



MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART CHARTERED BY CONGRESS

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National POW/MIA Recognition Day, September 19, 2014

As the National Commander of the Military Order of the Purple Heart, I ask you to join me in paying tribute to the POW/MIA community on the 35th National Prisoner of War and Missing in Action Recognition Day in America. Today we honor two special groups of America's heroes - those military men and women who were imprisoned by the enemies of our nation, usually under despicable conditions, and who suffered unspeakable torture at the hands of their captors. Yet, through courage, resilience, and determination, they survived to return home to a grateful nation. Today they represent us in Congress, we work alongside them, and they are in our own families. I am particularly proud that many are loyal Members of the Military Order of the Purple Heart.

We also pay tribute today to some 83,195 soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen whose fate remains unknown. They are the service members who have never been reunited with their mothers, their fathers, their wives and children, or their families. For the families and friends of those who remain missing from as long ago as World War II, their silent, yet hopeful, vigil still continues as they await news of their missing loved ones. We in the Military Order of the Purple Heart echo an entire nation's unending support and our undying promise that, no matter how long it takes, no matter what it takes, we will not stop until we have brought every American home. We pledge that we will leave no one behind.

I had the honor of getting to know a WWII POW personally a few years ago when I learned that a 89 year old fellow Delaware veteran had been trying for 65 years to get the Purple Heart Medal he rightfully earned. Ray Ciesinski had been an anti-tank gun crewman serving in Europe with Gen. George S. Patton. On Thanksgiving Day 1944, his unit was attacked by the Germans Army at Ratzwiler, France, where he was wounded by shrapnel hitting his right arm and a rifle round that left his leg with a compound fracture. He was captured by the Germans and, was forced into labor at Stalag IV-B, a POW camp about five miles north of the town of Muhlberg in the German state of Brandenburg. When that camp was finally liberated in June, 1945, there were 30,000 prisoners, including PFC Ray Ciesinski. Unfortunately, there were thousands of other POW's who had died before the camp could be liberated.

If his wounds had been documented after his POW release, Ciesinski would

clearly have qualified for the Purple Heart Medal -- but they weren't. After his discharge from the Army in 1945, he returned home and attended the University of Delaware, where he played defensive tackle on UD's famed 1946-49 team with Harold R. "Tubby" Raymond. Although recruited by the National Football League, he decided to become a teacher and taught physical education and coached track, cross country and other sports at Delaware's Newark High School until he retired in 1981. He was later was inducted into the Delaware Sports Hall of Fame. His quest for a Purple Heart began just after his honorable discharge from the Army, but was caught in a tangle of government red tape and lost records. Then his records were among those of 18 million service members that were lost in a 1973 fire at the National Personnel Records Center. A few years ago, thanks to efforts of some family members, friends, and Cheryl Yard, a National Service Officer with the MOPH, Delaware Senator Chris Coons was asked to intervene with the Army Board for Correction of Military Records to reopen Ciesinski's case. It turned out that the Army was able reconstruct Ciesinski's records with sufficient documents found in other files, allowing a fair and impartial review of his appeal. Finally, on May 25, 2011, the board approved award Ray's Purple Heart Medals. What he not realize was that he was also entitled to a Bronze Star Medal, a Prisoner of War Medal, and two oak leaf clusters for his Purple Heart, signifying three separate combat wounds.

On June 5, 2011, I had the honor of pinning the Purple Heart and other medals on the chest of Ray Ciesinski in his home, with many of his family members and friends in attendance. In a moving but joyous ceremony, Ciesinski said his only regret was that his wife didn't get to see him receive the medals. His daughter Katherine told me that, although she was proud that he was finally receiving his Purple Heart, she and her siblings knew he had been a POW, but he had never dwelled on that painful part of his life. She said. "Daddy was a hero to us and he didn't need medals to prove it."

Unfortunately, Ray Ciesinski died only 5 days later. But he did live long enough to be honored with the medals he so rightfully earned as a WWII Prisoner of War. For me, it was an experience I will never forget -- to get to meet and know someone who had overcome the horrors of captivity and then returned home to make indelible contributions to his community.

Please join me by pausing for a moment on POW/MIA Remembrance Day and pay special tribute to those who were captives at the hands of our enemies, those who still remain missing in action -- and especially those families who have lost their loved ones and still await their return.

May God also bless all those who have served their country in the past and those who continue to serve at home and abroad to protect the many freedoms we all enjoy. And, may God Bless America.

Pat Little
National Commander

