

8 Feb 2011 :

National Defence Medal

12.30 pm

Mr Denis MacShane (Rotherham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Brooke.

In essence, this debate is simple. The time has come to honour all the servicemen and women who serve our nation with a medal called the national defence medal. It would be given to the thousands upon thousands of former soldiers, sailors and air force personnel who have served their nation but have nothing to show for it. I am glad to say that some of them are present to listen to this debate. They place all their hope and confidence in the Minister that, by 1 o'clock, their wish will be granted.

The relationship of the British people to their armed forces has been transformed in recent years. Television and modern warfare have brought home the service and sacrifice that veterans have always understood, but that the public perhaps has not. Long gone are the days when Kipling could mock a nation that did not honour its soldiers when he wrote:

"For it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' 'Chuck him out, the brute!"

But it's 'Saviour of 'is country' when the guns begin to shoot".

That scorn is over. In each year since 1945-save, I think, one-British armed forces personnel have been in action. Remembrance day in Rotherham and nationally is as crowded as ever, but we still have no recognition for that service. Of course, gallantry and leadership are recognised, and I urge a visit to the Imperial War museum across the river Thames to see Lord Ashcroft's Victoria Cross gallery.

There is no recognition, however, for the many soldiers who served, and saw comrades die or wounded, or who provided the long tail of logistics and support that is as vital to military endeavour and success as the teeth of those doing the shooting at the front. A national defence medal would put that right.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In a spirit of non-partisanship, when the right hon. Gentleman's party was in government, they introduced the veterans badge, which is a form of recognition that can be worn all year round. Perhaps he ought to address that point.

Mr MacShane: My very next point was that a veterans badge-welcome as it is-is the most that can be aspired to. Only 10% of those eligible for the badge have taken it up. A medal that arrives at one's home and that can be shown to one's children, grandchildren and others is qualitatively different, and I believe that the House and the nation want something better.

To achieve that, we have to take on and defeat the enemy, by which I do not mean the actual foe out in the field, or even the traditional enemy of all our soldiers, the Treasury, but the

most dangerous enemy that serving men and women can face—the gentlemen of the Ministry of Defence who always know best. I remember the wonderful song, "One staff officer jumped right over another staff officer's back", from "Oh! What a Lovely War", and I fear that our major generals are making Ministers jump over each other's backs as they find excuse after excuse not to award a national defence medal to those who have served our nation.

This is not about the present Administration. More than two years ago, nearly 200 MPs signed a Commons motion calling for the establishment of a national defence medal. It was initiated by our former colleague, the right hon. and gallant Colonel Michael Mates, and supported by all Members of the House. Frankly, I wish that members of my party had dealt with the issue when in power, rather than leaving it to my colleague, the Minister, who is an occasional skiing companion of mine in the parliamentary ski race and in whom I have every confidence. The motion, however, is opposed by a committee of anonymous major generals in Whitehall who do not want to award such a medal. They are of the view that the award of a medal in recognition purely of service would somehow devalue the medal system.

We already award medals for long service and good conduct in the regular and reserve forces. In addition, medals in recognition of service have been awarded at particular times during our monarch's reign, such as the coronation and the silver and golden jubilees. Medals are therefore awarded to people just for the coincidence of having been in uniform when the Queen was crowned or when she had served a certain number of years on the throne.

Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that although his is an extremely noble endeavour, there have been conflicts and incidents for which incredibly brave members of our armed forces have not received a medal? I am thinking in particular about the campaign to get a medal for the Arctic convoy veterans of the second world war. Those guys put up with unbelievable hardship, but they did not qualify for a medal because it was thought that they would qualify for the Atlantic star. However, they needed to have served for six months for that, and no one could manage that in the extreme conditions of keeping the supply chains open to Russia. It belittles their contribution to the war effort to say that—

Annette Brooke (in the Chair): Order. I remind the hon. Lady that interventions should be brief in a short Adjournment debate.

