Rethinking the Post-Heroic Turn: Military Decorations as Indicators of Change in Warfare

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Abstract

This article compares the awarding patterns of the two senior Anglophone military decorations, the British/Commonwealth Victoria Cross and the American Medal of Honor, to challenge arguments that a shift to 'post-heroic' warfare has been in progress in Western societies since 1990. Despite the two decorations being independent of each other, each born of a particular military, political, and social context in their respective parent societies, the article reveals strong consistencies across the two. These include common understandings of military heroism centred on infantry- rather than machine-intensive combat, and a shared neglect of armoured, aerial, and naval combatants. Crucially, the medal data suggests that, despite academic suggestions to the contrary, there was no discernible shift towards 'post-heroism' in the post-Cold War era. Such a shift, however, is observable between 1916 and 1920, suggesting that the 'new Western way of war' began far earlier than is often suggested.

Introduction

Technology has been claimed to have replaced bodies (in more ways than one) in contemporary Western armed forces, with many studies of post-1990 American and Western warfare suggesting the emergence of a new 'way of war' that maximises use of technological innovation to minimise casualties.[1] This has led to claims that American and Western warfare had become 'post-heroic'

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in the sense that human perpetrators of violence are increasingly removed from its dangers through long distance smart weaponry and doctrines premised on force protection.[2] Yet the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq involved the deployment of large numbers of combat personnel by the US and its allies, not least in two 'surges', with casualty figures in the thousands.[3] Such a return to infantry-heavy warfare suggests that reports of 'heroic' warfare's death have been greatly exaggerated.

Alongside these post-2001 wars, the military 'hero' has returned to popular cultural prominence in the Anglophone world. Films such as *Black Hawk Down* (2001), *Lone Survivor* (2013), *American Sniper* (2014), and *Kajaki/Kilo Two Bravo* (2014) depict factual Anglo-American episodes in Afghanistan and Iraq. Central characters in each are decorated in some form for their actions, echoing earlier productions such as *To Hell and Back* (1955), *The Dam Busters* (1955), and *Zulu* (1964). Some of the actions depicted have merited the highest order decorations in the forms of the British and Commonwealth Victoria Cross (VC) and the American Medal of Honor (MOH), decorations that have also been the subject of numerous popular histories in recent years. Yet there have been very few academic studies of military decorations themselves. Recent exceptions include Melvin Smith and Gary Mead's studies of the VC,[4] but no similar study exists of the MOH, the most highly-ranked US military decoration. Similarly, no study exists which compares both decorations, although comparative analysis of other US decorations exists.[5]

Decorations provide a means to explore an aspect of warfare, heroism, that is one of the few 'recurrent features' across otherwise historically contingent conflicts (through its association with courage and fear).[6] The MOH and VC are themselves over a century and a half old, with both being awarded to members of the armed forces or by civilians under military command for valour in combat. Decoration citations and patterns of awarding thus offer the researcher a means of

exploring continuity and change in warfare and its relationship with political and military authorities over their lives. The MOH and VC are particularly significant as they are awarded in the name of and by the sovereign; the President and the Congress in the US and the regent in the Commonwealth. Thus, they are awarded a degree of political legitimacy unmatched by other Anglophone decorations that are invested instead by highly ranked military officers. A significant finding of Smith and Mead's studies is the willingness of military-political authorities to employ decorations to reward and exemplify behaviour representative of preferred doctrinal positions. Decorations thereby present a means of exploring prevailing military-political attitudes, along with glimpses of the actions considered to be heroic at any one time. Such an exploration of medal data is ideally suited to assess the 'post-heroic' thesis. More broadly, an exploration of the individual instances of their awarding (or non-awarding) might be suggestive of the way(s) of warfare favoured by the prevailing authorities, along with changes to these ways. The aim of this article therefore is to explore the extent to which shifts are visible in the practice of awarding the MOH and the VC, the decorations selected for the reasons noted above.

In terms of method, the study was facilitated by the recent publication of the details of every citation for both decorations, either verbatim for the MOH,[7] or paraphrased for the VC, for which official records are more fragmentary.[8] The article begins with an overview of the debate over the supposed (re-)emergence of post-heroic warfare in the aftermath of the Cold War. It then considers the emergence and logics of military decorations, before drawing five findings from a study of the citations and general patterns of awarding of the MOH and VC throughout their histories.

A new age of post-heroic warfare?

The notion of change has long been a preoccupation of scholars of military and strategic affairs, especially change that is potentially 'revolutionary'. One of the abiding debates in military historiography concerns a supposed 'military revolution' between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries,[9] expanding to consider other, more recent possible revolutions.[10] Much of the debate centres on the question of whether advances in military technology, strategy, and tactics led to major changes to the way in which societies were governed, or vice versa. Since the end of the Cold War a further debate has emerged suggesting that a new revolutionary period in warfare is underway, or, at the very least, that a new 'way of warfare' has been emerging.[11] Two defining and associated features of American and Western warfare are claimed in this literature to signify a break from pre-1990 ways of warfare. First, the emergence of more sophisticated information technologies and precision munitions have revolutionised the means of perpetrating violence. Second, Western states, and the US in particular, have become increasingly casualty averse in their waging of war, to the extent that casualty aversion has become the supreme guiding principle of all military operations.

