

State Treasurer Mike Frerichs Returns Purple Heart To Will County Family of WWII Veteran

by Greg Rivara
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SPRINGFIELD - Illinois Treasurer Michael Frerichs announced today that he has returned a Purple Heart awarded to a late Will County Marine to his only daughter, the 10th medal he has returned as part of an unprecedented mission to reunite Purple Heart medals and their rightful owners.

Marine Corps Private First-Class Charles John Alexander was an infantryman with the Marines serving in the Pacific Theater during World War II. A bullet ripped through his

knee during combat as he advanced with his Browning automatic rifle during the Mariana and Palau Islands campaign, also known as Operation Forager. He walked with a limp for the rest of his life.

“Private First Class Alexander served his country nearly 70 years ago, but it is never too late to honor his sacrifice,” Frerichs said.

Debbie Ernest is Private Alexander’s oldest living daughter. She and her husband accepted the Purple Heart at a private ceremony near their Will County home.

“Having my Dad’s Purple Heart in my hands means more than words can say,” Ernest said. “I am very proud of my Father and very happy to have this honor safely back in the hands of our family.”

Private Alexander was born in Marseilles on Aug. 20, 1916. He was 27 years old when he entered the service on Jan. 7, 1944. He was wounded July 30, 1944, and officially discharged that same day.

In 1948, he married Dorothy Johnson. He eventually worked for the Illinois Department of Transportation and retired in 1982. He was a life-long member of the Disabled American Veterans. He died at home, after hospice care, on April 27, 1988, and is interred at the columbarium at the Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery in Elwood.

Like many combat veterans, Private Alexander rarely spoke about his service and the battle in which he was wounded.

Private Alexander’s Purple Heart was among items in a forgotten safe deposit box in a Shorewood, Ill., bank. The contents likely were not touched since at least 2013 and were submitted to the state treasurer’s office in 2018 as part of the unclaimed property program. Safeguarding unclaimed property until it can be returned to its owners or heirs – no matter how long it takes - is a core function of the state treasurer’s office.

“Military medals personify honor, sacrifice, and duty,” Frerichs said. “I am grateful we returned this Purple Heart to Private Alexander’s daughter, and we continue to seek the assistance of Illinois residents to help us return these medals to the loving care of their families.”

Ernest contacted the Illinois State Treasurer’s Office after media coverage of Operation Purple Heart, Treasurer Frerichs’ unprecedented mission to return Purple Heart medals to their rightful owners.

Military medals are among the most difficult items to return because neither the Armed Forces nor the federal government maintain a comprehensive list of awardees.

Nevertheless, Frerichs' office has an unparalleled record of returning military medals. With today's announcement, Frerichs' office has reunited 10 Purple Heart and other military medals to soldiers or their survivors, more than any other administration in Illinois' history.

Of the soldiers, seven served in the Army, two in the Marines and one in the Air Force. Four Purple Hearts were earned for service in World War II, one in Korea and five in Vietnam. Only one soldier, a Vietnam veteran, was alive to accept the honor; survivors accepted the other nine. Two soldiers were Killed in Action: a Marine in Vietnam and a pilot in World War II.



Returned Purple Hearts and other medals

December 13, 2016 (Springfield) – Korean War – Returned Purple Heart and Combat Infantryman Badge to Barbara Ann Reynolds, daughter of Korean War Veteran Corporal John W. Naylor of Springfield. Cpl. Naylor served in the Army.

April 5, 2017 (Chicago)- Vietnam – Returned Purple Heart, Vietnam Service Medal, and National Defense Medal to Vietnam Veteran Specialist Harold J. Walker (of Vicksburg, Mississippi, formerly of Chicago). SPC Walker served in the Army (1969-70) in the 23rd Infantry Division.

May 22, 2017 (Peoria)– World War II – Returned Purple Heart to Constance Barr, daughter of World War II Veteran Corporal Edward H. Dunn of Peoria. Cpl. Dunn served in the Army (1943-45) as part of Battery A of the 808th Field Artillery Battalion in Europe where he was a Scout (reconnaissance) and Rifle Sharpshooter.

