

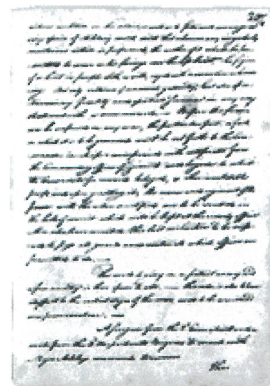
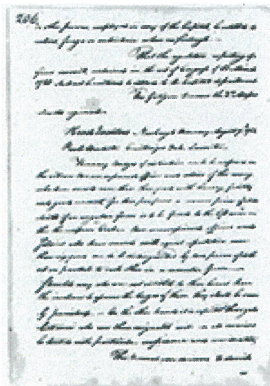
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Washington, D.C. 20420

CELEBRATING AMERICA'S FREEDOMS

The Purple Heart

It is one of the most recognized and respected medals awarded to members of the U.S. armed forces. Introduced as the "Badge of Military Merit" by General George Washington in 1782, the Purple Heart is also the nation's oldest military award. In military terms, the award had "broken service," as it was ignored for nearly 150 years until it was re-introduced on February 22, 1932, on the 200th anniversary of George Washington's birth. The medal's plain inscription "FOR MILITARY MERIT" barely expresses its significance.

On August 7, 1782, from his headquarters in Newburgh, New York, General George Washington wrote:



Gen. George Washington's instructions for the Badge of Military Merit

"The General ever desirous to cherish virtuous ambition in his soldiers, as well as to foster and encourage every species of Military merit, directs that whenever any singularly meritorious action is performed, the author of it shall be permitted to wear on his facings over the left breast, the figure of a heart in purple cloth, or silk, edged with narrow lace or binding. Not only instances of unusual gallantry, but also of extraordinary fidelity and essential service in any way shall meet with a due reward. Before this favour can be conferred on any man, the particular fact,

or facts, on which it is to be grounded must be set forth to the Commander in chief accompanied with certificates from the Commanding officers of the regiment and brigade to which the Candidate for reward belonged, or other incontestable proofs, and upon granting it, the name and regiment of the person with the action so certified are to be enrolled in the book of merit which will be kept at the orderly office. Men who have merited this last distinction to be suffered to pass all guards and sentinels which officers are permitted to do.

The road to glory in a patriot army and a free country is thus open to all. This order is also to have retrospect to the earliest stages of the war, and to be considered as a permanent one."

Only three soldiers are known to have received the original honor badge: Sergeant Daniel Bissell of the 2d Connecticut Regiment of the Continental Line; Sergeant William Brown of the 5th Connecticut Regiment of the Continental Line, and Sergeant Elijah Churchill of the 2d Continental Dragoons, also a Connecticut regiment.

For unknown reasons, the medal apparently was not awarded again. In fact, it was not until October 1927, after World War I, that General Charles Summerall proposed that a bill be submitted to Congress to revive the "Badge of Military Merit." In January, 1928, the Army's Office of The Adjutant General was instructed to file the materials concerning the proposed medal. Among those materials was a rough drawing of a circular medal disc with a concave center on which a raised heart was visible. Engraved on the back of the medal was "For Military Merit."

In January 1931, General Douglas MacArthur, Summerall's successor as Army Chief of Staff, resurrected the idea for the medal. Miss Elizabeth Will, an Army heraldic specialist in the Office of the Quartermaster General, was assigned the task of designing the medal according to some general guidelines provided to her. The Commission of Fine Arts obtained plaster models from three sculptors and, in May 1931, selected the model produced by John Sinnock of the Philadelphia Mint.

On February 22, 1932 -- the 200th anniversary of George Washington's birth -- the War Department (predecessor to the Department of Defense) announced the establishment of the Purple Heart award in General Order No. 3:

By order of the President of the United States, the Purple Heart established by General George Washington at Newburgh, August 7, 1782, during the War of the Revolution, is hereby revived out of respect to his memory and military achievements.

By Order of the Secretary War

Douglas MacArthur
General
Chief of Staff



Purple Heart (obverse)



Purple Heart (reverse)

Army regulations specified the design of the medal as an enamel heart, purple in color and showing a relief profile of George Washington in Continental Army uniform within a quarter-inch bronze border. Above the enameled heart is Washington's family coat of arms between two sprays of leaves. On the reverse side, below the shield and leaves, is a raised bronze heart without enamel bearing the inscription "For Military Merit." The 1 11/16 inch medal is suspended by a purple cloth, 1 3/8 inches in length by 1 3/8 inches in width with 1/8-inch white edges.

Army regulations' eligibility criteria for the award included:

- Those in possession of a Meritorious Service Citation Certificate issued by the Commander-in-Chief of the American Expeditionary Forces in World War I. (The Certificates had to be exchanged for the Purple Heart.)
- Those authorized by Army regulations to wear wound chevrons. (These men also had to apply for the new award.)

The newly reintroduced Purple Heart was not intended primarily as an award for those wounded in action -- the "wound chevron" worn by a soldier on his sleeve already fulfilled that purpose. Establishing the Meritorious Service Citation as a qualification for receiving the Purple Heart was very much in keeping with General Washington's original intent for the award.

However, authorizing the award in exchange for "wound chevrons" established the now familiar association of the award with injuries sustained in battle. This was reinforced by Army regulations, which stated that the award required a "singularly meritorious act of extraordinary fidelity service" and that "a wound which necessitates treatment by a medical officer and which is received in action with an enemy, may, in the judgment of the commander authorized to make the award, be construed as resulting from a singularly meritorious act of essential service."

Until Executive Order 9277 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in December 1942 authorized award of the Purple Heart to personnel from all of the military services (retroactive to December 7, 1941), the medal was exclusively an Army award. The Executive Order also stated that the Purple Heart was to be awarded to persons who "are wounded in action against an enemy of the United States, or as a result of an act of such enemy, provided such would necessitate treatment by a medical officer."

In November 1952, President Harry S. Truman issued an Executive Order extending eligibility for the award to April 5, 1917, to coincide with the eligibility dates for Army personnel.

President John F. Kennedy issued Executive Order 11016 in April 1962 that further extended eligibility to "any civilian national of the United States, who while serving under competent authority in any capacity with an armed force..., has been, or may hereafter be, wounded" and authorized posthumous award of the medal.

Executive Order 12464 signed by President Ronald Reagan in February 1984, authorized award of the Purple Heart as a result of terrorist attacks or while serving as part of a peacekeeping force subsequent to March 28, 1973. The 1998 National Defense Authorization Act removed civilians from the list of personnel eligible for the medal.

The Purple Heart is ranked immediately behind the bronze star and ahead of the Defense Meritorious Service Medal in order of precedence.

Possession of the Purple Heart medal does not by itself qualify veterans for Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) disability compensation. However, since November 1999, Purple Heart recipients have been placed in VA's enrollment priority group 3, unless eligible for the higher priority groups (1 or 2) based on service-connected disabilities. Recipients are also exempt from co-payments for VA hospital care and medical outpatient care, but not from pharmacy co-payments for medications prescribed for non-service connected conditions.