



ABIGAIL WILSON

Rodney Wilkerson, a human resources specialist with MMMA-3, examines records as part of a review of veteran awards, within the Awards Branch at MCB Quantico, Va., March 8.



# AWARDS BRANCH

## MMMA Works to Ensure Accuracy, Recognition For Deserving Marines

By Sara W. Bock

**W**hen Ray Kelley and Winfield Spear reconnected at a 1st Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment reunion in 1980, they hadn't seen each other—or even spoken—since 1967, when they both rotated out of Vietnam.

As the two conversed, Spear asked Kelley a question that caught him by surprise: Had he ever received the Bronze Star he recommended him for?

“He didn't know what I was talking about,” said Spear of Kelley, who as a young lance corporal was involved in Operations Hickory and Beau Charger as a machine-gun team leader with Com-

pany D, 1/3, on May 18, 1967, when he led his team on a mission to support and relieve an adjacent company that had become inundated by enemy fire.

Kelley maneuvered his Marines to a vantage point that allowed them to engage the enemy, which then attracted heavy gunfire on their position. When his team began to sustain casualties, without hesitation, Kelley placed himself out in the open to transport two wounded Marines to the platoon command post. He was wounded as he returned to his fighting position, determined not to leave his machine gun behind, and continued to engage with the enemy while disregarding his own injuries.

Then a lieutenant, a platoon commander attached to the battalion's tank company, Spear observed from the command post Kelley's heroic actions under hostile fire.

Spear strongly believed that Kelley was deserving of an award for valor in combat. When the fighting that day ended, he filled out the necessary paperwork to nominate the lance corporal for a Bronze Star and submitted it to the company staff to be passed up the chain of command.

But Kelley never received the Bronze Star—and as Spear learned at the reunion, he wasn't even aware he'd been written up for one. The battalion's Marines spent so much time in the field and engaged with the enemy that they understandably

fell behind in keeping up with paperwork and administrative tasks. The paperwork for the award, they surmised, must have been lost or misplaced. Like many who served in Vietnam, their focus was not on awards, but simply on making it home, then trying to find some sense of normalcy while dealing with visible and invisible wounds as well as with hostility from those who opposed the war.

“We all went in the closet, so to speak,” said Kelley of life upon his return home from Vietnam.

After the 1980 reunion, Kelley and Spear again went their separate ways, both certain that too much time had passed to do anything about the award that was well-deserved but had never been received.

“I didn’t follow up on this, because in my opinion it was too late to do anything,” recalled Spear.

Many more years went by, but in the early 2000s, Spear started to think about the missing paperwork and couldn’t shake a growing sense of duty to see it through. The more he thought about it, the more determined he became.

“I said, ‘I’m going to get it done,’ ” he recalled—and instead of the Bronze Star, this time he was going to nominate Kelley for the Silver Star. After reading numerous award citations, which at this point were being written for the actions of U.S. servicemembers in Afghanistan, Spear was certain that Kelley’s heroism in May 1967 warranted the nation’s third-highest award for valor in combat.

He had no idea where to begin, so he visited the local Marine reserve unit in Albuquerque, N.M., near his home, where he spoke with a first sergeant on the I&I staff. The first sergeant gave him a copy of the OPNAV 1650 form he would need to submit, and Spear completed it to the best of his ability with the help of his wife, who he says was instrumental in helping him navigate the process. He then submitted the form to Headquarters Marine Corps. What Spear didn’t realize at the time was that this would be the beginning of an approximately 15-year effort, full of frustrations and roadblocks.

Because nearly 40 years had passed since Kelley’s actions, each required task was far more difficult and time-consuming than Spear anticipated.

The award recommendation required endorsements from officers in Kelley’s chain of command. Spear solicited the help of Ken Hicks, who was a lance corporal in Kelley’s unit and was now a retired major, to help him in his efforts to track them down.



**After presenting Ray Kelley, center, with the Silver Star for his actions in Vietnam on May 18, 1967, Capt Winfield Spear, USMC (Ret), second from left, addresses those in attendance at a ceremony at the National Museum of the Marine Corps, May 18, 2018.**

COURTESY OF NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE MARINE CORPS



**As a lance corporal serving as a machine-gun team leader with Co D, 1/3 during Operations Hickory and Beau Charger in 1968 in Vietnam, Ray Kelley, left, repeatedly exposed himself to enemy gunfire in order to transport wounded Marines to safety. He continued to engage the enemy even after he was injured.**

COURTESY OF NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE MARINE CORPS

Hicks and Spear spent two or three years trying to locate the company commander, Captain Edmund Aldus, before learning that he had passed away in 1995.

Around the same time, they tracked down two eyewitnesses who, like Spear, had observed Kelley’s heroism that day: a Marine from Kelley’s gun team and a rifleman from Spear’s platoon who volun-

teered to go forward when the shooting intensified. Both provided affidavits that corroborated the proposed citation and summary of action Spear had written as the originator of the award.

