara and Batticaloa at the outbreak of Eelam War II are clearly disillusioned. Their nominations for a medal have been dropped

either by the service board or by the tri-services board which makes the final decision.

Similarly, the rank and the file of the first Singha Regiment and the first Gajaba Regiment who went out of the Jaffna Fort after breaking the siege and engaged the enemy for 24 hours have not been awarded medals. Incidentally, some 50 men were killed and over 150 wounded from these two regiments in their fierce fight against the LTTE. Some of the bodies of the officers and men who died could not be recovered.

It is unfortunate that many of the officers who are earmarked to conduct operations, based on their past record, are not receiving medals for the operations they have either conducted or participated.

But some men who have neither conducted nor participated in operations, and men who are unfit to conduct operations in the future, are being better decorated.

It appears that some of the officers who are to receive medals were either personal friends of those who served on either of the two boards or had enough clout to speak to an influential officer and get his name slipped in. Politics within the armed forces and between the armed forces have dented not only the image of the services but also impeded their efficiency. With this type of favouritism, the morale of the troops will be affected.

When Camp in the Mannar region was attacked, an officer who communicated with the camp from another camp located 25 miles away has been nominated for a Rana Wickrama. This has been regarded as absurd even by his soldiers.

There are other cases where the officer who had planned the operations have received higher medals than those who have led operations. Friends and associates of officers, who prepare medal lists too have been

favoured. Some officers, including a very senior army officer, had nominated himself for a medal, which was turned down previously by General Kobbekaduwa. This type of favouritism, has generated anger and resentment particularly among the field officers who are risking their lives for the country.

The biggest folly of the selection criteria is the nomination of General Denzil Kobbekaduwa and General Wijaya Wimalaratne, Sri Lanka's most outstanding war heroes, for the Rana Weera Padakkama. On the contrary, they should have received the Weera Wickrama — the highest honour.

The loss of Kobbekaduwa and Wimalaratna is being felt only at this stage when there are no men of that stature and ability to lead operations. When these two heroes were always in the battle-field conducting operation after operation. After their death on the eve of the operation to strike Jaffna, no officer or group

of officers could replace them.

The whole nation and the army still reveres Kobbekaduwa and Wimalaratne — denying them and those who fought under them, what was earned by sweat and blood, is no credit to the Army of the Wijetunga Administration. Why did not the Army Chief

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take up this matter with the highest authorities in the country?

Further the army board had degraded the medals of a battle experienced officer, who led a number of operations. Not only other gallant officers who fought with him side by side as well as officers who manned logistics under his command during the same operations will receive higher medals.

The biggest drawback is that in proportion to the officers and men, more officers have received medals. This is unfortunate and this must be rectified immediately. It must always be remembered that medals and the ribbons do matter to keep

the fighting spirit.

Among the most deserving brave men to be decorated will be Squadron Leader Lasantha Waidyaratne. He will receive Veera Vikrama Vibhushana, the highest award for a living combatant, for Operation Eagle. This has been rated as a dare devil operation not only by the three services but also by the LTTE leadership.

With the outbreak of Eelam War II, the Jaffna Fort was besieged by the LTTE for 23 days. No supplies could be flown nor troops inducted either by land, sea or air. After the LTTE had effectively blocked passage, ammunition, food and medicine levels were low. With the passage of time, the Government became desperate as it only became a question of days that the Fort would fall into the hands of the LTTE.

Waidyaratne volunteered for the suicidal mission to land in the Jaffna Fort amidst heavy enemy fire. His task was to induct fresh troops, supply ammunition, medicine and food, and to evacuate the critically injured. At 5.00 a.m. on

July 3, 1990, Waidyaratne accompanied by Flight Lieutenant Avinda Miranda and two gunners landed on board an American built Bell 412 (UH-1N) helicopter. Waidyaratne's co-pilot will also be awarded the same honour.

It has been poor judgement on the part of the air force and the tri-services committee to award the same medal to some who were involved in the operational design.

The illogical decision by the air force and the tri-services committee, to place men who risk their lives for the nation and those who work miles away from the battle zone creates a heartburn for the true heroes who had fought and risked their lives in the front.

The Government must also make a decision to streamline the process of selecting a service personnel for a medal. Close scrutiny of the selection process confirm that officers who have a personal rapport with those in the medal committees have been nominated for medals. The Government must generate safe guards against this

as it lowers the standard of the medal as well as the level of the true hero who receives a medal.

Streamlining the process of selection, perhaps by a constant review of operations, will help Sri Lanka to have a better motivated force. Further the Ministry of Defence must weigh the pros and cons of awarding a medal soon after a bravery act than to award medals every two or three years. With the passage of two or three years the motivation of a field man can diminish but if he or she is decorated soon after the act of bravery then he or she may be motivated to contribute in a greater way.

In the last medal ceremony held in October 1990, Lasantha Waidyaratne was to receive a Rana Sura Padakkama for assisting troops marooned in Kilinochchi during an anti-LTTE operation. Some 60 troops under the command of Denzil Kobbekaduwa inducted to Dharmapuram in Kilinochchi on January 30, 1986, came under fire as their armoured vehicles got

bogged down in Wattakachchi. The next day some 150 militants surrounded them and attacked them. Kobbekaduwa recommended Waidyaratne for a Rana Sura Padakkama for captaining the only troop carrier that "supported the ground troops by flying in reinforcements, ammo and recovery items, and even evacuating a casualty under fire. On all four occasions he was fired upon by the terrorists with RPGs, MGs and motars, and he in spite of this voluntarily carried out his task".

Unfortunately, the letter recommending this medal was stolen by another jealous staff officer attached to the Air Force Headquarters from Waidyaratne's personal file. This is the fault with the system, and the system must be streamlined and safe guards incorporated to prevent this type of incident happening again.

The lack of professionalism displayed by the two boards have affected the normal keenness and enthusiasm that goes with such a medal cere-

mony. This is because many of the key actors who genuinely sweat it out in the field are denied or down graded in the awards while those who played roles in the rear headquarters, logistics appointments or in support functions are given higher awards.

It was decided that the awards are given for operations conducted upto December 31, 1991. Unfortunately, the awards for those who conduct anti-JVP operations have been left out. Why? Is it army politics which continues to affect the efficiency of our fighting force and capability?

Had the men and the women of the armed forces not combatted the JVP menace, Sri Lankan history would have been very different. Why should one draw a distinction between the LTTE and the JVP, as enemies of the State? Both the JVP subversives and the LTTE terrorists are citizens of Sri Lanka. These are probing questions which Sri Lanka's political and military leaders should face and answer intelligently.