For instance, Eliot A. Cohen contended that Kosovo in 1999 marked the transition from an 'old American way of war' characterised by (infantry) men imbued with 'fighting spirit', 'killing mood', and blood 'lust' to a new 'way'.[12] Significantly, casualty aversion was 'first and foremost' among the 'vulnerabilities inherent in [the new] way of war'.[13] This translated in operational terms to 'an unwillingness even to contemplate serious land operations'. Casualty aversion and lower deployed troop numbers are facilitated by the new 'smart' stand-off weaponry, albeit with potential consequences to operational effectiveness.[14] Azar Gat argues that liberal-democratic states now aim to conduct war 'by proxy, blockade, naval and aerial actions, and limited operations by

technologically superior strike forces', blaming 'liberalism' for the prevalence of casualty aversion.[15] Edward Luttwak's contribution is, however, somewhat distinctive as it frames the supposed transition within the subjective cultural notion of 'heroism' and, in relation to the supposed new warfare, 'post-heroism'.[16]

Whilst many authors employ this post-heroic frame to their own work on various Western militaries,[17] there is a reluctance to engage with the concept of heroism itself. Works concentrate instead on the methods, logics, and technologies involved in the practice of warfare, ignoring the socio-political value of heroism during warfare. Indeed, Luttwak himself is frustratingly vague on heroism, with a definition of 'heroic' only visible in his work via a handful of indirect points such as his argument that the forcing of decisive battlefield outcomes during 'Napoleonic' warfare constitutes the opposite of the 'unheroic' approach.[18] The heroic is also implied in his call for a casualty aversion 'index' to be integrated within the US military planning process:

> 'In descending order, a rough ranking of usability would begin with unmanned, long-range weapons (notably ballistic and cruise missiles) and proceed through remote forces with small combat echelons, such as air crews that launch standoff weapons, to the least usable forces, the Army and Marine infantry forces whose combat echelons are useful only in close proximity to the fighting.'[19]

This suggests an antagonistic relationship between technology and heroism. In short, the more technologically intensive the warfare and the more combat depends on machines rather than flesh, the more 'unheroic' the form of warfare. One of the strengths of Luttwak's approach is his recognition that technology is not an exclusively modern phenomenon. For Luttwak warfare has many periods in which 'unheroic' warfare was prevalent, from Roman methods that sought to protect the lives of legionaries, to the wars of late seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe which

emphasised manoeuvre and displays of force rather than the actual commitment of forces to battle.[20] Luttwak's claim that such warfare rewarded those of a 'patient disposition' implies that heroic warfare is the opposite: warfare that relies on urgency and immediacy of results.[21] The end of the early modern episode of 'un-heroic' warfare is brought about by the Napoleonic Wars which, in turn, trigger the 'heroic' phase that lasts until the post-Cold War conflicts that inspired Luttwak's broader thesis.[22] This appreciation of historical fluctuations between eras of heroic and un-heroic warfare sets Luttwak apart from others who view post-heroic warfare as a purely 'postmodern phenomenon … [constituting] a significant departure from modern reality and tradition of war and strategy'.[23] In sum, Luttwak's heroism is biological, something of the flesh with all its vulnerabilities, whilst un- or post-heroism is mechanical, technological, scientific and industrial, regardless of the age in which warfare occurs. To be heroic is to expose the flesh, and the more of it which is exposed, either on a single individual or in terms of numbers of individuals, the more heroic the approach to battle.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, however, have produced reasons to challenge assumptions concerning a new American or Western way of war. They have exposed the disjuncture between strategy in theory and strategy in practice which, as Hew Strachan observes, often occurs in war.[24] Those perceiving a new form of warfare crucially forget that adversaries might deliberately seek to disrupt one's plans and assumptions, thereby refusing to correspond to the ideal of warfare one might have sought to pursue prior to hostilities.[25] Indeed, 'war cannot be the unilateral continuation of policy by other means because both sides are using war to thwart, subvert, or change each other's policies'.[26] Such was the case in Iraq and Afghanistan; two wars initially conducted in line with US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's vision of new, high tech wars,[27] but which became manpower intensive conflicts involving troop 'surges'.[28] Iraq was, in the eyes of Stephen Metz, a

conflict launched from the vision of high-tech, Air Force- and Navy-led warfare prevalent in the 1990s.[29] 'As a result,' he adds, 'when the US military found itself in a type of conflict not amenable to speed and precision firepower … it was unprepared'. The same might be said of Afghanistan, to where the 'surge' model was exported in 2009. Notably, whilst the surges brought some success in US-controlled areas, the British – unwilling and unable to match US commitments – achieved no such results, and only with the redeployment of thousands of US troops to the British areas around Basra (Iraq) and Helmand (Afghanistan) that stability was re-established.[30]

Post-Iraq, post-Afghanistan retrospective literature therefore tapers the techno-enthusiasm of the scholarship of the 1990s. Others have also questioned the extent to which casualty aversion is a factor for Western publics when deciding on the merits of a particular operation,[31] suggesting that Western casualties in post-2001 wars mark a crisis for 'risk transfer war'.[32] This does not, however, negate the concept of post-heroic warfare; only questioning the extent to which a real shift has occurred since 1990. Moreover, whilst all post-2001 practice might not entirely meet with pre-2001 theories of new ways of war, this does not necessary preclude a general policy disposition towards post-heroism. For instance, continued investment in air power has meant that by Afghanistan, one aircraft could be relied upon to complete a mission that would have demanded ten aircraft as recently as 1991.[33] Before exploring whether shifts between 'heroic' and 'un-' or 'post-heroic' warfare are visible in decorations for valour, however, it is first necessary to consider the socio-political and military contexts in which they emerged.

