



OFFICE OF ILLINOIS STATE TREASURER

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
November 6, 2023

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State Treasurer Mike Frerichs Returns Purple Heart To Will County Family of WWII Veteran

Operation Purple Heart Finds 10th Family Whose Military Honors Were Missing for Years

SPRINGFIELD - Illinois Treasurer Michael Frerichs announced today 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.

“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 life-long 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.

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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 as part of the unclaimed property program. 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.

“Military medals personify honor, sacrifice, and duty,” Frerichs said. “I am grateful we returned this Purple Heart to Private Alexander's daughter, and we continue to seek the assistance of Illinois residents to help us return these medals to the loving care of their families.”

Ernest contacted the Illinois State Treasurer's Office after media coverage of Operation Purple Heart, Treasurer Frerichs' unprecedented mission to return Purple Heart medals to their rightful owners.

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.

Nevertheless, Frerichs' office has an unparalleled record of returning military medals. With today's announcement, Frerichs' office has reunited 10 Purple Heart and other military medals to soldiers or their survivors, more than any other administration in Illinois' history.

Of the soldiers, seven 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 soldier, a Vietnam veteran, was alive to accept the honor; survivors accepted the other nine. Two soldiers were Killed in Action: a Marine in Vietnam and a pilot in World War II.

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 \$55 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. The office provides financial institutions 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 unclaimed property I-Cash program, which has returned a record-breaking \$1.8 billion since Frerichs was elected.

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