

BACKGROUND

AFMAN 36-2806, *The Air Force Awards and Memorialization Program*, provides Air Force policy, criteria and administrative instructions concerning individual military decorations. Paragraphs 3.1 and 3.21.1 provide the framework for determining the why and who:

3.1. "...designed to recognize sustained and superior performance demonstrated by individuals... Commanders use decorations...to recognize meritorious or outstanding service, as well as excellence above and beyond the actions of others."

3.21.1 "To preserve the integrity of Air Force decorations, they are only approved to recognize acts or services that are clearly and distinctly outstanding by nature and magnitude. These acts or services place a member's performance clearly above that of their peers and [are] of such importance that they cannot be appropriately recognized in any other way."

APPROACH

Based on the above, enlisted members are usually submitted for decorations based on their scope of responsibility relative to rank and success within said scope. Under normal conditions, rank tiers typically function within a particular scope of responsibility relative to their rank:

- AB – SrA: tactical with little/no supervisory or section leadership responsibilities
- SSgt – TSgt: tactical/operational with day-to-day supervisory and/or section leadership responsibilities
- MSgt – CMSgt: operational/strategic with expanded supervisory and/or unit leadership responsibilities

Under normal conditions, commanders have typically awarded service (ie PCS, COT) decorations as follows:

- AB – SrA: Air Force Achievement Medal (AFAM)
- SSgt – TSgt: Air Force Commendation Medal (AFCM)
- MSgt – CMSgt: Meritorious Service Medal (MSM)

Variation may occur based on an individual's performance in a position typically held by one of higher tiered rank, or in situations where the unit's mission drove expanded scope of responsibilities. For example:

- A commander may choose to award an AFCM for "sustained and superior performance" to a SrA with responsibility normally associated with the NCO tier over an extended period of time (typically six months or more).
- A commander may choose to award an MSM for "sustained and superior performance" to a TSgt with responsibilities normally assigned to multiple NCOs over an extended period of time (typically six months or more).

NOTE: This approach is NOT mandated by any AFI, nor by 59 MDW. It is simply an acknowledgement of historical norms. Commanders should make decisions based on individual performance within the Airman's defined scope of responsibility, and consider its impact to fellow Airmen and Air Force processes, to include the enlisted promotion system.

There will be times when an eligible Airman experiences one or more of the following situations:

1. An Airman may not have the scope of responsibility typically associated with their rank (for example, a SSgt with no supervisory or leadership role).
2. An Airman may have done fairly well, but did not necessarily perform at the same level as their peers.
3. An Airman may have experienced a professional setback at some point during their tour.

Should these Airmen receive the same decoration as their peers? Should they receive a "downgraded" decoration (i.e. a MSgt receiving an AFCM)? Should they receive a decoration at all? It's your call; just be consistent.

IMPACT

Both supervisors and commanders typically want to reward enlisted members based in part on awards received. For example, they may want to submit an Airman who earns a wing or AFSC functional annual award for a higher level decoration. Here are some key points to consider.

1. The annual or functional award, of which there are many, is a byproduct of the Airman’s overall performance and should be considered in the context of an EPR and future positional/assignment considerations. However, the Airman’s overall performance within his given scope of responsibility should determine the level of decoration, not the functional award itself.
2. Decoration options are extremely limited. How would awarding a MSM to a SSgt who wins an annual or functional award compare with awarding that same decoration to an accomplished SMSgt who led a highly effective and successful unit? Most commanders have very little, if any, leeway to award a SMSgt (not to mention a MSgt or CMSgt) a decoration higher than MSM, regardless of that SMSgt’s performance. As such, commanders should be judicious in their decoration determinations.
3. An award-winning Airman is often pushed for Forced Distribution consideration. Airmen earn points based on the EPR’s promotion recommendation that greatly influence promotion results:

Recommendation	Eligible SrA	Eligible SSgt/TSgt	Points
Promote	0 to 80 th percentile	0 to 85 th percentile	200
Must Promote	81 st to 95 th percentile	86 th to 95 th percentile	220
Promote Now	96 th percentile and up	96 th percentile and up	250

Considering the limited number of Forced Distribution allocations for junior enlisted promotions, giving an award-winning Airman a higher level decoration in addition to Forced Distribution could be perceived as essentially rewarding that individual twice within the enlisted promotion system for the same performance.

4. An award-winning SNCO eligible for promotion to SMSgt or CMSgt may be considered for Senior Rater stratification. This, in turn, will influence promotion board scores. This could be perceived as rewarding that individual twice within the enlisted promotion system for the same performance.
5. Decorations directly impact the enlisted promotion system and, as such, are highly coveted. Airmen earn points toward promotion (up to a maximum 25) based on the decoration type:

AFAM	AFCM	MSM
1 point	3 points	5 points

6. Airmen eligible for promotion to MSgt, SMSgt or CMSgt have their records reviewed and scored by a promotion board. Although Airmen testing to these SNCO ranks do NOT receive points for decorations, decorations may significantly influence promotion board scores.

FINAL THOUGHTS

We should understand and carefully consider all factors, to include second- and third-order affects, when determining what decoration to award a deserving Airman. We must consistently and deliberately recognize deserving Airmen for their efforts that go above and beyond the actions of others, while upholding both the decoration and enlisted promotion programs’ credibility.

In the end, what matters most? Sustained and superior performance, given the member’s rank and scope of responsibility. Commanders: you set the bar, be deliberate and consistent, and make the call!