The institutionalisation and functional logics of decorations

Whereas heroism itself is subjective, the institutionalisation of military heroism in the form of decorations provides government-sanctioned definitions of the concept. The MOH, for example, is 'conferred only upon members of the United States Armed Forces who distinguish themselves through conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life above and beyond the call of duty'.[34] The VC, meanwhile, is awarded 'for most conspicuous bravery, or some daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self-sacrifice, or extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy'.[35] Key to the methodological utility of the decorations as indicators of change is an appreciation of their political qualities. The institutionalised hero is frequently a political tool through which desired behaviour is exemplified and senior military and political leaders' doctrinal preferences can be publicly validated.[36] Smith and Mead's studies of the VC illustrate how exploring medal citations becomes a means of exploring the type of military behaviour and approaches to warfare that authorities wish to promote and how decorations are used instrumentally.

Indeed, military decorations have long been seen as tools through which conduct viewed as desirable by commanders (and possibly undesirable or even suicidal for others) may be encouraged. Polybius, for example, wrote that the Romans during the Punic Wars had an

> 'excellent system of incentives to motivate the men to face danger. After an engagement in which some of them have displayed bravery, the consul convenes an army assembly and calls forward those who are thought to have distinguished themselves. He first makes a speech in praise of each man individually, mentioning not only his courage, but also any other exemplary aspects of his life, and then presents awards.'[37]

Polybius lists a number of awards for 'those who deliberately and voluntarily expose themselves to danger' and for those who completed key dangerous tasks on the battlefield, such as being first over an opponent's wall. More recently, Napoleon Bonaparte responded to a critique that decorations were reminiscent of monarchist 'baubles' by remarking: 'You call these baubles, well it is with baubles that men are led … Do you think that you would be able to make men fight by reasoning? Never. That is only good for the scholar in his study. The soldier needs glory, distinctions, and rewards.'[38] Similarly US general George S. Patton believed that decorations 'are for the purpose of raising the fighting value of troops'.[39] Reward through decoration has therefore long been recognised as an effective facilitator of command and control on the tactical battlefield.

Napoleon's words are particularly significant as they herald the re-emergence of institutionalised heroism in Europe.[40] The *Légion d'Honneur*, still France's premier military and civilian honour, was established by Napoleon in 1802.[41] Prussia introduced the Iron Cross in 1813 as part of broader military reforms, whilst the Dutch created the Military Order of William in 1815. Importantly, the opening of many of the new decorations to men of all rank, either completely or for certain grades of the award, marks a significant departure from the previous European custom of only recognising the valour of officers. Conversely, the earlier Prussian *Pour le Mérite* (or 'Blue Max'), was open only to military officers and civilians, being illustrative therefore of such elitist decorations.

As the dates of the European decorations suggest, the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars provide the military and political contexts in which they emerge. This era has been labelled the 'birth of modern warfare'[42] and a 'revolution in military affairs'.[43] The first stages of industrialisation allowed states to field effective armies that required only a fraction of the training time and costs of a professional or 'mercenary' soldier common to the dynastic armies of preceding centuries.[44] Moreover, the political revolution in France introduced the possibilities of mass armies mobilised

around the concept of the nation, producing the *levée en masse*, whilst dramatic improvements in strategic thought and the organisation and command structures of armies further enhanced their capabilities.[45] States also became more willing to use the mass armies to force decisive battlefield and strategic outcomes, breaking from the more conservative practices of private forces that sought forms of warfare which would preserve as much of the capital investment put into the years required to train professional soldiers as possible.[46] Victory in 'Napoleonic' warfare often required armies hundreds of thousands strong, facilitated by new operational and strategic thinking and more effective logistics.[47] Despite arguments to the contrary,[48] there is a strong body of work that suggests that the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars marked the emergence of a new era of warfare,[49] and both Luttwak's thesis and the institutionalisation of heroism in Europe at that time reinforces with this view.

The UK and the US were somewhat exceptional in that neither society's premier decorations for military heroism were established until the mid-nineteenth century. This is the first of many parallels between the VC and the MOH. Unlike the *Légion d'Honneur* and the *Pour le Mérite*, the VC and MOH are supposedly awarded only for military valour (with some early exceptions). They are also deliberately inclusive as recipients could always have been of any rank. Furthermore, both decorations are directly linked to specific conflicts that would prove transformative to their parent societies: the VC in January 1856, shortly before the end of the Crimean War; and the MOH in December 1861, early in the American Civil War.

This relatively late establishment of the British and American decorations stems partly from the lack of major war for either society in the decades after 1815, with the exception of the Mexican-American War, and, in the British case, from the persistence of exclusively aristocratic notions of heroism throughout the Napoleonic Wars.[50] By the 1854 outbreak of the Crimean War, however,

emancipation was very much part of British politics and popular movements for the liberalisation of politics and society were more important than any military need for a *levée en masse*. However, the experience of the Crimean War challenged established practices and demanded new approaches. The political class was shaken by the Army's poor performance in the Crimea and the associated outcry from an increasingly literate and enfranchised public reacting to reports of the war from the new war correspondents.[51] The VC was part of the establishment's response to these concerns.

