



OFFICE OF ILLINOIS STATE TREASURER

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Illinois State Treasurer Michael Frerichs Returns WW II Purple Heart, Bronze Star To Late Chicago Soldier's Family in Downstate Marion

*Operation Purple Heart Finds 16th Family
Whose Military Honors Were Missing for Years*

Video will be posted here: <https://cms.illinois.gov/agency/media/video/videos.html>

MARION, ILLINOIS – Illinois Treasurer Michael Frerichs today returned a lost Purple Heart medal to the grand-niece of a World War II veteran who earned it while fighting the Germans in Italy.

Frerichs reunited Army Private Stephen J. Grabowski's military medals with grand-niece Chrystal Cantrell during a ceremony at VFW Post 1301 in Marion.

It is the 16th lost medal Frerichs has returned as part of [Operation Purple Heart](#), an unprecedented mission to reunite lost medals with the rightful owners. The iconic military honor is given to individuals wounded or killed during military combat.

"Private Grabowski sacrificed a great deal to stop an evil dictator and ensure a free world," Frerichs said. "It is never too late to honor the sacrifices of the Greatest Generation."

On April 15, 1945, during the closing days of active fighting in Europe, Grabowski and thousands of others participated in Operation Grapeshot, the final Allied attack during the Italian Campaign. Grabowski was a rifleman in Company B, 473rd Infantry. He was 27 and serving in his third year in the military when a German grenade struck his bunker and buried him under debris as his unit advanced in Italy. Grabowski was paralyzed from the waist down.

A few weeks later, Germany surrendered to Allied Forces on May 7, 1945. Three months later, Japan fell, and the war ended.

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Grabowski, the son of Polish immigrants in Chicago, returned home the following year and lived at Hines VA Hospital, where he died of kidney failure in 1974. He was 56 years old.

Treasurer Frerichs also returned Grabowski's Bronze Star; European, African, Middle Eastern Campaign medal; Good Conduct medal; American Campaign medal; and World War II Victory medal. The medals were in a bank safe deposit box owned by Grabowski's oldest nephew, who is in poor health and lives in a nursing home in Chicago. Cantrell, Grabowski's grand-niece who lives near Marion, accepted the honors on behalf of the family.

"Knowing the sacrifices my great uncle and so many others made on behalf of this country is amazing," Cantrell said. "We must always remember we enjoy the freedoms we have because someone else stood up and did the right thing."

The contents of the safe deposit box were turned over to the Illinois State Treasurer's Office in 2010 after it had not been touched for several years. 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. Other examples of unclaimed property include bank accounts, unpaid life insurance benefits and uncashed rebate checks.

This is the 16th Purple Heart medal that Treasurer Frerichs has returned to the soldier or the soldier's family, an unparalleled record in Illinois and the nation. A list of unclaimed Purple Heart medals in possession of the Illinois State Treasurer's Office is available [online](#).

"If you recognize a name, please reach out to their family. This is an honor that deserves to be in their loving hands, not the cold, dark vault of my safe," Frerichs said. "You also can contact my office through operationpurpleheart.org."

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. In most of these cases, the conflict in which the Purple Heart was awarded, such as World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, or Desert Storm, is unclear or unknown.

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 \$60 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.

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The office provides financial institutions with 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 missing money I-Cash program, which has returned a record-breaking \$2.3 billion since Frerichs was elected.

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