

History of The Purple Heart

The Purple Heart is an American decoration-the oldest military decoration in the world in present use and the first American award made available to the common soldier. It was initially created as the Badge of Military Merit by one of the world's -most famed and best-loved Heroes, General George Washington.

General Washington is often pictured as a cold, stern soldier, a proud aristocrat. Yet we know he showed sympathy and concern for his troops, and was not too proud to pray humbly on his knees for his beloved country and for the men who served it, and him, so bravely and loyally.



His keen appreciation of the importance of the common soldier in any campaign impelled him to recognize outstanding valor and merit by granting a commission or an advance in rank to deserving individuals. In the summer of 1782 he was ordered by the Continental Congress to cease doing so-there were no funds to pay the soldiers, much less the officers!

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Deprived of his usual means of reward, he must have searched for a substitute. Shortly after receiving the "stop" order from Congress, he wrote his memorable General Orders of August 7, 1782, which read in part as follows:

"The General, ever desirous to cherish virtuous ambition in his soldiers as well as 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 his 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 due reward. The name and regiment of the persons so certified are to be enrolled in a Book of Merit which shall be kept in the orderly room." The order further states: "Men who have merited this distinction to be suffered to pass all guards and sentinels which officers are permitted to do. The order to be retroactive to the earliest stages of the war, and to be a permanent one." Washington ended his order with: "The road to glory in a patriot army and a free country is thus open to all."

Lost or misfiled for almost 150 years among the War Department Records at Washington, D.C., this important paper came to light during the search for Washington's papers prior to the celebration of his bicentennial in 1932. With it were the dramatic accounts of the soldiers who received the decoration at Newburgh, N.Y., at Washington's Headquarters. The Book of Merit has not been found. The U.S. War Department revived the Purple Heart decoration on February 22, 1932. Miss Elizabeth Will, an Army heraldic specialist in the Office of the Quartermaster General, was named to redesign the newly revived medal, which became known as the Purple Heart. Using general specifications provided to her, Ms. Will created the design sketch for the present medal of the Purple Heart. The Commission of Fine Arts solicited plaster models from three leading sculptors for the medal, selecting that of John R. Sinnock of the Philadelphia Mint in May 1931. The revived form is of metal, instead of perishable cloth, made in the shape of a rich purple heart bordered with gold, with a bust of Washington in the center and the Washington coat-of-arms at the top. The latter is believed to have been the source of the stars and stripes of the American Flag.

The **Purple Heart** is awarded to members of the armed forces of the U.S. who are wounded by an instrument of war in the hands of the enemy and posthumously to the next of kin in the name of those who are killed in action or die of wounds received in action. It is specifically a combat decoration.

An organization now known as the "**Military Order of the Purple Heart**," was formed in 1932 for the protection and mutual interest of all who have received the decoration. Composed exclusively of Purple Heart recipients, it is the only veterans service organization comprised strictly of "combat" veterans. For more information go to <www.purpleheart.org>.

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