

**Response to the:  
Report to the Senate and House Armed Services Committees  
On a  
Searchable Military Valor Decorations Database**

*The House Committee on Armed Services report, which accompanied H.R. 5658, the Duncan Hunter National Defense Authorization Act of Fiscal Year 2009, requested that the Secretary of Defense provide the Senate and House Armed Services Committees with a report addressing the feasibility of establishing a publicly searchable database listing individual valor award recipients in order to reduce fraudulent claims to valor awards.*

*Said report was submitted to the respective committees on April 2, 2009 noting:*  
**"The Department determined that although the intent of this endeavor is laudable, such a database would have little utility for reducing the number of fraudulent claims."**

That report listed the following as caveats to the feasibility of such a database, which is called for in H.R. 666, *The Military Valor Roll of Honor Act*, currently before the House Armed Services Committee:

1. The current existence of a database of all Medal of Honor recipients would make such a database redundant.
2. For purposes such as Veterans Benefits, obtaining distinctive vehicle license plates, membership in veterans organizations, etc., awards can be vetted by simply requiring individuals to produce their DD-214.
3. Privacy issues would "preclude inclusion of the personal information (in such a database) necessary to allow members of the public to specifically identify bona fide valor award recipients."
4. Although this historical information is important, it is already available to those members of the general public through the NPRC or through the National Archives and Records Administration.
5. A 1973 Fire at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, which destroyed 18 million records, means that such a database would be vastly incomplete.
6. Such a database would be functional only if relatively complete.

I have spent the last two decades developing a database such as is called for in H.R. 666 to include the top five levels of military awards. That process has given me insights into both the problem and the solution. My current database is considered 99.% complete for the top three levels of awards (Medal of Honor, Distinguished Service Cross, Navy Cross, Air Force Cross, and the Distinguished Service Medals), and my index of Silver Stars is estimated at 75% complete for all wars and all branches of service. That personal database is used by the F.B.I., Congressional Research Services, the Texas Department of Transportation, Army Human Resources Command, and many others, including multiple media outlets, in much the same fashion as would be the expanded database called for in H.R. 666. My experience in compiling this has given me insights to the processes and the problems, and towards that end I offer the following response to this DoD report.

C. Douglas Sterner

***1. The Congressional Medal of Honor Society of the United States already maintains a publicly accessible database of Medal of Honor recipients. The Department is not aware of any compelling reason to create a duplicate database of Medal of Honor recipients.***

It is true that a database currently exists for recipients of the Medal of Honor. Of the nearly 10 million military decorations earned by and awarded to members of the Military Services in our Nation's history, however, awards of the Medal of Honor number only 3,467--meaning for every Medal of Honor listed there are nearly 3,000 other soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines who did their jobs well enough to be decorated, have been "lost to history" for lack of a database. The existence of the Medal of Honor database serves the specific function of providing 3,467 fewer records needed to be digitized for a comprehensive database.

The Roll of Honor for recipients of the Medal of Honor was mandated by Congress in 1917 and has existed since that time. The existence however of this compendium alone did little to deter false claims. In the early 1990s the Congressional Medal of Honor Society reported that PHONY Medal of Honor recipients out-numbered two-fold the 300 valid recipients living at that time. In that same decade the FBI, myself, and other historians received reports of PHONY Medal of Honor recipients at a rate of three or four each month.

The advent of the Internet changed all that, making this Medal of Honor database readily available to the public. Currently I encounter a false claim to the Medal of Honor only a few times each year, and reports to the F.B.I. have also dropped dramatically, we believe because it is very easy to quickly verify a Medal of Honor claim with a quick Internet search.