Mr MacShane: I agree with the hon. Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage); I feel strongly about the issue. My uncle, Neil MacShane, died when his ship was sunk while on Arctic convoy duties. I have also campaigned for Bomber Command veterans to be given a medal, but that too has been refused. I could not agree more with the hon. Lady. We are talking about one or two people who are now probably in their late 80s, or even in their 90s, and I do not think it would do any harm at all. My family would certainly appreciate the award of an Arctic medal, even though it would be extremely posthumous.

Patrick Mercer (Newark) (Con): The Peninsular general service medal was awarded from 1832 onwards. It was retrospectively awarded not for peacetime service, but for operational service. Therefore, following the logic of the right hon. Gentleman's sensible arguments, I could reclaim retrospectively for my great-great-grandfather, who served in the Irish militia during the Napoleonic wars but who saw not a stroke of action. We cannot have the proposed medal if we do not honour our fathers and forefathers who actually saw

campaign service but received no recognition at all. As I understand it, this is simply a medal for service, rather than campaign service.

Mr MacShane: The medal is indeed for service. The Arctic convoy and Bomber Command medals are a separate case, but if people who served in those campaigns who are still alive were given a medal that they could wear on Remembrance day and pass on to their grandchildren and so on, it would at least be some recognition.

There are medals for given conflicts and campaigns, and I welcome the decision to award the Afghanistan service medal to medical personnel who fly in for a short time. However, thousands of veterans who are still with us are denied the chance to wear a medal. In the Cyprus campaign, for example, 371 men were killed-more than in Afghanistan-over a short period in the mid-1950s, yet they needed to serve for 120 days to qualify for a medal, which is more than three months longer than the time required for the Afghanistan medal.

We should also give recognition to the more than 2 million young men between the ages of 18 and 21 who were taken away from their homes by the Act of Parliament that introduced national service. They were obliged to serve in the armed forces, and without them this country and its interests around the world at the time would not have been protected. Many are now dead, and the remainder are in their 70s and 80s. How would it devalue the medal system to award them a national defence medal?

The cold war involved a formidable threat from the Soviet and Warsaw pact forces. Many service personnel died not while fighting, but while on duty in north-west Europe, and many more were discharged through injury. One of the most critical moments was the Berlin airlift. The RAF worked tirelessly to keep West Berlin alive and to stop Stalin's effort to take control of the city. Thirty-nine of our service personnel died in that operation. Would giving them a medal devalue the medal system? Of course not.

One of the most scandalous examples of ill treatment of our service personnel occurred in the 1950s in relation to nuclear weapon testing in Australia. Some 28,000 members of UK armed forces were used as guinea pigs in the nuclear tests conducted in Australia and the Pacific ocean area. None of those veterans had protective clothing, and they were subjected to high levels of radiation. Fewer than 3,000 of those veterans are still alive today, and it is estimated that 30% of those deceased died early in their 50s from different cancers. Many people in our communities across the country would fail to see how recognition of the award of a national defence medal to those cold war veterans would devalue the medal system.

Let us consider Northern Ireland, where IRA extremists posed a specific threat to British service personnel and their families not just in the Province, but outside Northern Ireland and, indeed, the United Kingdom. During that time, there was no normal way of life for those service personnel and certainly no safe haven. For example, nine soldiers were blown up in their barracks in Duisburg in far away Germany, and 10 Royal Marine bandmen were killed and 20 more injured when the military school of music was blown up in Deal. A coach crowded with soldiers and their families was blown up on the M62 while they were returning to their barracks after a weekend away; there were 11 dead, including a corporal, his wife, and their two children aged 5 and 2. A staff sergeant was blown up in his car in Colchester; a colonel was shot in Bielefeld, Germany; and an RAF corporal and his four-month-old baby were shot and killed at a petrol station in Wildenrath. The list goes on.

Recognition of such service by creating a national defence medal cannot be deemed to devalue our medal system. I strongly urge the Minister to overrule his major generals and to recommend to Her Majesty that she award a UK national defence medal. On the recommendation of the Australian and New Zealand Governments, Her Majesty has already agreed to award a defence medal to their respective armed forces and veterans. If the Anzac forces and Governments can agree that with the approval of Buckingham palace, I really do not know why Britain has to trail behind.