In the US, on the other hand, the Civil War brought *levée*-styled armies, and the institution of the MOH went hand-in-hand with the rapid expansion of the Army. On 22 July 1861, the day after the defeat of the US Army at Bull Run, the war's first major battle, President Lincoln signed a bill for the enlistment of 500,000 men for three years. Three days later he signed another bill for a further 500,000 thereby transforming the US Army from a tiny pre-war force of 16,402.[52] After some political argument, Secretary of the Navy Gideon Wells instituted the Navy Medal of Valour which was signed into law on 21 December 1861.[53] The Navy Medal was followed by an Army version on 12 July 1862 and an Air Force version on 14 April 1965.[54]

Crucially, the Crimean and Civil wars are typical of 'Napoleonic' warfare, despite their later occurrence. Notwithstanding new weaponry, technological innovations and some arguments to the contrary,[55] the tactical execution of battle in both wars means that the war should be viewed as one of the last in the 'Napoleonic' style.[56] Thus both the MOH and VC should be seen as a consequence of the emergence of elements of Napoleonic warfare; respectively the *levée en masse* and popular political emancipation. Luttwak's view that heroic warfare began with Napoleonic warfare is therefore bolstered by the establishment of military decorations. One might expect, therefore, that a similar shift regarding military decoration may be present to indicate the end of such warfare, as

war moves to a supposedly post-heroic era wherein fewer individuals are exposed to the danger thresholds deemed necessary in the criteria for the decorations.

The evolution of British and American heroism

Some caution is required when exploring the numbers of VCs and MOH awards over their lifespans. For instance, the occurrence and intensity of wars, and therefore of the conditions for which the medals might be awarded, are not consistent over the medals' lives. One might consequently expect clusters of awards during major conflicts and, conversely, more peaceful periods in which very few were decorated. Moreover, one should also note that in the case of most more recent wars the numbers of awards are so low that conclusions should always be made with the relative lack of data in mind. Yet the lack of awards is a point in itself, and does not necessarily signify a lack of conflict. By grouping awards from periods between major wars as single blocs it remains possible to search for patterns visible at earlier or later points in time. Thus, even small numbers may be indicative of a trend, and an overview of the more than 4,500 citations for both decorations reveals five key points.

1. <u>The Great War shift</u>

There is a dramatic reduction in the numbers of decorations after the Great War. As Table 1 shows, 1914-1918 represents a crucial turning point for both decorations, with the vast majority of both decorations occurring before 1918. The slightly more equal distribution of MOH awards between the pre- and post-1918 eras compared to the VC stems from the US's more intensive involvement in the Korean and Vietnam wars than that of the VC societies (see Table 4). Nevertheless, the pre-/post-1918 disparity for both decorations is evident. So too, in the case of the VC, is the disparity

between the two world wars. This is despite a similar level of manpower commitment in both wars by the British, Dominion, and Empire militaries.[57]

Table 1 – VC and MOH awards pre- and post-WW1

	Victoria Cross		**Medal of Honor (a)**	
	Raw numbers	*Percentage*	*Raw numbers*	*Percentage*
TOTAL AWARDS	*1366*	*100*	*3277*	*100*
Institution – 1918	1154	84.5	2411	73.6
1918-2015	212	15.5	866	26.4

Notes:

a. Figures do not include revoked Medals or those awarded for lifesaving at sea, to unknown soldiers from allied states, or to non-combatants.

Reasons for such a contrast in the VC figures are suggested in the existing scholarship. Melvin Smith proposes two reasons associated with a 1920 inter-service meeting that reviewed the VC.[58] First, this meeting deliberately sought to clarify the regulation on the awarding of posthumous awards, which led to a greater willingness among fellow officers to propose those 'killed on the spot' for consideration. Second, a greater burden of proof to support commendations was demanded in response to concerns that sentimentality played too large a part in shaping the willingness of some officers to make recommendations. However, heroism's subjective nature, the battlefield's confusing environment, and the mortality of the (frequently few) witnesses to an action often make proof difficult to obtain. Furthermore, the introduction of several new decorations just before or during WWI, including the Military Cross, Military Medal, and the Conspicuous (1901-1914)/Distinguished Service Cross (1914-present) meant that more options were available through which valour on the battlefield could be recognised.

As the British establishment commenced their reform of the VC, culminating in the 1920 inter-service meeting, the US Congress was completing its own reform of the MOH, passing an Act on 9 July 1918. This Act tightened the requirements of the Medal so that the recipient needed to 'distinguish himself conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty'.[59] In addition, the heroic act needed to happen 'in action involving actual conflict with an enemy'. This Act predates the end of WWI and followed a process begun in 1916, before American entry into the war. The Act also instigated the 'Pyramid of Honor' by ranking the MOH above the Distinguished Service Cross (with its Navy, Cost Guard and, later, Air Force equivalents), the Distinguished Service Medal, and the Silver Star.[60] Similar to the new British decorations, the DSC and DSM provided more options to reward gallantry considered exceptional but somewhat below the standard required for the MOH. Moreover, just as the British inter-service meeting identified a need to tighten the criteria for the VC, the MOH review suggested similar tightening. It also retrospectively and anonymously reviewed all hitherto granted Medals. Consequently, 911 Medals were revoked, including 864 awarded to the 27th Maine regiment in 1864 as a reward for simply re-enlisting in 1863, a number of civilians, and one for Buffalo Bill.

2. Infantry bias

The second noticeable trend in the decorations is their distribution across the various military branches. As Tables 2 and 3 illustrate, there has been an overwhelming weighting in favour of the army in both decorations. This is not immediately surprising: a state's army is likely to represent the most numerically significant branch of service in terms of manpower numbers and, consequently, suffer the largest share of casualties in a conflict.