As he made progress, Spear continued to submit paperwork to Headquarters Marine Corps, but without all of the required documents they were unable to verify



**Records were archived using microfilm, which is stored in labeled boxes and drawers, (above) until the early 2000s. Today, a digital awards processing system is used. Awards specialist Betty Hill, (right and above right), loads a microfilm reel to view historical records belonging to the Awards Branch, March 8 at MCB Quantico, Va. (Photos by Abigail Wilson)**

the award in order to pass it on to the applicable review board. He had rewritten the proposed citation numerous times, but it still wasn't quite what they were looking for.

Since the company commander was deceased, Spear focused his efforts on going up the chain of command and began searching for Major Peter Wickwire, who was the battalion commander at the time of the incident. This search ended on a positive note: Wickwire, now a retired colonel, was still living and would do what he could to help.

But just when his persistence seemed to be paying off, a series of hospitalizations and health issues forced Spear to put the project on the back burner for two years.

"I dropped this whole thing," Spear said. Until one day, when an unexpected phone call changed everything. On the other end of the line was Betty Hill, an awards specialist with Headquarters Marine Corps' Awards Branch, Manpower Management Military Awards (MMA), located at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va.

Hill had reviewed a file that contained all of the paperwork Spear had submitted

over the years. She told Spear that she believed that Kelley had a strong case for a Silver Star, and explained what he needed to do to submit a package that could be verified by the Awards Branch and passed up the Marine Corps chain of command before being reviewed by the Secretary of the Navy's awards board and the Secretary of the Navy himself, the approval authority for historical awards. He needed to again rewrite the proposed citation and provide a minute-by-minute account of Kelley's actions, and the battalion commander—Col Wickwire—would have to endorse the OPNAV 1650. By this point, both eyewitnesses had passed away, but the sworn statements Spear had collected from them years earlier remained valid.

It would take a year after the complete package was submitted, but another phone call from Hill late in 2017 brought Spear the news he had been waiting for. Kelley's Silver Star finally had been approved, 50 years after his actions.

Spear was overjoyed to call Kelley and share the news after he had begun planning a presentation ceremony on a particularly important day. On May 18, 2018, the 51-year anniversary of the incident,



Kelley was awarded the Silver Star at the National Museum of the Marine Corps in Triangle, Va.

In the audience that day was Betty Hill, and when it was his turn to speak, Spear, who had the honor of presenting the Silver Star to Kelley, made sure to acknowledge her for her integral role in getting the award processed.

"I introduced her and said that if it hadn't been for her, I don't think we'd be here today. This was the lady that pulled

it all together,” said Spear of his remarks to the 160 individuals who attended.

Hill, who has 26 years of awards experience, is one of a staff of 12 civilians and five active-duty Marines who make up the Awards Branch, which is tasked with developing awards policy and processing all awards, both active duty and historical, as well as responding to inquiries from Congress, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of the Navy (SECNAV), the Commandant of the Marine Corps and individuals regarding specific awards.

Kelley’s Silver Star is just one of a number of Vietnam-era awards that have made headlines around the Corps in recent years. Most notably, in October 2018, Sergeant Major John L. Canley was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions at Hue City in 1968, an upgrade from his previously awarded Navy Cross.

These “historic awards” were made possible through the National Defense Authorization Act of 1996, Title 10, Section 1130, which allows for awards to be approved outside the time limit of three years to originate an award and five years to present it.

In order to be approved, upgrades like Canley’s Medal of Honor require new and relevant information that wasn’t available at the time of the action, said Hill, adding that the majority of the “1130 cases” are for new awards, like Kelley’s Silver Star, and not for upgrades.

Many of the 1130 cases are originated after reunions and annual get-togethers when veterans discuss awards, said Major Alejandro Quinn, USMC (Ret), who works alongside Hill in MMMA-3, which handles historical awards. What many Marines don’t realize, said Quinn, is how much extensive research is conducted after a package is submitted to them.

“The process is not an easy process,” said Quinn. “We can get a case and it’ll take us a month or longer just to research and get ready. Some cases, because we have to send them back for corrections, take six months to a year to locate people and get people to sign things and get documents rewritten. And that’s before you even go before the board.”

Each award request must go through a member of Congress in order to be considered, but just because a representative’s office submits it to the Awards Branch doesn’t mean the package is complete. Quinn and Hill often communicate at great lengths with the actual originator of the award—like Hill did with Capt Spear—to get everything submitted properly. It’s important to note that the law requires that the service branch act as the



**A stack of records and paperwork sits on a desk in the MMMA-3 office at MCB Quantico, where a dedicated staff handles the review process for historical awards. The process of extensively researching and validating the 1130 cases is extremely time consuming and must be completed before an award nomination can be passed to a review board. (Photo by Abigail Wilson)**

neutral processing party and may not compile any of the original package, said Colonel Emily Swain, USMC (Ret), the MMMA branch head. And when reviewing requests for historical awards, the Awards Branch staff must follow the guiding regulations for awards that were in place at the time of the event in question—not the rules that are in place today.