I have been in correspondence with the Secretary of State for Defence on the matter and, in a reply sent to me last month, he got several facts wrong. For example, he wrote:

"The position remains that medals are not awarded solely as a record of service."

However, those of us who support the idea of a national defence medal have never made that argument. We believe that there should be a single medal for service. There is the precedent of medals for specific periods of service, including the long-service good conduct medal, which is awarded for 15 years regular service; the volunteer reserve service medal, awarded after 10 years in the Territorial Army; the jubilee medals, which mark service at a particular point in time; and the Rhodesia medal, which is awarded for just 14 days service between designated dates and is not a campaign medal.

In his letter to me, the Secretary of State made reference to the veterans badge and the Elizabeth cross. I welcome the veterans badge, but we want recognition from Her Majesty and the right to wear her medal because one has served her in the armed forces. Fewer than 10% of those eligible have taken up the offer of a veterans badge. Service personnel want a medal that they can wear with pride on Remembrance day and on other appropriate occasions. The Elizabeth cross is a marvellous new decoration, but it is not an award to servicemen and women, although, of course, it is a welcome gift to their families. For armed forces personnel past or present, there remains no award for those injured or killed during service, or those present when a terrorist or other attack takes place that is aimed at military personnel.

May I politely suggest that the Ministry of Defence is out of step with public opinion, with the 184 MPs who have signed the early-day motion and with what is happening in the Commonwealth? While our Whitehall warriors ponder and pontificate, the New Zealanders, with Her Majesty's approval, are getting ready to award their first medals in February this year.

As I said, I know from previous campaigns to get an award for Bomber Command veterans how hard the MOD combats those who want to reward our armed services personnel with a medal. My uncle was drowned when his ship was sunk on Arctic convoy duties. Those who survived have been denied a medal. Now they are in their 80s and 90s, can we not be generous and let them hand on to their grandchildren and great-grandchildren a medal that recalls the service of those sailors? I just do not understand why the Major General Blimps of the MOD are so mean and unwilling to honour service with a medal. We failed in our campaign to get a Bomber Command medal or an Arctic convoy medal, but I hope that this new Government can read the mood of the nation better, particularly as far more former serving officers are now MPs and Ministers. I urge the Minister to take command of the issue himself and tell the MOD to get on with bringing in a national defence medal.

12.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Andrew Robathan): It is a pleasure to serve under you for the first time in Westminster Hall, Mrs Brooke. I am sure that there will be many more such occasions. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr MacShane) on securing this short debate on a proposal for a national defence medal. He speaks with some history on this long-running campaign, and I acknowledge that he has an interest in the recognition of former service personnel; indeed, I have with me the letter he sent to the Secretary of State in January. I am sorry to hear that today the right hon. Gentleman regards me as representing the enemy but, nevertheless, that appears to be my position.

First, I pay tribute to the courage and dedication of both current service personnel and those who have served in the past—those from the second world war who are still alive and those who have served since then whether as part of national service or whatever. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister uses words such as "awesome" to describe our armed forces, but no words can describe the outstanding, courageous work they are doing today and, indeed, have done in the past. There can be no doubt that they have earned the nation's recognition of their service to our country and the nation's gratitude.

As a former serviceman, I know the hardships of service life and the pride of earning a medal. I got two after 15 years; I had to rejoin the Army to get the second one, but I do not know of anyone who joined the services in order to gain a medal. Heroic personnel who perform gallant acts do not perform such actions in hope of a medal; they do so out of instinct and because they feel it is the right thing to do. I question the value of a medal that is essentially given to anyone who has served in the armed forces. Medals should be earned not expected, and I would certainly be surprised if they were demanded.