At the same time, we have seen a dramatic increase in false claims to the so-called "lesser medals," largely because there exists no database for recipients of the other awards. During the period from May 19, 2009 through the end of the month I personally found NINE false claims to the "Navy Cross," which ranks second only to the Medal of Honor, in news reports. Among these was the speaker for Memorial Day events in Pennsylvania who appeared in Marine Corps uniform wearing Captain rank, the Navy Cross, TWO Silver Stars, the Navy and Marine Corps Medal, and FIVE Purple Hearts. The individual did serve as a Marine, as a Corporal, and received one Purple Heart. All other awards comprised what we call "stolen valor."

The existence of a publicly accessible Medal of Honor database is a striking example of the fact that a database such as that called for in HR 666 can and WILL decrease fraudulent claims.

***2. All Service members who separate from the military are given a Defense Department Form 214 (DD Form 214)...that lists all military decorations that the member was awarded during the period he/she served in the military. Whenever a state organization or federal organization believes that an individual is not a bona fide valor award recipient, they merely have to ask to see a copy of the individual's DD Form 214. State organizations should require***

***military members or veterans attempting to obtain valor award license plates to present a copy of their DD 214.***

Without a doubt, the DD 214 is the most commonly forged/altered military document presented in American society today. When confronted with a case involving one person with a fraudulently obtained "Legion of Valor" license plate in Texas, the Texas DoT began investigating all 67 individuals in the state with such plates. To do this they turned to my own database of DSC, Navy Cross, and Air Force Cross recipients. All plates require individuals to produce documentation to vett their claim to the distinctive plates, but FOURTEEN of the 67 individuals in Texas with "Legion of Valor" plates were found to have obtained them fraudulently.

On June 19, 2009, the Florida U.S. Attorney filed charges against Gary Bruce Amster for fraudulently portraying himself as a Medal of Honor recipient. Mr. Amster drove a Vehicle with Florida State-issued Medal of Honor plate F02. I have in my files the CERTIFIED (by Brevard County) DD-214 that shows Mr. Amster was awarded the Medal of Honor...a clever forgery.

In a case two years ago in Seattle, 8 individuals were charged with defrauding the Veterans Administration. All eight men were in the VA system as combat veterans with high awards including Navy Crosses, Silver Stars, and Purple Hearts awarded for combat wounds...all verified by documents provided to the VA. In fact, none of the eight men had ever served in combat, and two of them had never even served in the military. Cost to the VA was \$1.4 million dollars...money stolen from legitimate wounded warriors.

In a large number of cases resolved over the last several years, the fraud has been exposed not for the lack of a DD-214--in all too many cases there have been DD-214s and other fraudulent documents to bolster the phony--but for a lack of listing in my own database. It is for this very reason that organizations like the Legion of Valor, law enforcement agencies, and media outlets, use that needed, but unofficial database. I have even had inquiries from Army Human Relations Branch and CENTCOM to verify Silver Star and DSC awards.

***3) The inability (due to privacy laws) to provide the general public with access to a valor award recipients SSN and DOB severely limits the utility of the database as a means for members of the general public to distinguish bona fide award recipients from those who fraudulently claim such medals...it would be very difficult for a member of the general public to distinguish the John R. Smith who was awarded a Silver Star from the multitude of other John R. Smiths in the general population...This centralized repository of information could actually increase the likelihood of fraudulent claims by providing individuals who share common names with bona fide recipients with the information necessary to initiate a fraudulent claim to a valor award.***

Privacy laws do preclude including the SSN and DOB for any living recipient (such information does become releasable under FOIA when the individual is deceased). Using my own database containing the names of 120,000 recipients of the Silver Star or higher in history (all wars/all branches), the name cited in the DoD report "John R.

Smith" appears only twice...both of them for the same man who in World War II earned two Silver Stars.

Furthermore, such information as Home Of Record (at the time of service) IS releasable under FOIA, and is often published in the General Orders and/or citations for awards. This information alone vastly reduces the argument that common names can be used for what is essentially "identity theft."