When they receive a Section 1130 case for an award from World War II, for

example, they have to look at the SECNAV regulation for that award during World War II.

“One of the things to emphasize here is the level of research and detail to make sure that the award is written in a way that is accurate for the award they’re being submitted for,” said Gunnery Sergeant Edward Mosley, USMC (Ret), MMMA-3 section head.

The majority of the Section 1130 re-

quests the Corps has received in recent years are from the Vietnam War, but there have also been some from actions during World War I and World War II, as well as a few from Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Another time-consuming step in the research and verification process involves ordering records from the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Mo., the repository for military personnel records. The records are not digitized, so once they are ordered it can take up to six months or more to receive them. Sometimes, the records requested are on loan to another agency or entity, such as the Department of Veterans Affairs, and can't be transferred to MMMA until they've been returned. The Awards Branch is required to not only verify the records of the Marine who is recommended for an award, but also the records of the award originator, each of the eyewitnesses and members of the command. This helps determine the legitimacy of their claims.

"Everything is validated ... to verify each person's whereabouts in comparison to the incident," said Quinn.

If they are able to verify everything in the awards package using individual records, unit records, command chronologies and historical resources, the staff then puts together a research paper outlining everything they have discovered and reviewed, said Hill. Everything is then sent to the branch head for approval; if it passes muster, it is submitted to the board.



CPL ALEXANDER HILL, USMC

**The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan brought to the forefront the need to revise criteria for certain awards. In 2011, one such revision was made when mild TBI was added to the list of injuries that may qualify for the Purple Heart due to the growing research surrounding the long-term effects of IED blast exposure.**

"Unfortunately this is a long process, but our goal is to make sure that the best possible package is sent forward," said Hill. "We never guarantee that an award is going to be approved, but we guarantee that we put forth every effort to verify, and the board will receive the best package possible."

Not only does MMMA-3 process Section 1130 requests, but its staff also has

been tasked with handling a series of reviews ordered by Congress to determine whether certain Marines were discriminated against and wrongfully denied the Medal of Honor. They currently are in the process of reviewing the records of Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander war veterans, and have completed reviews of Jewish American, African-American and Hispanic American Marines who received the Navy Cross but may have been deserving of the nation's highest award for valor.

Throughout history—and particularly over the past two decades—changes to the nature of warfighting have necessitated changes to the Marine Corps' awards system.

"In regular peacetime, awards are not as present an issue," said Swain. "Awards are more in the forefront—there's an entire new generation of Marines that are now very engaged in doing amazing things and being in a position to be observed doing all these amazing things," she added, noting that the words "while engaged with the enemy," specific to awards for action or service in combat, is a phrase that Marines in some eras never would have dealt with.

For post-9/11 veterans in particular, emerging technology and changing warfare have transformed the battlefield and required the Department of Defense to reevaluate criteria for certain awards.

In 2011, the Corps implemented revised criteria for the Purple Heart that lifted



USMC



SGT ANDY MARTINEZ, USMC

**During a Feb. 1 ceremony in Portland, Ore., Maj Edward F. Wright, USMC (Ret), pictured on the left in Vietnam as a second lieutenant serving with "Lima" Company, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment, was awarded the Silver Star for his actions on Aug. 21, 1967, when he led a reaction force to rescue soldiers and Marines who had been pinned down by the enemy, exposing himself to intense enemy fire and successfully rescuing the surrounded troops.**



During a March 8 meeting, MMMA staff members, from the left, Rodney Wilkerson, Jon Vigon, Betty Hill, Maj Kimberly Wade, Alejandro Quinn and Capt Nelson Hooker discuss their current workload and taskings at MCB Quantico, Va. The Awards Branch staff is made up of 12 civilians and five active-duty Marines who develop awards policy and process all awards, both active duty and historical. (Photo by Abigail Wilson)

the requirement for a Marine to have lost consciousness due to a mild traumatic brain injury (TBI) in order to qualify for the Purple Heart. Instead, Marines who sustain concussive injuries caused by enemy action and remain conscious may qualify for the medal if they are determined by a medical officer as “not fit for full duty due to persistent signs, symptoms or findings of functional impairment for a period greater than 48 hours from the time of the concussive incident.” The change, which was made retroactive to Sept. 11, 2001, was influenced by a growing body of research within the Department of Defense regarding mild TBI—often caused by blast exposure from improvised explosive devices (IEDs)—and its long-term effects.

