

Prepared Statement of Mr. Jerry Jonas

Testimony before the
Military Personnel Subcommittee
of the
House Armed Services Committee

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Background: Gerard “Jerry” Jonas

Born and raised in Philadelphia, Gerard “Jerry” Jonas graduated from St. Hugh Parochial School, Northeast Catholic High School, and LaSalle University with a B.A. in History.

While still in high school, Jerry began his professional newspaper career by selling sports cartoons to a local weekly newspaper. In September, 1949, at the age of 18, he obtained a position as an editorial copy-boy and apprentice cartoonist at the Philadelphia Daily News.

In January, 1951, following the outbreak of the Korean War, Jerry left the Daily News and enlisted for three years in the U.S. Marine Corps. His military service included a year in Korea’s front lines with the 1st Marine Regiment as an artillery and heavy mortar forward observer. Shortly after his discharge, he re-enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve and served additional four years.

Returning to civilian life, Jerry wrote features and drew sports and political cartoons for the Philadelphia Inquirer and Evening Bulletin, the Levittown Evening Press, and several news magazines. During this time he published and edited a local monthly full-color news magazine in Levittown, PA.

In the early years of America’s space program, Jerry directed a publications and motion picture group for the General Electric Company’s “Missile and Space Vehicle Department” in Valley Forge, PA., and was a member of the company’s Speakers Bureau.

Turning to the electronic media in the mid 1960’s, Jerry was appointed advertising and promotions director for the Ballantine Brewing Company, and later created numerous radio and tv programs and sports promotions for the Philadelphia Eagles and Phillies, the New York Yankees, and the Houston Astros. In the early 1970s, he wrote and produced several local TV shows, (including a weekly TV show for the Philadelphia Eagles), and a syndicated TV show featuring cowboy actor Roy Rogers.

During this time he also taught several courses in communications at LaSalle University.

For the past thirteen years Jerry has written a weekly general interest newspaper column for the Bucks County (PA) Courier-Times, (a daily and Sunday newspaper in Suburban Philadelphia) and occasionally writes for the Philadelphia Inquirer and other publications.

Jerry is active in community affairs and with several military and veterans’ organizations including Philadelphia STAND-DOWN (a veteran’s outreach group that works to rehabilitate the city’s homeless veterans), and with the Marine Corps “Toys for Tots” campaign at the Willow Grove, PA, Naval Air Station.. He was the first appointee to the Middletown Township, Bucks County, PA, Arts and Culture Commission, and served as its first chairman. .

Jerry is a member of the National Cartoonists Society, the U.S. 1st Marine Division Association, the Disabled American Veterans, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the Korean War Veterans Association.

Jerry has been a licensed pilot since 1957. He and his wife Betty have been married for 51 years and have six children and five grandchildren. They have lived in Levittown, PA for 50 years.

Opening Statement of Gerard “Jerry” Jonas

Good Morning.

I want to thank Chairman Hunter, Chairman McHugh and Ranking Member Snyder for inviting me to testify before this distinguished committee today.

During the past several years as a newspaper columnist I’ve become painfully aware of a total lack of consistency in how major military awards are decided.

This is especially true in the awarding of the Medal of Honor, the highest military decoration that the U.S. government can bestow on a member of its armed forces. .

All too often the award boards subjectively interpret how an individual’s actions match up to the rigid criteria for awarding the Medal of Honor, and one board’s interpretation of that criteria can vary considerably from another’s.

Occasionally, in deciding who gets the Medal, personal biases, or simply clear and unmistakable errors made by those entrusted with making these critical decisions come into play.

The result can be two individuals performing the same basic acts of valor, with one receiving the nation’s highest honor, and the other receiving something less, or even worse, receiving nothing at all.

Unfortunately, when an individual is unfairly denied an award, correcting the situation becomes nearly impossible. Technical - often quasi-legalistic roadblocks are then routinely thrown up at every step along the way. Even worse, there is a reluctance in today’s military to overturn the erroneous award decisions of individuals in the distant past.