There is however, an even more compelling fact that refutes the assertion in the DoD report that such a database would lack needed "identifiers". Prior to 1968 the military services assigned a "Service Number" to military personnel, a number unique to the individual, separate from their Social Security Number, and that Service Number IS releasable under FOIA, and publishable with citations. This means that all awards presented for actions prior to 1968 can include the veteran's service number. Further, the Social Security Number of a veteran either Killed in Action or who is subsequently deceased, is publishable. With this in mind I offer the following:

- A total of 24,048 of the top two levels of awards (MOH/DSC/NX/AFC) have been awarded in history.
- Of these, only 1,248 were for actions after January 1, 1968, meaning that for all other citations in the database, a Service Number can be published.
- Of the 1,248 awards earned after 1968, a total of 488 were posthumous awards, meaning there are only 760 veterans who received one of the top two levels of awards for which a unique ID can not be published.
- Of those 760 award recipients who survived their post 1968 actions, 440 either have Service Numbers (having entered service prior to 1968) or have died since.

Based upon these numbers, in the process of making available the citations for the 24,048 recipients of our Nation's most-highly decorated heroes, only 320 could fall into the category of not having unique identifiers. I further believe these numbers can be extrapolated out to the other awards, meaning 99% of all award recipients in the database will have a publishable Service Number or Social Security Number.

Finally, the assertion that such a database might actually **increase** fraudulent claims is a stretch that falls flat on its own merit...or lack thereof...really requiring no further rebuttal.

***4) Although this historical information is important, it is already available to those members of the general public through the NPRC or through the National Archives and Records Administration.***

First and foremost, this argument on its face, contradicts much of what DoD attempted to do in its own report in trying to cite privacy issues as problematic to such a database. It is true that this information is **sporadically** available through FOIA requests to NARA or NPRC. Such requests however are hampered by many roadblocks which are encountered regularly whenever a family member attempts to get the records, not to prove someone a phony, but to recall and preserve the legitimate valor and sacrifice of a loved one.

1. The FOIA process is a foreign process to many American, and quite probably the vast majority of Americans seeking to find information on a family member who served their country, don't even know where to begin.

2. NPRC's records fall under the 62-Year Archive rule, meaning that in 2009, if you request records for a veteran who was discharged before 1947 (the vast majority of World War II veterans), the family member is advised they will have to pay fees ranging from \$15 to \$60, with no promise that any records other than pay records will be returned.
3. A 1973 fire in St. Louis (to be discussed further), destroyed 18 million records at NPRC. There were no duplicates and no indexes for those records and if you are requesting records on a veteran who served in the Army, Army Air Forces, or U.S. Air Force in WWII, Korea, or Vietnam, the chances are very good a records request will be returned with the notice, "We don't have those records...they may have burned in the fire."

As an appendix to this report I am including a letter from Jan Girando to the Chairman of HASC and the Chairwoman of the Personnel Sub-Committee. Mrs. Girando believed her father was awarded the Navy Cross in World War II and, as such, he was entitled burial at Arlington National Cemetery. As a Naval Officer he was entitled to the maximum of military honors.

Her letter details her efforts to get records on her father, one of the fewer than 7,000 veterans in history to receive the Navy Cross. But for my own database, this American hero would have been denied his memorial at Arlington, and Mrs. Girando's letter speaks eloquently to the problems she encountered. In her case she was persistent and eventually successful...I believe in too many cases families just give up in despair.

***5) There was a major fire at the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) in 1973 that destroyed approximately 16 to 18 million official military personnel records of personnel discharged during World War II, the Korean War, and the early years of the Vietnam conflict. According to the NPRC, no duplicate copies of the records that were destroyed in the fire were maintained, nor was a microfilm copy of the records ever produced...therefore, a complete listing of the records that were lost is available.***

The devastating 1973 fire that destroyed all or part of the records of 80% of the Army personnel discharged between 1912 and January 1960, and 75% of the Air Force personnel with surnames after Hubbard discharged between 1947 and 1964 provides the single BEST reason for the database called for in HR 666. While DoD portrays this fire as evidence that a complete database cannot be done, the database called for in HR 666 has absolutely nothing to do with NPRC--except perhaps, to provide them with significant data on hundreds of thousands of those veterans whose records were lost in the St. Louis fire.

