

## Drone pilots don't need a "participation trophy"

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Sometimes — and I stress *sometimes* — the government does work for the people.

Case in point: The new Secretary of Defense, Chuck Hagel, has [halted production](#) [1] of the new Distinguished Warfare Medal — awarded to drone operators — in response to veterans' complaints that the "participation trophy" ranks above combat medals like the Purple Heart and Bronze Star.

As a veteran, myself, I'm elated. I mainly served in support units and cannot fathom receiving an award — with my keister parked thousands of miles behind the lines — that ranks ahead of combat decorations.



The central conceit behind the Distinguished Warfare Medal is that drones/remotely piloted vehicles/unmanned aerial systems have become an indispensable part of our modern warfighting

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arsenal — and the pilots have heretofore gone unrecognized.

And it's a sound argument.

Drone attacks have risen dramatically during the Obama administration — from 2004-2007, we [launched](#) [2] 10 drone attacks — *total* — while in 2010, we [reached](#) [3] a high of 122. But ever since that banner year, the frequency of drone attacks has [gone down](#) [4].

So why do drone operators deserve special recognition? And why should a rear-echelon award rank ahead of combat decorations?

Do we celebrate drone pilots above other support specialties because the former kill people? Outgoing Defense Secretary Leon Panetta alluded to this when he [said the following](#) [5] (emphasis mine):

"The contribution they make does contribute to the success of combat operations, *particularly when they remove the enemy from the field of battle*, even if those actions are physically removed from the fight."

I don't buy it.

We should honor everyone who serves our country — regardless of their proximity to the fight — but special recognition should be reserved for those who earn it. Drone operators have become an indelible part of the global war on terror, but many rear-echelon types contribute to the fight and don't receive a medal for it.

Drone pilots — sitting in air-conditioned trailers in Indian Springs, Nevada — don't deserve special recognition. The existing repertoire of awards — the [ARCOM](#) [6] should suffice — is more than sufficient.

I'm more convinced than ever that the Distinguished Warfare Medal is a participation trophy. In its current form, the DWM specifically *cannot* be awarded for valor in combat. So why does it rank ahead of combat decorations? This is madness.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey will order a review of the DWM's "order of precedence." If the Distinguished Warfare Medal must exist, it should at least rank below the Bronze Star and Purple Heart in precedence.

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### Links:

[1] [http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/U/US\\_NEW\\_PENTAGON\\_MEDAL?SITE=MABED&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT](http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/U/US_NEW_PENTAGON_MEDAL?SITE=MABED&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT)

[2] <http://counterterrorism.newamerica.net/drones/2007>

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[3] <http://www.ecnmag.com/counterterrorism.newamerica.net/drones/2010>

[4] <http://counterterrorism.newamerica.net/drones/2012>

[5] <http://www.armytimes.com/news/2013/02/air-force-new-medal-ridicule-merit-022013w/>

[6] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ARCOM>