



DEI *Perspectives*

Celebrating the Oldest U.S. Military Award and its Recipients: Purple Heart Day 2024

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Every year, on August 7, we celebrate Purple Heart Day, but many of us may not know the history behind the Purple Heart award or what it represents. As the age-old adage goes — knowledge is power — so join me as I provided a little bit of background information on our nation’s oldest military award, the Purple Heart.

What Does the Purple Heart Represent?

The Purple Heart is bestowed upon service members who are wounded on the battlefield or those who pay the ultimate sacrifice with their life while serving in the U.S. military. While this is one of the most recognizable awards presented to service members, it’s also referred to as the award that no one wants because the recipient, usually, had to pay a great price.

What’s the History Behind the Purple Heart?

The Purple Heart had a humble start in 1782 as the Badge of Military Merit, a heart-shaped purple cloth with a silver edge. During this time, George Washington, commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, noticed that morale in the army was low because of the lack of pay, harsh weather, shortages, etc. It became so tough for these soldiers, that there were rumors circling about a rebellion. In order to boost morale and show his appreciation to his soldiers, Washington created the Badge of Military Merit and awarded three of these badges to soldiers for “any singularly meritorious action.” This was his way of saying “Thank you” because he couldn’t afford to pay these soldiers for their service. Afterwards, he allowed those under his command to provide these awards to other service members, whenever and wherever they deemed appropriate.



After the American Revolutionary War ended in 1783, the Badge of Military Merit was a forgotten award until General Charles Summerall asked Congress to restore it in 1927. However, this didn’t come to fruition until 1932, when General Douglas MacArthur proposed to reintroduce the Badge of Military Merit as the Purple Heart. This reintroduction occurred on February 22, 1932, as an honor to George Washington on his birthday, and the new award was a medal that featured Washington’s portrait. At this time, it was only being awarded to Army or Army Air Corps members, but 10 years later, in 1942, it was expanded to all branches of the military, including the U. S. Coast Guard.



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Purple Heart Recipients:

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, there have been 1.8 million Purple Heart recipients since the award was created in 1782. However, due to fires and other mishaps, the exact number isn't known. Of those 1.8 million Purple Heart Recipients, some of the most notable are Curry T. Haynes and John F. Kennedy.

Curry T. Hanes is remembered as the soldier who has received the most Purple Heart awards due to his service during the Vietnam War. His first award was received when he was injured in a jungle ambush. He received nine more Purple Hearts when he returned to war after his first injury, only to be involved in an assault where he had to dodge multiple grenades. He received a Purple Heart for every injury that he sustained.

John F. Kennedy, the 35th and only U.S. president to be a recipient of the Purple Heart, received this award because of his heroic actions in the Navy during World War II. A Naval Lieutenant at the time, Kennedy was tasked with torpedoing Japanese destroyers during the middle of the night, while Japanese fighter pilots flew overhead. During this attempt, the fighter pilots released two bombs that gave away the position of Kennedy and his men and resulted in their Patrol Torpedo boats being destroyed. Many of Kennedy's men were injured, including Kennedy, during this assault. After swimming to, and spending 24 hours on, an island with no fresh water and inedible food, they decided to swim to a different island, where they finally found help. Kennedy's bravery and courageous actions resulted in a Purple Heart award.

In addition to Kennedy and Hanes, there have been two military animals who have received a Purple Heart for their bravery in battle — Sgt. Stubby (a canine) and Sgt. Reckless (a horse).

How You Can Honor Purple Heart Recipients:

- Take a moment of silence on your own, or at an event honoring recipients, to ensure their courage is never forgotten, and to pay respect to those who paid the ultimate sacrifice.
- Listen to soldiers and veterans to learn more about their life stories and their military service.
- Fly American flags at your home or business.
- Visit the National Purple Heart Hall of Honor in New York.
- Visit the National Purple Heart Honor Mission's website to read about Purple Heart recipients and learn what the award means to them. In fact, on Purple Heart Day, the National Purple Heart Honor Mission hosts a national tribute ceremony where recipients can gather to share their stories, which provides the perfect opportunity to learn from those who are recipients of the Purple Heart.

No matter how you decide to honor Purple Heart recipients on August 7, 2024, I encourage you to simply remember the sacrifice and bravery of all who serve in our military, and especially those who are presented with the award that no one wants, the Purple Heart.