As every veteran knows, the military is redundant in paperwork...if nothing else. All Army and Air Force awards are issued under General Orders, each of which usually contains multiple awards to many different veterans. These General Orders are housed at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, where they were not affected by the St. Louis Fire. The caveat is that there is no index for these hundreds of thousands of awards.

It is those very General Orders that HR 666 calls for being digitized into a national database. I receive ten to fifteen emails each week from individuals looking for

award citations for a family member, often back to World War II, and quite often after they have already received the NPRC letter that the record for their loved-one burned in the fire. To date, without exception, I have not failed to provide those individuals with the citation from a General Orders at NARA within a few weeks if the award is for a Silver Star or higher (the limit of my own index).

DoD has previously gone on record to note that some of these General Orders have been lost over time. While this is true, the "lost General Orders" are rare and, when we know what we are looking for, are often found later. Brendan Wiegand, a private researcher, has combed General Orders to index awards and I provide the following as a case example as to the completeness of these General Orders.

In his own private research Mr. Wiegand attempted to index all General Orders for the 1st Infantry Division in WWII. He published his index in a 533-page compendium listing the names of individuals of the 1st Infantry Division who received more than 28,000 awards in World War II. Of the hundreds of General Orders published by the 1st Infantry Division in the period 1942 to 1947, he found only SIX General Orders missing.

The General Orders for these awards typically include the following information:

- Name
- Rank
- Specialty (Infantry, Artillery, etc.)
- Service Number
- Unit
- Theater of Action
- Date of Action
- Home Town
- (Some citations for valor awards also specifically indicate combat wounds, which can be a substantiation to a claim to a Purple Heart)

By digitizing this information, which is exactly what HR 666 calls for, we will recover a significant amount of information on hundreds of thousands of veterans whose records were lost in the fire. In the DoD report where the fire is addressed, it is noted that sometimes these lost records can be recovered from "alternate sources." In fact, that "alternate source" is usually pay records that includes ONLY Name, Rank, Service Number, and whether or not there is combat pay.

***6) The utility of the database as a means for the public to identify bona fide valor award recipients is directly related to the completeness of the database. If the database does not contain a sufficiently complete listing of valor award recipients...then it is of limited value... While determination of 'sufficiently complete' is rather subjective, it is the Department's opinion that if such a database were approximately 95 percent complete, it would be sufficiently accurate.***

While I would concur that a "Roll of Valor" is only worthwhile if it is reasonably complete, DoD prepared their report under the assumption that it would not be possible to achieve a 'sufficiently complete' database except for Silver Stars and higher awarded after 2001. I have, on my own and with only limited funding, spent the last decade proving otherwise.

My current database includes the names and nearly all of the full-text citations for:

- 3647 Medals of Honor (100% Complete)
- 23 Marine Corps Brevet Medals (100% Complete)
- 13,452 Distinguished Service Crosses (Estimated 99.9% Complete)
- 6,931 Navy Crosses (Estimated 99.9% Complete)
- 6,674 Distinguished Service Medals (Estimated 70% Complete)
- 97,000 Silver Stars (Estimated at least 75% Complete)
- Various other awards (Soldier's Medals, Airman's Medals, etc.)

I would challenge DoD to find 135 legitimate DSC recipients not in my database, or 70 legitimate Navy Cross recipients not in my database. If they can find those 200 "missed" heroes, my database is only 99% complete for the nearly 25,000 awards of our Nation's two highest levels of military awards. The Silver Stars are a work in progress, and I am confident can be quickly brought to the same high levels.