November 6, 2017 (East St. Louis)- Vietnam – Returned Purple Heart to Tommie Turner, brother-in-law of Vietnam Veteran Specialist Willie G. Riley, formerly of East St. Louis. SPC Riley served in the Army (1967-69). The medal then was presented to his widow, Lori, and children at Calverton National Cemetery in New York on Veterans Day.

December 19, 2017 (Springfield) - Vietnam – Returned Purple Heart to Bertha Richard, niece of Vietnam Veteran Private First-Class Andrew Gust Richard of Elkhart. PFC Richard served in the Marine Corps (1968) in B Company, 1st Battalion, 27th Marines, 1st Marine Division, 3rd Marine Amphibious Force as a Rifleman. He was killed in action (KIA) 6/19/68 (age 21) in Quang Nam Province, South Vietnam at Bac Dong Ban, Go Noi Island while participating in Operation Allen Brook. His tour in Vietnam began on 2/26/68. He is buried at Camp Butler National Cemetery outside of Springfield.

June 28, 2018 (Chicago) - Vietnam – Returned Purple Heart to Phyllis Furlough, daughter, and Kenneth Furlough, grandson, of Vietnam Veteran Private First-Class Phillip Allen Morris of Harvey. PFC Morris served in the Army (1964-67) in the 101st Airborne Division, A Company, 2nd Squadron, 17th Cavalry (when received Purple Heart) as an Armor Crewman and Armor Intelligence Specialist and in the Army Reserves (1967-70). He was wounded in battle on January 13, 1966. PFC Morris passed away in 1997.

March 11, 2019 (Joliet) – World War II – Returned Purple Heart to Barbara Martens, niece of First Lieutenant Walter B. Ingledew Jr. The Chicago native enlisted in the Army Air Forces in 1942 and served in the 428th Fighter Squadron, 474th Fighter

Group, Ninth Army Air Force as a Fighter Pilot. He was active over Normandy on D-Day and received his Purple Heart after he was killed in action when his plane was shot down over France on August 14, 1944. He was 23 years old.

October, 2021 (Springfield) – World War II - Returned Purple Heart to family of Vincent Shayer, an Army veteran. He died in 2007 at the age of 87. After his service, he was a CTA bus driver for 30 years, a member of the Amalgamated Transit Workers Union and member of the American Legion, Edison Park Post #541.

March 5, 2023 – (Springfield) –Vietnam -Returned Purple Heart to children of Army Specialist Kenneth R. Wiest. Specialist Wiest earned the Purple Heart while serving in Vietnam. He died in O’Fallon, Illinois, in 1998 at age 48.

August 20, 2023 - (Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery, Elwood) World War II Returned Purple Heart to daughter of Marine Corps Private First-Class Charles John Alexander. The announcement was made later, on Nov. 6, 2023. The Marseilles, Ill, native was an infantryman during the Mariana and Palau Islands campaign, also known as Operation Forager, in the Pacific Theater during World War II. A bullet ripped through his knee and he walked with a limp for the rest of his life. He returned home, worked for the Illinois Department of Transportation and was a life-long member of the Disabled American Veterans. He died at home in 1988.

About the Illinois Treasurer

The Illinois State Treasurer’s Office is a powerful economic engine that invests in people to drive prosperity, development and growth throughout the state. As State Treasurer, Michael Frerichs (FRAIR'-iks) is the state’s Chief Investment and Banking Officer and actively manages approximately \$55 billion. The investments help families pay for college and trade school; workers save for a dignified retirement; and local governments process bill payments more efficiently so they can pass along the savings to taxpayers. The office provides financial institutions money to loan to farmers, small business owners, and qualified individuals at below-market rates because better jobs create stronger communities. The office operates the state’s largest consumer-protection initiative, the unclaimed property I-Cash program, which has returned a record-breaking \$1.8 billion since Frerichs was elected.

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