Defense Primer: Gold Star Designation

Background
During the years of U.S. participation in World War I (WWI, 1917-1918), a service banner with a blue star was flown by some families to represent each family member in military service. The white field, edged with red, holds up to five stars. See Figure 1. This flag was conceived by Army Captain Robert L. Queisser during WWI to honor his sons’ military service. A practice developed that when a servicemember was killed in action (KIA), the blue star with replaced with a gold one.

Figure 1. Blue and Gold Star Service Banners (Flags)

In May 1918, President Woodrow Wilson approved the recommendation by the Women’s Committee of the Council for National Defense that American women should wear a black band on the upper left arm, affixed with a gold star to signify the loss of a family member during the war. Wilson was the first to use of the term ‘Gold Star Mothers’ in his letter to the Women’s Committee. The designation of “Gold Star” refers to those who suffered the loss of an immediate family member killed in in combat (i.e., Gold Star Wife/Spouse, etc.). This recognition continues.

Gold Star Lapel Button
The Gold Star Lapel Button (also called the Gold Star Pin) was designed and created in 1947 for certain family members of those who died in combat in World War II. The Gold Star Lapel Button is a gold star on a field of purple surrounded by laurel leaves. See Figure 2. According to 10 U.S. Code § 1126(a), “the military departments shall provide a Gold Star Lapel Button to each of the immediate family members of servicemembers who lost their lives while engaged in an action against an enemy of the United States, while engaged in military operations involving conflict with an opposing foreign force, while serving with friendly forces engaged in an armed conflict in which the United States is not a belligerent party against an opposing armed force, as the result of an international terrorist attack against the United States or a foreign nation friendly to the United States or as the result of military operations while serving outside the United States as part of a peacekeeping force.”

Families of those servicemembers who died by suicide or from a medical emergency outside deployment are not, by law, Gold Star family members but may qualify for the Next of Kin Lapel Button.

According to 10 USC § 1126(d), “the Gold Star Lapel Button shall be distributed to the widow or widower (remarried or not), each parent (mother, father, stepmother, stepfather, mother through adoption, father through adoption, and foster parents); each child, each brother, each sister, each half-brother, each half-sister, each stepchild, and each adopted child of the servicemember.”

Next of Kin Lapel Button
Approved in 1973, the Next of Kin Lapel Button (also referred to as the Next of Kin Pin) is provided to the families of servicemembers who lost their lives while serving on active duty or while serving in a drill status as a member of the National Guard or Reserves but not KIA. The Next of Kin Lapel Button is gold, with a star within a circle of sprigs of oak. According to the Department of Defense (DOD), A Survivor’s Guide to Benefits, “The star within the circle commemorates honorable service and the sprigs of oak refer to the Army, Marine Corps, Navy and Air Force.”

Gold Star Military Benefits
After the death of a servicemember on active duty, a casualty assistance officer is assigned by the respective military department to assist any surviving spouse, child(ren), or other designated beneficiaries, with all eligible benefits and entitlements. These generally include the following:


Casualty Assistance to Survivors of Military Decedents

States on all Government officials to display the flag of the United States on the lapel of their overcoats, suits, or dresses and to request the American flag to be flown over public buildings on the day of the burial of a member of the armed forces who was killed in action. The President, by proclamation, may suspend this observance on the national day of remembrance, September 11, to honor the victims of terrorist acts.

lapel buttons to survivors of military personnel killed by terrorist acts.


One or more survivor benefit annuities (DOD Survivor Benefit Plan, and/or the Department of Veterans Affairs Dependency and Indemnity Compensation; receipt of more than one annuity may require offsets between the annuities).

Each benefit described above has unique eligibility criteria. Survivors may, or may not, qualify for a given benefit based on their unique circumstances. For details on who qualifies for a given benefit, see DOD’s A Survivor’s Guide to Benefits; VA Benefits for Veterans’ Spouses, Dependents, and Survivors site; and CRS Report R45325, Military Survivor Benefit Plan: Background and Issues for Congress, by Kristy N. Kamarck and Barbara Salazar Torreon.

Selected Legislation

Gold Star Mothers and Widows Pilgrimage. An Act to enable the mothers and widows of deceased American servicemembers interred in European cemeteries to make a pilgrimage to these cemeteries. Mar. 2, 1929, Public Law 70-952, 45 Stat. 1508.


Gold Star Lapel Button and the Cold War. To amend Title 10, United States Code, to provide gold star lapel buttons for the next of kin of members of the armed forces who lost or lose their lives in war or as a result of cold war incidents. Aug. 11, 1966, P.L. 89-534, § 1 (1), 80 Stat. 345.


Gold Star Fathers Act of 2015 (Derived Veterans’ Preference for Parents). To amend chapter 21 of Title 5, United States Code, to provide that fathers of certain permanently disabled or deceased veterans shall be included with mothers of such veterans as preference eligibles for treatment in the civil service. Oct. 7, 2015, P.L. 114-62, 129 Stat 547.

Gold Star Families Voices Act. To amend the Veterans’ Oral History Project Act to allow the collection of video and audio recordings of biographical histories by immediate family members of members of the Armed Forces who died as a result of their service during a period of war. Nov. 28, 2016, P.L. 114-246, 130 Stat. 995.

Relevant Statutes

Title 10 U.S. Code, § 1126 - Gold star lapel button: eligibility and distribution.

Title 10 U.S. Code § 1475 - Death gratuity: death of members on active duty or inactive duty training.

Additional Resources

Army Gold Star Survivors at https://www.army.mil/goldstar/
Marine Corps Gold Star Representative at https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Agencies/Casualty-MFPC/Long-Term-Assistance-Program/Gold-Star-Representative/
Navy Gold Star Program at https://www.navygoldstar.com/

Barbara Salazar Torreon, btorreon@crs.loc.gov, 7-8996