Most people will agree that the Medal of Honor is awarded for valor and bravery in action above and beyond the call of duty. An extreme example is that of an individual throwing his body onto an enemy hand grenade in an attempt to save the lives of his comrades. During the Vietnam War, sixty two members of the U.S. armed forces received the Medal of Honor for doing just that. Fifty of them died from their wounds.

These brave Americans willingly forfeited their lives, and their Medals were awarded to them posthumously. The few who survived were taken to Washington. D.C., and personally decorated by the President.

Yet, there were exceptions. At least sixteen individuals who jumped on grenades received the Navy Cross - the 2nd highest honor a Marine can receive . Out of those sixteen, all but three survived . From this, it appears that whether or not an individual survives the explosion, is a major factor in determining the level of his award.

I’m personally aware of at least one glaring example of an individual who survived jumping on a

grenade, yet was turned down for the Medal of Honor.

On the night of March 11th, 1970, two U.S., Marines serving in Vietnam - both of them in the same regiment - threw their bodies onto enemy hand grenades to save the lives of fellow Marines serving alongside them.

Though severely wounded, both men survived the explosions, continued to direct their subordinates and helped repel the enemy. Within days, each would be recommended by their commanding officers to receive the Medal of Honor.

One of them, Gunnery Sgt. Allen J. Kellogg, Jr. would recover and receive that Medal from President Richard Nixon three years later.

The other, Lance Corporal Richard Gresko, would spend 15 months recovering in the Philadelphia Naval Hospital. Yet as of today, nearly 37 years later, he has never received the Medal.

The only official acknowledgment of Gresko's bravery came more than six years after he had jumped on the grenade. And that was only after constant badgering by a U.S. Senator, that forced the Secretary of the Navy to finally agree that Gresko's actions did merit an award. Unfortunately, it was somehow decided that Gresko's actions did not meet the rigid criteria for awarding him the Medal of Honor. Instead, he was awarded the Navy Cross

Yet, the official words on Gresko's Navy Cross citation that describe his actions are virtually indistinguishable from the words on the citation accompanying Kellogg's Medal of Honor. I'd like to read the key sentences from each citation that describe the actions taken by these two Marines.

The first one:

"With complete disregard for his personal safety and fully aware of the dangers involved, he unhesitatingly threw himself on top of the grenade, absorbing most of the blast fragments with his own body in order to protect his men from certain injury and possibly death. Although painfully wounded, he continued to direct his men's actions until the squad made their sweep."

And the second:

"He, threw himself over the lethal weapon and absorbed the full effects of its detonation with his body, thereby preventing serious injury or possible death to several of his fellow Marines. Although suffering multiple injuries to his chest and his right shoulder and arm, he resolutely continued to direct the efforts of his men until all were able to maneuver to the relative safety of the company perimeter."

I would defy anyone to tell me which of these action resulted in the Medal of Honor and which one the Navy Cross.

A few years ago, Dan Fraley the director of Military and Veterans Affairs in Bucks County, PA, and a former Vietnam War Marine teamed up with me to try to determine why Gresko, who had performed an identical and equally brave act as Kellog, had received a lesser award.

What we repeatedly encountered was an especially intransigent and sometimes indifferent military. We also discovered that at different times over the past 30 years, a U.S. Senator and at least five Congressmen had petitioned the Secretary of the Navy to reopen the case. All were given a routine brush-off with statements like.

“To second-guess the decision made by the chain of command years after the events transpired is highly difficult. Altering the level of award today would repudiate the judgement of those senior leaders who were morally bound to make the decision at the time the events occurred.”

While time constraints this morning don't allow me to go into lengthy examples of the inconsistencies Fraley and I found with the awards system I'll be happy to answer any more specific questions that the committee members may have, and I've brought along some printed material that I'm willing to share with anyone who may be interested.

Thank you.

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