Table 2 – Cross-service breakdown of Medal of Honor awards, 1941-2015

War (a)	Totals	Army (b)	Navy	Marines	Air Force (c)	Coast Guard
WWII	464	290	57	82	34 (d)	1
Korea	133	80	7	42	4	0
Vietnam	245	160	15	57	13	0
USS *Liberty* **(d)**	1	0	1	0	0	0
Somalia	2	2	0	0	0	0
Afghanistan	13	10	1	2	0	0
Iraq 2003+	4	2	1	1	0	0
GRAND TOTALS	*862*	*578*	*82*	*184*	*17*	*1*

Notes:

a. Totals based on citations in *Medal of Honor Citations* (2012); CMOHS.org (online). Does not include wars in which no MOH were awarded.

b. To allow comparison with later conflicts, Air Force figures for WW2 include Medals awarded for air actions to members of the US Army Air Corps. These would normally be listed under the Army total as the Air Corps was until 1947 part of the Army.

c. Does not include two Medals awarded to US Army Air Corps personnel for ground actions by forward air controllers. These are listed in the Army total.

d. This award concerns the attack on the USS *Liberty* by Israeli aircraft and torpedo boats on 8-9 June, 1967.

Table 3 – Cross-service breakdown of Victoria Cross awards, 1939-2015 **(a)**

War (b)	Totals	Army	Navy	Marines (c)	Air Force

WWII	182	128	23	1	30
Korea	4	4	0	0	0
Malaysia	1	1	0	0	0
Vietnam **(d)**	4	4	0	0	0
Falklands	2	2	0	0	0
Afghanistan	8	8	0	0	0
Iraq 2003-9	1	1	0	0	0
GRAND TOTALS	*202*	*148*	*23*	*1*	*30*

Notes:

a. Totals based on citations in Brazier (2015). Includes all VC awards to British, Dominion/Commonwealth, and Empire forces.

b. Does not include wars in which no VCs were awarded.

c. To allow comparison with MOH data, Royal Marine VCs are listed separately to those of the Royal Navy, their parent service.

d. All Australian.

Yet a further breakdown of the decorations indicates not just a preference for the armies, but also for the more traditional branches of it. Despite widespread mechanization in the British Army after 1920, and especially from 1939, only six Crosses were awarded to men in armoured units during WWII, and not one involved actions inside a vehicle.[61] One explanation for this imbalance towards infantry Crosses may lie in the greater number of casualties suffered by the infantry. For example, within the British and Canadian armies in North West Europe, 1944-5, the infantry suffered 70 per cent of the total casualties whilst comprising only 15 per cent of the total land forces deployed.[62]

Nevertheless, the lack of any VCs for an action within an armoured fighting vehicle (AFV) is surprising when one considers that British and Dominion armies fielded – and indeed lost – thousands of such vehicles during the war. For instance, over 400 British tanks were lost in just two days during Operation GOODWOOD in Normandy, 18-20 July 1944.[63] Despite each tank having four or five crew members, there were no VCs to show for such losses. This hints at reasons other than susceptibility to casualties for the lack of 'armoured' VCs.

A similar weighting in favour of infantry operations is evident in the MOH figures. Only eight MOH were awarded to AFV crewmen in WWII, with another one in Korea, from totals of 290 and 80 Army Medals awarded in each war, respectively. Furthermore, only two of these nine 'armoured' Medals from both wars were for action inside a vehicle, and one of those (Sergeant Robert H. McCard, Saipan, 16 June 1944) involved the recipient being partially out of his tank as he threw grenades from a turret hatch.[64] US Marine Corps WWII MOH awards reinforce the infantry-heavy picture. Despite 82 Marine MOH during the war and the extensive participation of marine aircraft units in the Pacific campaign, not one Marine Medal was for action in the air.

Another aspect of the army bias in the numbers of decorations concerns the doctrinal politics of the eras in which the decorations were awarded. In short, decorations awarded to air force personnel more frequently reflect the doctrinal preferences of contemporary military and political leaders, rather than the 'heroic' nature of a particular deed. This is not to say that the armies are not immune to such practices. Melvin Smith identifies the clusters of VC awarded by both British Field Marsh Douglas Haig and Air Marshall Arthur 'Bomber' Harris in the First and Second World Wars, respectively.[65] In the case of the former, Smith noted a correlation between the number of Crosses awarded for aggressive action increased in line with Haig's desire for more battlefield breakthroughs.[66] However, Smith also cautions that suspicion of the doctrinal nature of the Haig

VCs lack any 'concrete documentary evidence' and 'must remain a mere suspicion'.[67] Conversely, the case for Harris' doctrinal use of the decoration is much less opaque and indicative of 'standard practice' for the Royal Air Force (RAF) between 1939-45. The VC functioned for Harris as a means of validating the new doctrine of strategic bombing. Indeed, only one of the RAF's 30 VCs of WWII was awarded to a British fighter pilot, Flight Lieutenant Eric Nicolson.[68] Harris was keen to show how an air force could win a war from the skies, and most RAF VCs went to bomber crews for such reasons as bombing high-profile targets or continuing a mission despite being injured or in a crippled aircraft.[69] Such use of the VC reinforced the popular but problematic suggestion by former British prime minister Stanley Baldwin in 1932 that 'the bomber would always get through'.

