



The Uncle I Never Met, Uncle Walt's Story, Plus Purple Hearts and Other Medals Returned

by Michael W. Frerichs, Illinois State Treasurer
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Treasurer's note: In honor of Veterans Day this coming weekend, the majority of this newsletter is devoted to our nation's veterans. We all owe them a great debt of gratitude.

I frequently talk about how much fun my job is. I get to make money for the state. I get to help families save for college and retirement. I get to return hundreds of millions of dollars in missing money to our residents. But there is no greater honor than the 10 times I have reunited veterans or their loved ones with Purple Heart medals that have been left in bank safety deposit boxes and turned over to my office.

Part of that is because Veterans Day is important in my family. Over the decades, my family has kept alive the memories of Uncle Doug and Uncle Walt.

April 28, 1968, is an important day for my family. It's the day my parents were married. It's also the day Amel Douglas Royalty, my Aunt Bev's husband, was killed by an enemy mortar in Vietnam. She found out two weeks after the wedding when U.S. Army officers showed up on her doorstep with the news.



Doug (see photo) received seven military medals, and for his heroism, he was posthumously awarded the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart. On my first visit to Washington, D.C., I sought out the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and made a rubbing of his engraved name. I often make a trip back to that Memorial and stand in silence, thinking about his sacrifice.

Though he died before I was born and I never had the chance to meet him, my family shared stories about him and referred to him as my uncle Doug. My aunts and uncles kept the memory of their former brother-in-law alive. My great-uncle Walter survived the Korean War, but was only able to return after nearly three years in a Communist Chinese prisoner of war camp. (See photo of his homecoming.)



I was only 15 when “Uncle Walt” passed away, so it shouldn’t be a surprise that he didn’t share any frightening war stories with me, but he also didn’t share them with my aunts and uncles in their adulthood. They do remember him saying “you never knew if the guy you went to sleep next to would wake up in the morning.”

Many of our veterans of foreign wars experienced trauma that they would rather forget. That is part of the reason returning Purple Hearts is a challenge.

I returned a Purple Heart to a gentleman and when I asked how he earned it, he choked up and his eyes teared up. His son told me his dad never talks about that time of his life.

We were able to return a medal to a daughter who was not aware that her father had earned a Purple Heart. Her father returned from Korea and never spoke of it.

With Veterans Day a few days away, I am asking once again to help my office reunite families with their medals. Please look at our website with a list of medals and information we know about them. We would appreciate any clues or hints that you can give us to help return the others we still have.

I had the honor of returning the Purple Heart Medal of Marine Corps Private First Class Charles John Alexander to Debbie Ernest this summer. You can read about it and watch a video if you scroll just a little further through this newsletter. I hope this is not the last one that I will return. Please take some time and see if you can help us take another medal out of our cold vault and return it to the warm embrace of family.

Sincerely,

Michael W. Frerichs

Illinois State Treasurer



EPILOGUE:

My aunt Bev eventually remarried another veteran of the Vietnam War. I want to highlight and thank him as well for his service. Uncle Harold (see photo) returned home with partial hearing loss, stemming from his assignment as part of an artillery crew during the war. He has been of invaluable help to me with my HVAC problems, and he is the best man with babies that I have ever seen.

Uncle Walt would never forget one of those soldiers he befriended in the prison camp. They made a pact that if either would die, the other would find their family and tell their story. Walt asked him to find his parents. The other soldier asked him to find his fiancée. After Walt was released and returned home, he upheld his promise. Not too long after that, she became his wife, my great-aunt Margaret.

Operation Purple Heart Never Forget Those Who Served

Illinois State Treasurer Michael Frerichs this week announced 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. (See video above.)

"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 lifelong 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. Safeguarding missing money and 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 are among the most difficult items to return because neither the Armed Forces nor the federal government maintain a comprehensive list of awardees.

Seven of the service members 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 service member, a Vietnam veteran, was alive to accept the honor; survivors accepted the other nine. Two service members were killed in action: a Marine in Vietnam and a pilot in World War II.

Returning Purple Hearts and Other Medals

State Treasurer Michael Frerichs has made it a priority to find the rightful owners of Purple Hearts and other military service medals.

Here is a list of Purple Hearts and other medals he has given back to veterans or to their heirs:

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 (photo above). 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.