There is a belief that the rules governing the award of medals have been applied inconsistently, so the coalition Government pledged to address that in their agreement. We have honoured that pledge and have undertaken to review the rules governing the awarding of medals. The review is considering the numerous campaigns by veterans to reconsider past cases and the justification for a national defence medal is again being re-considered as part of that. The review will report to me and work is now under way. Senior military officers—Major General Blimps, the right hon. Member for Rotherham might call them—are contributing to the review and the chiefs of staff have been consulted. Campaign representations have also been considered.

The review aims to report its conclusions in the near future and will address the following four issues: the principles underpinning the award of medals, operational medals currently awarded to the armed forces, the award of foreign medals and proposals, such as this one, for medals for past service. At present, the position remains that medals are not awarded solely for service. The only exceptions are coronation and jubilee medals, and even then strict qualifying criteria have to be satisfied before a medal is issued. As I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will appreciate, that position cannot change until the review has concluded.

As the right hon. Gentleman knows, there are already many forms of recognition that acknowledge many aspects of service in the British armed forces. I shall set out clearly what they are. First, service personnel are already recognised for their extra effort, for courageous, distinguished and gallant acts, and for the risk and rigour they face on operations, by the

award of state decorations, meritorious medals, campaign medals and commendations. The integrity of the operational honours system is a matter of the utmost importance to the Ministry of Defence and, indeed, to all service personnel to whom I speak. Medals are generally introduced for particular operations when there is the presence of particular risk and rigour. However, many service personnel have served and continue to serve on commitments that are demanding in their own way but are not recognised by a medal.

There is no evidence that today's personnel have any particular desire for a universal defence medal. New medals are instituted primarily for serving personnel, not for veterans. Medals awarded to members of the British armed forces have a relative scarcity about them, which is not shared by many other nations; for example, the former Soviet Union, North Korea and, indeed, some of our allies. Such an approach leaves people in no doubt that medals have been truly earned. That ethos has stood us in good stead in the past and we should be cautious about changing it.

Secondly, as the right hon. Gentleman will be aware, long service and good conduct are also recognised. Thirdly, official recognition from the Government for service in the armed forces is awarded in the form of Her Majesty's armed forces veterans badge, to which my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) has already alluded. Although the national defence medal supporters claim that the badge is insufficient recognition for having served, almost 1 million veterans have claimed a badge and one is now issued to all personnel as they leave the armed forces.

I have taken the time to look at the national defence medal veterans recognition report, submitted to the Ministry of Defence in June 2009 under the previous Administration. I was interested to see that the campaigners for the medal agree with, and quote, the words of Winston Churchill:

"The object of giving medals, stars and ribbons is to give pride and pleasure to those who have deserved them. At the same time a distinction is something which everybody does not possess. If all have it, it is of less value. There must, therefore, be heartburnings and disappointments on the borderline. A medal glitters, but it also casts a shadow. The task of drawing up regulations for such awards is one which does not admit of a perfect solution. It is not possible to satisfy everybody without running the risk of satisfying nobody. All that is possible is to give the greatest satisfaction to the greatest number and to hurt the feelings of the fewest."

That was written in 1944 when Winston Churchill was busy with the second world war, and it is extraordinarily prescient. Is it not true, therefore, that just to give a medal for service would challenge that comment?

Some argue that by serving in the armed forces and by performing the daily duties of service life, service personnel should automatically receive a medal irrespective of the duties they undertook. I am sure the right hon. Member for Rotherham agrees that duties undertaken in areas of heightened risk and rigour are not comparable to those undertaken by service personnel based in Chelsea, for example, or in Germany or Colchester. Should they qualify for the same level of recognition? A similar argument could be applied to many other professions. Doctors, nurses, police and firefighters, to name but a few, perform selfless acts

on a daily basis, but they are not automatically awarded a medal in recognition of their efforts.

There needs to be a compelling argument as to why service in the armed forces should be so completely different. Some argue that being on call to deploy on operations should entitle personnel to a medal, but joining the armed forces does not guarantee operational service, even though it is highly likely in today's climate. Many have stood ready to go to war, but thankfully were never called on to do so.