This stands in stark contrast to the levels of danger faced by aircrew, and especially bomber crews. For instance, aircraft design problems and associated politics meant that British and Dominion aircrew were less than half as likely to escape from damaged aircraft than their American counterparts.[70] Moreover, throughout the war British bombers were defended by .3-inch machine guns that offered 'no adequate defence' against German fighters.[71] In contrast, American bombers used heavier .5-inch guns. The casualties suffered by Bomber Command during the war totalled 73,741 killed, wounded, and captured, from a total of 125,000 aircrew who flew (or 59 percent).[72] This figure further problematises an infantry-heavy, flesh exposure understandings of heroism.

It is noteworthy that these 'doctrinal' VCs occurred at a time when airpower theory lagged far behind capability,[73] despite WWII being the first major war in which the air was viewed as a crucial space of warfare by all principal belligerents. The US was no exception, echoing the British by bestowing its highest decoration 'for valour', the MOH, for doctrinal reasons on pioneers of aerial warfare. A prominent example is Lieutenant Colonel James H. Doolittle in 1942 for his part

in the eponymous 'Doolittle Raid'.[74] This was the first US bombing mission on Japan, using modified B-25 medium bombers flying from the aircraft carrier *USS Hornet*. The Medal provided a positive narrative in the aftermath of Japan's surprise Pearl Harbour attack by taking the fight to the enemy's capital, whilst simultaneously highlighting the use of two new technologies of war, the bomber and the aircraft carrier, and their potential for the forthcoming war. The political hue of Doolittle's decoration is reinforced by the absence of Medals to any other aircrew involved in the raid, including those on Doolittle's own aircraft. Yet all participating aircrew faced the same 'apparent certainty of being forced to land in enemy territory or to perish at sea' mentioned in Doolittle's citation. Doolittle was awarded the MOH a month before being posted to England as a senior officer in USAAF's VIII Bomber Command prior to the launch of the strategic bombing offensive on Germany.

Another case is William 'Billy' Mitchell's decoration 'in recognition of his outstanding pioneer service and foresight in the field of American military aviation'.[75] Whilst his may have been a special 'Congressional Gold Medal' rather than a MOH, the listing of his citation in a US Senate catalogue of MOH recipients in 1972 strongly suggests that Mitchell's was indeed a MOH.[76] Its doctrinal nature is evident in the citation's wording, which explicitly promotes the use of new military technology, and in the (posthumous) 1946 date of awarding. A decade after Mitchell's death, this was during the politicised final stages of the US Army Air Force's struggle for formal independence from the Army, and provided a timely reminder of the successful the strategic bomber offensives against Germany and Japan. Just like the 'Bomber' Harris VCs, therefore, Mitchell and Doolittle's decorations illustrate the susceptibility of the highest state-sanctioned decorations for valour to being used for political ends, rather than purely as indicators of heroism.

More significantly in terms of post-heroism is that so few 'air' Medals were awarded in relation to 'land' Medals, and those that were are frequently doctrinal in nature.

Further to the numerical evidence from the patterns of awarding, recent directives pertaining to decorations suggest that the preference for infantry actions persists in the early twenty-first century. There is a continuing lack of decorations to personnel operating machines of war, whilst recent revisions to the criteria for the US Air Medal seek to do the exact opposite by stripping operators of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) of their abilities to be decorated.[77] This limitation of eligibility through insistence on the nominee's physical presence also applies to all decorations of higher rank, including the MOH. Moreover, since WWII there is a noticeable absence of any 'doctrinal' decorations, indicative that the new technologies since that war have either not required championing through the decorations or that there is an acceptance that such use of the decorations is no longer unacceptable. In keeping with the neglect of WWII 'tankies', therefore, becoming a decorated 'hero' in contemporary warfare continues to depend on the exposure of the flesh. More generally, it seems that heroism as predominantly recognised by the VC and MOH remains the domain of the foot soldier.

3. <u>The glorious dead</u>

Third, the 'price' of heroism has twice leapt in the sense that a recipient of either decoration is far more likely to have been killed whilst accomplishing the 'heroic' act after 1914 than previously, and even more likely again after 1918. It should be noted that whereas the MOH has always been available for posthumous award, posthumous VCs were unobtainable before 1902. Public pressure forced the authorities to retrospectively consider potential posthumous VCs from pre-1902 wars, and some were retrospectively awarded for conflicts from the 1879 Anglo-Zulu War onwards, where the first action (near iSandlwana) deemed worthy of posthumous decorations occurred. This

establishes the Anglo-Zulu War as a de facto temporal dividing line between conflicts during which the VC was and was not available for posthumous award.

Nevertheless, even allowing for these posthumous technicalities, the ratio for posthumous VCs during 1879-1914 conflicts are significantly lower than those for WWI, which in turn is almost equally lower in percentage terms than the figure for wars after 1918. Moreover, a similar pattern is discernible in the MOH totals. Two clear leaps are visible in posthumous decorations around WWI. For both decorations, approximately a quarter awarded during WWI were posthumous, indicating a sharp rise from past practice but a figure also significantly below that since 1918. Since 1941 it is more likely that a MOH recipient is killed during the heroic act than he survives. Whilst the VC mortality figures are lower, below the 50 percent mark for the post-1918 era, if one adds Smith's totals of recipients wounded during the heroic act to the total killed, one arrives at a tally of 128 casualties from 182 VC winners in WWII,[78] or, in percentage terms, a 70.3 percent casualty rate.