**EXAMPLE:**

The Army Awards Branch shows that a total of **846** Distinguished Service Crosses (Second ONLY to the Medal of Honor, were awarded in the Vietnam War. My database contains the names, General Orders, and citations for **1,060** DSC recipients--indicating more than 200 of the most decorated heroes of that war have been "lost to history" by the DoD but fortunately, recovered for history by private research.

Since the end of World War I when Harry Stringer published the citations for ALL awards in that war (Heroes All and The Navy Book of Distinguished Service) to Marine Corps Historian Jane Blakeney (Heroes, U.S. Marine Corps 1861 - 1955), to the late Colonel Albert Gleim who spent decades combing the National Archives to index award recipients, it has fallen to private researchers to insure that the men and women who receive awards from our military branches are never lost to history.

Conspicuous by its absence from the DoD report is the other side of the database issue...REAL heroes forgotten by the nation they served. I can personally recount numerous cases of highly decorated heroes slighted, nearly denied proper burial or recognitions on their headstones, because there is no comprehensive database of the men and women who have received military awards. This issue is NOT about exposing PHONY heroes, but about properly remembering REAL heroes.

**C. Douglas Sterner**

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# JANICE MILLER GIRANDO

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August 14, 2008

The Honorable Ike Skelton  
Chairman of the Armed Services Committee  
Representative of Congressional District  
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514-B North West Seven Highway  
Blue Springs, Missouri 64014-2733

Re: H.R. 3769 (S2610), The Military Valor Roll of Honor Act of 2007

Dear Congressman Skelton:

Thank you so much for your kind reply to my letter of May 28, 2008, asking for your support on *The Military Valor Roll of Honor Act of 2007*, and for the amplification you provided regarding Congressman Duncan Hunter's National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2009 (H.R. 5658).

As you suggested, it is of great interest to me, particularly the language from House Report 110-652 referencing the establishment of a searchable database listing individuals who have been awarded military medals for valor.

I'm certainly glad Congressman Hunter has brought this significant issue to the attention of Congress, however the language in the report appears to have a loophole when it states this will pertain to "... at least a Roll of Honor for the Medal of Honor."

I have spoken to a representative of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society. As you know, it is a not-for-profit organization chartered by Congress. Based on that conversation, I believe the list of Medal of Honor recipients already exists!

It is for other award recipients like my father, who won the Navy Cross in WWII, that we need the expanded database searchable by the general public.

Here's an example of why. As I mentioned in my earlier letter, my father died in 1985. Due to family circumstances, most of his records pertaining to his military service and Navy Cross were lost. In an effort to have him memorialized in Arlington National Cemetery, I began searching the Internet for any information regarding my father's military career.

The following timeline illustrates the difficulty a private citizen faces when trying to locate information about his or her loved one's military honors.

- 10/15/06 I began informally searching the Internet for information related to Dad's service career. Without a service number and with very little information about his service background, I looked up Ness City, Ness County, USS Benjamin Franklin, and various combinations of wording to locate any relevant information. I did uncover some data upon which to build.
- 12/13/06 I placed the first call to the Internment Services Branch of Arlington National Cemetery; they said they needed the DD214 to validate his eligibility. I did not know what this was and began researching it.
- 1/4/07 I sent a letter to the Internment Services Branch of ANC and attached two Change of Duty orders from 1945 that I had located, the Release from Active Duty orders from 1945, a copy of an Army and Navy Legion of Valor letter indicating approval if documents could be supplied, and all other information including what I believed to be his service number, enlistment date, etc.
- 1/16/07 I located a copy of Dad's Honorable Discharge form dated October 1, 1956, and sent them to ANC.
- 2/16/07 ANC said they needed a copy of the actual citation or the General Orders.
- 2/19/07 I came across the website HomeofHeroes.com and sent the Webmaster the information I had to this point.
- 2/20/07 Through his extensively researched records, Webmaster and Vietnam veteran Doug Sterner was able to verify my father's Navy Cross award. He phoned ANC to verify this personally.
- 2/21/07 ANC accepted Doug Sterner's verification. It was now 5 months after I began the search.
- 2/22/07 (est.) I completed the SF 180 and mailed it to St. Louis. I figured out what a SF180 was while researching the DD214.
- 4/10/07 My father's headstone was installed in ANC.
- 6/6/07 (est.) I received word from St. Louis that Dad didn't have a DD214 since he never saw active service.
- 7/11/07 The memorial service with full honors took place at ANC and was attended by 34 family members from 3 generations who gathered from 8 states.
- 9/15/07 I received the Navy Cross certificate along with a letter from the Navy documenting all of Dad's awards, including two Air Medals. It was now 48 weeks since I began my search.

