Lawmakers, Vet Groups Panning Pentagon's New Medal

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By KEVIN FREKING

WASHINGTON (AP) — The military's new medal for cyber warriors should get a demotion, according to veterans groups and lawmakers who say it shouldn't outrank such revered honors as the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart.

The Distinguished Warfare Medal, announced by the Defense Department two weeks ago, is a sign of the changing nature of war, in which attacks conducted remotely have played an increasingly important role in gathering intelligence and killing enemy fighters and terrorists. It will recognize extraordinary achievement related to a military operation occurring after Sept. 11, 2001.

But the Veterans of Foreign War and other groups say that ranking it ahead of the Bronze Star and Purple Heart is an injustice to those who served on the front-lines.

On Wednesday, his first day on the job, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel received a letter from the VFW about the medal, the first combat-related award to be created since World War II.

John Hamilton, the group's commander-in-chief, said it's important to recognize drone pilots and others. "But medals that can only be earned in combat must outrank new medals earned in the rear," he said.

Members of Congress are also getting involved. Five veterans now serving in the House introduced a bill that would prohibit the Defense Department from rating the medal equal to or higher than the Purple Heart. A medal's order of precedence refers to how they are to be displayed, with the Medal of Honor getting top billing among nearly 60 medals and ribbons.

"It's absolutely necessary to ensure that combat valor awards are not diminished in any way," said Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., who served two combat tours in Iraq and one in Afghanistan.

There is no indication the Pentagon is rethinking the award or its ranking.

"The Defense Department remains committed to honoring the remotely piloted aircraft operators and the cyber warriors as appropriate," said Pentagon spokesman George Little. "This is recognition of their significant contributions and the changing nature of warfare."

The secretaries of the Army, Navy and Air Force are developing the criteria for the medal for each of the military services that will lay out what someone would have to do in order to qualify. The medal has been designed, but it has not yet been minted or created. Once the criteria are finalized, then troops can be nominated for the award.

The backlash to the Pentagon's announcement includes an online petition to the White House that has been signed by more than 15,000 people. The petition calls the medal "an injustice to those who served and risked their lives" and says it should not be allowed to move forward as planned. The organizers need to get to 100,000 signatures to elicit a formal response from the administration, a threshold established by the Obama administration.

John Bircher, a spokesman for the Military Order of the Purple Heart, said the veterans groups are not objecting to the medal at all — just the ranking. He said some medals ranked ahead of the Purple Heart are achievement medals that can be earned outside of war time. What bothers many veterans is that the new Distinguished Warfare Medal appears be a war-time medal that trumps acts of valor, which he finds insulting.

He said it's extremely rare for veterans' service organizations to publicly chastise the Defense Department, but the new medal risks being looked down upon by veterans.

"These guys work relentless hours, and are dedicated and good at what they do, but it's completely different from the hardships of serving in combat and being on the battlefield," Bircher said.

A spokesman for Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the general has made clear that there will be very high standards for the award, which requires approval at the top service levels. The spokesman, Marine Col. David Lapan, said Dempsey believes the medal will be infrequently awarded because the bar for qualifying is so high.

It is widely expected that the award could be handed out and the public may never know about it because the actions envisioned in the types of cyber, intelligence or drone operations that might qualify for the honor would often be classified as top secret.