For the VC, it is possible that a third leap is in process following a 1970 UK Ministry of Defence review of the Australian VCs awarded in Vietnam. In clarifying the eligibility conditions for the VC, the review makes the following recommendation: '(1) For the most conspicuous gallantry of the highest order in the presence of the enemy. (A guide as to the standard required may be taken as a 90 per cent possibility of being killed in performing the deed.)'[79] The very few VCs since that date means that conclusions as to the extent to which this recommendation has been applied should be treated with caution. Nevertheless, judging by the six British recipients since that date – two in the Falklands, one in Iraq 2004, and three in Afghanistan 2001-15 – the 90 percent 'possibility of death' rule appears to be in full force: four have been posthumous awards whilst another recipient,

Private Johnson Beharry in Iraq, was 'so badly injured that he was not expected to survive'.[80] Thus whilst the numbers are very small, they indicate a continuation of the posthumous trend.

Table 4 – Posthumous awards per war

War (a)	VICTORIA CROSS			MEDAL OF HONOR		
	Total awards	*Posthumous awards*	*Posthumous as % of total*	*Total awards*	*Posthumous awards*	*Posthumous as % of total*
Crimean **(b)**	111	n/a	n/a	-	-	-
Indian Mutiny **(b)**	185	n/a	n/a	-	-	-
American Civil	-	-	-	1522	32	2.1
Native American	-	-	-	426	13	3
Spanish-American	-	-	-	110	1	0.9
Other pre-1879 **(b)**	50	n/a	n/a	15	0	0
Other 1879-1914	179	12	6.7	214	5	2.3
WWI	629	159	25.3	124	33	26.6
***All pre-1918* (c)**	***1154 (808)***	***171 (171)***	***14.8 (21.1)***	***2411***	***84***	***3.5***
All inter-war	10	5	50	4 **(e)**	0	0
WWII	182	86	47.3	464	266	57
Korea	4	2	50	133	95	71
Vietnam	4	2	50	245	154	62.9
Other post-1945	12	5	41.7	20	9	45

All post-1918	***212***	***100***	***47.2***	***866***	***524***	***60.5***
GRAND TOTALS **(c)**	*1366* *(1020)*	*271* *(271)*	*19.8* *(26.6)*	*3277*	*608*	*18.6*

Notes:

a. Totals based on *Medal of Honor Citations*, 2012; Brazier, 2015; CMOHS.org, online. All wars mentioned individually are those for which over 100 VC and/or MOH were awarded.

b. The practice of awarding posthumous VCs began during the Second Boer War, 1899-1902, with some retrospective posthumous decorations for earlier conflict from 1879.

c. Figures in parenthesis are totals for wars in which the granting of posthumous VCs was possible, either at the time or retrospectively after 1902.

d. MOH figures do not include awards for lifesaving at sea.

The recent mortality rates among recipients suggests that to receive the very highest decorations involves acting against any instinct for self-preservation to a greater degree than in the past. This is reinforced by the UK MoD review of 1970 and also in recent US Government documentation on American decorations. The last major Act of Congress to reform the MOH criteria, of 25 July 1963, specifies that the Medal may be awarded 'to a person who … [has] distinguished himself conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty'.[81] Two recent DoD and Department of the Army documents add: 'The deed performed must have been one of personal bravery or self-sacrifice so conspicuous as to clearly distinguish the individual above his or her comrades and must have involved risk of life.'[82]

The military's own guidelines for the awarding of the MOH, therefore, could not be clearer in emphasising that the risk of death associated with the heroic act should be almost absolute. As if this was not enough, both more recent documents also add that a MOH citation also requires:

'Incontestable proof of the performance of the service will be exacted and each recommendation for the award of this decoration will be considered on the standard of extraordinary merit.'[83] Indeed, the criteria for the next lower decoration, the DSC also demands a degree of mortal danger from recipients in the form of a 'risk of life so extraordinary as to set the individual apart from their comrades'.[84] It is only in the criteria for the third ranked decoration for military valour, the Silver Star, that the requirement for risking one's life is dropped.[85] Viewed alongside the increased rates of posthumous decoration, these textual changes suggest that if a service person values their life, committing actions worthy of the highest US decoration for valour is not the best course of action to take. Taken alongside Smith's findings regarding the VC, it is evident that whilst some acts of heroism continue to be recognised, the 'price point' for decoration has become so high as to make deliberate attempts at winning them tantamount to suicide.

4. Parallel lives

A striking overall similarity exists between the awarding patterns of both decorations when the three points above are considered alongside each other. This includes the dates of their establishment and of their respective review processes, beginning in 1916 for the MOH and 1920 for the VC. The American review occurred before that country's involvement in the Great War, making it difficult to claim the direct influence of that war on the review. Moreover, the experience of conflict for both societies was somewhat different until WWII as, with the notable exceptions of 1917-19 and the Boxer Rebellion, British (including Imperial and Dominion) and American forces did not fight in the same war from the institution of the decorations until 1941. The story is largely reversed after 1941 when the societies associated with the two decorations have operated as close allies in most conflicts, the only major exceptions being Vietnam, when Britain and Canada stayed out whilst Australia and New Zealand participated, and the exclusively British

Falklands War. This numerical breakdown of VC and MOH awards therefore reveals two decorations evolving in almost identical fashion, from their mid-nineteenth century births, through their 1916-20 reform processes, their preference for posthumous awarding, to the present. Moreover, as warfare has become more technologically dependent since 1914, governmental understandings of military heroism in the form of actions worthy of the highest decorations for valour have remained centred on actions concerning risk to the flesh. Thus, their value as motivational tools for battlefield conduct or as beacons of doctrinal direction have become less important as the amount of flesh exposed in warfare has reduced.