**It had taken nearly a year to locate this information.**

Clearly, we need to do better in honoring those whose sacrifices have resulted in our nation's highest awards for valor.

And we can.

The capability is there, the money for such a significant undertaking will be nominal, and certainly the Secretary of Defense will come to the same conclusion when he reports on or before March 31, 2009.

Because of my intimate experience with this issue, I would be happy to be called for any hearing that is held in conjunction with the Secretary of Defense's report. Please contact me if my testimony can be of value.

Again, thank you so much for your feedback and continued help.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jan Girando". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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cc: Congresswoman Susan Davis, Chairwoman of the Military Personnel Subcommittee

# MILITARY TIMES

## Editorial: Establish valor database to honor national heroes

After watching the film "Saving Private Ryan," which showed scenes of the U.S. cemetery in Normandy, France, Monty McDaniel became curious about the grave of his uncle, who is buried there. On the Web site for the American Battle Monument Commission, McDaniel discovered that his uncle, Army Staff Sgt. Paul Alexander, received the Distinguished Service Cross three months after he died in 1944. But no one had told his family that their soldier ever earned the nation's second-highest combat award for valor.

McDaniel then went down the list. Another soldier, Staff Sgt. Lawrence Gunderson, also received a posthumous DSC, the same day as Alexander. He contacted Gunderson's family; it was news to them, too. It's hard to believe, but there is no national database of valor awards for U.S. service members. So it's impossible to say just how many other bona fide war heroes are buried unheralded in grassy fields, their lives silenced by bullets and their exploits silenced by a bureaucracy.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are men like Roy Scott, who pretended to be a decorated Korean War veteran so he could bilk the Department of Veterans Affairs out of \$22,000. Again, without a publicly accessible, searchable database, it often takes an eagle-eyed veteran or a scorned family member or business partner to expose a phony.

Many of these truth-seekers turn to the various branches of the military, with spotty success. Often, if the service can't answer whether a person truly received, say, a Silver Star, or what rank that person was when he left the military (if he even served at all), investigators are stuck with the National Personnel Records Center, which requires a Social Security number before it can produce the goods.

Enter Doug Sterner, a Pueblo, Colo., man who, on his own, maintains the closest thing to a definitive database of Medal of Honor, service cross and Silver Star citations. It was Sterner's work that led to passage of the Stolen Valor Act of 2005, which made it a crime to claim unearned valor awards. Like many others, he believes it is the government's job to maintain the definitive database for all valor awards. Working with lawmakers, Sterner is in the early stages of pushing for the "Preservation of Valor Act," which would create that database.

He believes that if Congress held hearings and drew attention to the problem, many more would realize the twin advantages of such a database: Citizens can use the information to honor their

heroes, while quickly and easily exposing those who use phony service and combat valor to inflate their egos and their wallets. Sterner estimates this would cost about \$6 million over two years. Considering that the Defense Department spends more than \$1 billion a day, \$6 million is a tiny drop in a large bucket.

Not only must Congress act now to fund the effort (which will probably need to be administered by the VA or Pentagon), but this database must also be searchable by anyone with Internet access.

It's well past time to start uncovering real heroes while exposing the phonies. Such a database would make all the difference.