Some argue that those who undertook national service should receive special recognition, such as a national defence medal, on the grounds that conscription was mandatory and disrupted lives. Many feel that the sacrifices that were made have largely gone unrecognised by the nation. However, although there is no medal specifically for those who performed a period of national service, those conscripted for military service could qualify for the same medals as their regular colleagues, and many did. Furthermore, since national service was terminated in 1960, it has been the personal choice of an individual to join the armed forces. It would be divisive, and I have to say curious, to offer national servicemen a medal simply for being conscripted, when those who volunteered for service would be excluded from receiving the same award.

Some argue that we should adopt the principles of other countries such as Australia and New Zealand, but they withdrew from the imperial honours system many years ago. It is for them and their Governments to decide which medals they wish to institute.

The right hon. Gentleman and the national defence medal campaigners claim that there is a significant amount of support for the institution of such a medal. Although I am sure that many people are concerned about the matter—indeed, some of them are here today—in reality the representation made to my Department is very low. Of the estimated 4 million former service personnel who would qualify for the medal, less than 200 have contacted the Ministry of Defence either directly or through their Member of Parliament. Frankly, those communications are likely to be the result of the national defence medal campaign targeting former service personnel to lobby as many MPs as possible on their behalf. It is notable that an e-mail was sent out yesterday. It said that "you might suggest"—

that the recipient—

"use the short letter below for your MP to send directly to the Defence Minister...If you haven't already could you please send me your postcode so I can ensure that every MP in the country has at least one active supporter in their constituency."

I am sure that there are many active supporters in every constituency, but that would make a grand total of 650 people campaigning on behalf of the proposal, and I do not think that would be a great many.

I shall briefly touch on the issue of cost. The right hon. Gentleman may be interested to know that it is estimated that approximately 4 million people could apply, either for themselves or on behalf of a deceased relation, for a national defence medal, should the review conclude that one should be instituted. The estimated cost of a national defence medal could extend to as much as £300 million, or even more, because one would have to research each case where somebody claimed to qualify for a medal. Otherwise one would just be giving out medals to

anybody who claimed that they were in the forces. The right hon. Gentleman grimaces, but not far from my constituency in Burbage there was a man who used to go to Remembrance day ceremonies wearing a Special Air Service beret, a full array of medals and a blazer. People thought that he was very smart until they started looking at the medals; indeed, I understand that he is currently being prosecuted. The medals he wore included medals for the Korean war, the Falklands war and, I think, the Afghan war. It is quite difficult to fit in all those wars in one period of service.

I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman would agree that the medal would cost a huge amount of taxpayers money, especially in the current financial climate. To justify such expense would be hard, particularly when the grounds for doing so appear to be somewhat thin. I must state that we would be unlikely to decline a proposal for a new medal on the grounds of cost alone, but such an expense must be warranted.

Campaigners for the medal have suggested that it could be paid for by individuals. Medals are awarded free of charge to individuals who meet or exceed the published qualifying criteria laid down for each one, from a grateful nation, expressed by the Queen. If a charge was placed on such a medal it would devalue the status of the award, and the UK honours and awards system more generally. I understand that one can buy commercially produced medals to commemorate having served under national service. However, I think that is not what people wish to have.

I have listened to the right hon. Gentleman and I assure him that we firmly believe that it is important to review the rules governing the award of medals, and that we are considering carefully the case for a national defence medal. In conclusion, I must say that those who are serving at present, or who have served in the past 50, 60, 70 or 80 years, have done their duty. The Government and I pay the highest tribute to them, but I am not sure that most of them would want that tribute recognised by the receipt of a material object such as a medal simply for having been there. The right hon. Gentleman said that the time has come. Well, it is noteworthy that this campaign started relatively recently, when personnel are earning many campaign medals-many more than I did when I was serving-but little demand for this was heard in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s or even in the 1990s. Today, the right hon. Gentleman has urged me not to disappoint. I fear that I will disappoint him, but we will await the results of the review.

Annette Brooke (in the Chair): I thank all the participants in the debate. As everyone we need for the next debate is here, we can commence it. I call Charlie Elphicke. You have two extra minutes.