5. New wars, old ways

The final point relates to decorations bestowed in wars after 1990, representing less of a new trend than a continuation of an older one. Whilst caution again must be exercised due to low numbers of decorations, the numbers available challenge assumptions that any further post-heroic shift has occurred in recent decades. Despite a brief hiatus during the 1990s (except for the two Somalia MOHs), the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts have brought a new crop of decorations (Tables 2 and 3). Their citations testify to the ongoing importance of infantry combat with all decorations for actions on the ground, with the US Navy recipients decorated as members of special forces SEAL team ground actions. Whilst the lack of air and naval decorations might reflect the lack of aerial or naval opposition to US and Commonwealth forces during this period, it also belies the very real danger faced by many aviators in support of ground forces both special and conventional. For instance, the action depicted in *Lone Survivor* (for which US Navy Lieutenant Michael P. Murphy was decorated) also involved the downing of a MH-47 Chinook helicopter, killing eight aviators and eight SEALS.[86]

Notwithstanding this continued neglect of air and naval branches of militaries, the post-1990 data chimes with the findings of studies of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars that high-intensity infantry conflict remains necessary. The need for 'heroic' warfare was also not lost on policymakers involved in the conflicts. For instance, Charles Robb, a former US senator and governor was part of the cross-party 'Iraq Study Group' tasked by President George W. Bush to review failing US strategy in Iraq in 2006, observed on a visit to Baghdad that 'a significant short-term surge' in US and coalition ground troops was needed. Moreover: 'it's time to let our military do what they're trained to do on offense – without being overly constrained by a zero casualties or collateral damage approach'.[87] His view was echoed elsewhere and formed part of the evidence that persuaded President Bush to implement the surge in 2007.

This does not necessarily translate into a rejection of a shift towards more technologically-dependent means of warfare. Indeed, the paucity of decorations between 1990-2001 might be taken to justify claims of a shift. However, it reinforces Strachan's observation that strategy in theory does not always equate with strategy in practice, and that practice as defined in decorational terms after 2001 very much marked a continuation of patterns common since 1920 outside periods of major inter-state war (WWII, Korea, Vietnam). Thus, according to medal data at least, the post-1990 period should not be taken as a break from the past, but rather as a continuation of trends established around 1916-20: declining numbers of decorations, higher mortality rates among recipients, and few decorations for operators of vehicles. This corresponds to an increased reliance on technological, 'post-heroic' forms of warfare, but never an absolute reliance.

Conclusion

This article challenged the contention that a new 'post-heroic' Western way of warfare has emerged since the Cold War by exploring the 'heroic' extent of warfare as indicated by the awarding patterns of the VC and MOH. These are the highest profile military decorations for 'heroism' in societies closely associated with post-heroic warfare, the US, UK and other Commonwealth states. The similarity in the understanding of what constitutes 'heroic' warfare – infantry heavy, 'high-tempo', and typically casualty intensive warfare – between one of the original proponents of the 'post-heroic' thesis, Edward Luttwak, and that of the military authorities associated with the VC and MOH is striking. Indeed, as the article revealed, instances of each decoration are concentrated in what Luttwak describes as 'the least usable forces' of 'post-heroic' warfare, the army and marine infantry forces. Conversely, hi-tech, low-intensity warfare is seen as un-heroic in both Luttwakian and decorational terms.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the institution of so many European decorations during the nineteenth century's Napoleonic-style wars reaffirmed Luttwak's identification of the emergence of such warfare as the birth of heroic warfare. Yet this point is methodologically significant as it confirms the value of decorations as indicators of military change. Similarly, the emergence of decorations at this time echoes arguments that the Napoleonic period constituted a period of major shift in the nature of European warfare, involving new approaches and methods. The newly enfranchised citizen-soldiers required new forms of incentives to lay down their lives, and associating the decorations with the sovereign and the wider polity provided such an incentive. Military decorations thus provide the researcher with an observable record of both the definition of military heroism by military and political authorities and, thanks to the consistency of these definitions over time, of the extent to which warfare has demanded that combatants place themselves in mortal

danger. Consequently, the decorations serve as a barometer of the type of warfare being conducted at a particular point in time, providing a new perspective on academic debates on changes to Anglophone ways of warfare over the long-term.

Indeed, the article's method placed the recent new ways of war debate in a much broader historical sociological context. This revealed that, in terms of decoration data at least, recent Anglophone warfare is no more 'post-' or 'un-heroic' than that practiced in most post-1918 conflicts. The decline in decorations after 1918 and the sharp percentage rises in posthumous decorations during and after WWI marks the 1914-1920 period as a transitional point in Anglo-American military heroism. Therefore, it is this period rather than the more recent, post-Cold War past which should therefore be seen as the post-heroic turn. This finding is reinforced by the discovery that definitions of heroism associated with the decorations are not only consistent with Luttwak's 'biological' understanding of the term but are also consistent across both decorations. This is evident in the rarity of VC and MOH citations for acts involving the operation of war machines, despite the significant dangers that the operators of such machines often faced in battle. It means that when viewed in the context of VC and MoH awards, operators of aircraft or AFVs are only slightly more 'heroic' than remote operators of UAVs. Put differently, any approach to warfare that employs technology to shelter combatants from danger (through armour or distance, for example) is 'un-heroic' to some degree. Reducing risk to one's own personnel is far from a new phenomenon, and the current episode of post-heroic warfare with all that it entails is far less 'new' than what many assume.

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