The prevalence of IEDs in Iraq and Afghanistan also led to a 2012 change in the eligibility criteria for the Combat Action Ribbon, determining that Marines and Sailors could receive the award for taking “direct action to disable, render safe, or destroy an active enemy emplaced improvised explosive device (IED), mine, or scatterable munition” after Oct. 7, 2001.

Most recently, in 2017, in response to new Department of Defense-wide policies concerning devices worn on certain awards, the Corps issued guidance regarding the bronze letter “V” (valor) device as well as two brand new devices—

“R” (remote impact) and “C” (combat conditions). Service-specific achievement medals are no longer eligible for the “V” device, which is now only authorized on awards recognizing specific acts of valor.

The new “R” device is now authorized on certain personal decorations “to denote the medal was awarded for the direct hands-on employment of a weapon system, or for other warfighting activities that had a direct and immediate impact on a combat operation or other military operation from a remote location.” Intended for drone operators, cyber network operators



Silver Star



Purple Heart



ABIGAIL WILSON

As of 2017, devices authorized for wear on certain awards now include the “C” for combat conditions and “R” for remote impact. The bronze letter “V” for valor is now only authorized on awards recognizing specific acts of valor, a departure from past DOD policy.

**Capt Nelson Hooker, MMMA-2, is responsible for handling all of the personal awards for current active-duty Marines. His advice to today's Marines is to learn from the past and submit awards immediately after the action occurs.**

and in some cases joint terminal attack controllers, forward air controllers or artillery Marines, among others, the addition of the device acknowledges the role that technological advancements increasingly play in Marines' ability to impact the battlefield from outside the "enemy threat envelope."

For meritorious service under combat conditions, the "C" device is authorized for a number of awards—among them, the Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal and the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal—in which the recipient was personally exposed to hostile action or was at significant risk of such an exposure. It is not authorized on the Bronze Star or other valor awards, as those already require exposure to hostile action.

The new devices and the accompanying rules and regulations only apply to awards for which the date of action was on or before Jan. 7, 2016.

According to Captain Nelson Hooker, MMMA-2, who handles all the personal awards for the current force, it's important to note that in historic cases, the award



ABIGAIL WILSON

regulations from the time in question still apply to those award requests.

"We no longer do the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal with 'V' for the current force; however, [on] a historic case from Vietnam our board can still go back and recommend a NAM with 'V' because those rules existed at the time," said Hooker. "On the flip side of that, someone from Vietnam or World War II or Korea could not receive a Navy and

Marine Corps Commendation [Medal] with the 'R' device because the 'R' device wasn't in existence at the time."

Changes in technology have not only affected the criteria for certain awards, but also have improved the way the Awards Branch processes them. Since the early 2000s, the Corps has used an awards processing system in which the entire process is digitized. The newest iteration of the system, the improved awards processing system (iAPS), was merged with the existing system almost a decade ago, and is considered to be the premier system for processing and archiving awards within the Department of Defense.

Looking to the future, Major Quinn believes that iAPS will help streamline the process for historical awards.

"Assuming the 1130 processing is going to continue on 50 years from now, whoever succeeds us will be able to have better records," said Quinn. "We have those right at our fingertips and it cuts down on a lot of our research time."

Speaking to the current active-duty force, Hooker emphasized the importance of submitting awards in a timely manner within the three-year time limit so that the award won't be considered a section 1130 request. His advice: get the award in immediately after the action.

"As time goes by, it's a lot harder to recall those things ... the time keeps dragging by, suddenly chain of command members are deceased, originators are deceased, and that makes it 10 times harder," said Hooker.

A retired gunnery sergeant, Mosley urges Marines to not undervalue their accomplishments, and encourages leaders in the Corps not to undervalue the actions of their Marines.

"We as Marines say, 'We're just doing our job,' " said Mosley. "We're taught to be hard, tough, but humble, and a lot of times with these Vietnam 1130 cases it was the same then. They were humble—'just doing my job'—and then years later they're getting together and they talk about these things ... but at that point it's tough and it's a long process."

Whether an award is presented a few months after an action or 51 years later, as in Raymond Kelley's case, it is vitally important that deserving Marines are given the recognition they are due.

Yvonne Carlock, the deputy communications and strategy officer for Manpower & Reserve Affairs, echoed Mosley's sentiments:

"What a lot of people consider valor, Marines consider duty." 🇺🇸



CPL PATRICK OSINO, USMC

**BGen Stephen M. Neary, CG, 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade, left, and SgtMaj Joy M. Kitashima, right, present a Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal to LCpl Matthew Ellis, a 2nd MEB intelligence specialist, at MCB Camp Lejeune, N.C., Dec. 11, 2018. The Awards Branch staff emphasizes the importance of recognizing Marines for meritorious service or acts of valor and strives to ensure that all are given the credit they deserve.**