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Half a Million Purple Hearts

Why a 200-year-old decoration offers evidence in the controversy surrounding the Hiroshima bombing.

By D. M. Giangreco and Kathryn Moore

Early last year, just as NATO was stepping up its bombing campaign in Kosovo, the news broke that the United States was manufacturing 9,000 new Purple Hearts, the decoration that goes to American troops wounded in battle and the families of those killed in action. To the media, this seemed a clear indication that despite its pledge not to send in ground forces, the United States was planning to do just that. "Why in good God's name are we making Purple Hearts if we are not in a war and we don't expect casualties?" asked the New York *Post*.

But in fact the run of medals had nothing to do with imminent combat; rather it cast light backward on a long-ago war. For this was the first large-scale production of the decoration since World War II; for more than half a century, American casualties have been receiving Purple Hearts stockpiled for the invasion of Japan. All the other implements of that war—tanks and LSTs, bullets and K rations—have long since been sold, scraooed. or used up, but these medals, struck for their grandfathers, are still being pinned on the chests of young soldiers.

More than 370,000 Purple Hearts have been issued between the outbreak of the Korean War through the current peacekeeping operations in Bosnia and Kosovo. Remarkably, some 120,000 more are still in the hands of the armed services, not only stockpiled at military supply depots but kept with major combat units and at field hospitals so that they can be awarded without delay. But although great numbers of the World War II stock are still available and ready for use, those controversial 9,000 new ones were ordered for the simplest of bureaucratic reasons: So many medals had been transferred to the armed services that the government organization responsible for procuring them, the Defense Supply Center Philadelphia, had to replenish its own inventory.

Established as the Badge of Military Merit in 1782, the decoration was Gen. George Washington's way around congressional unwillingness to reward ordinary soldiers for extraordinary deeds. In the eighteenth century, the traditional practice among all

armies of the world was to present decorations only to officers. Early in the war, the new American army used promotion to reward exceptional gallantry, but as money dwindled the military found such promotions to be a hard sell with Congress.

In the hard-pressed Continental Army, there were often no funds to pay a soldier at his existing rank, let alone for a promotion. Still, some way had to be found, said Inspector General Baron von Steuben, to recognize "soldiers who have served with fidelity." Washington's answer was to order narrow strips of cloth added to the lower left sleeve of a uniform to denote length of service (these are commonly referred to today as *hash marks*) and the creation of the Badge of Military Merit for "singularly meritorious action" as well as for "extraordinary fidelity and essential service." Washington stipulated that the decoration be worn over the left breast and be created in "the figure of a heart of purple cloth, or silk, edged with narrow lace or binding." The general himself presented the first two.

The decoration fell into disuse after the Revolution, and efforts to revive it in the wake of World War I by Army Chief of Staff Charles P. Summerall failed. Summerall's successor, Douglas MacArthur, had better luck, largely because his campaign coincided with the run-up to the bicentennial of George Washington's birth in 1932. MacArthur changed its name to the Purple Heart and, at the last minute, expanded its franchise to include wounds received as a result of enemy action. In 1942 this became the sole criterion—a separate medal had been established for wartime meritorious achievement—and other services later adopted the award.

The demands of global warfare played havoc with the first 635,000 Purple Hearts produced during the fighting, and a variety of manufacturers and contracting agencies attempted to standardize mass-production techniques. To the delight (or consternation) of collectors, there were four major variations of the medal before all the parties involved settled on the attributes making up the decorations still being presented today. Although the vast majority of these early types were awarded long before the war ended, the nature of the medal's distribution resulted in some being returned to the central pool; medals struck in 1942—with a six-digit serial number—appeared as late as the Vietnam War.

THE BEST WORLD WAR II SURPLUS: 495,000 MEDALS. IN 1999 THE MILITARY ORDERED THE FIRST MAJOR PRODUCTION SINCE THEN.

In all, some 1,506,000 Purple Hearts were made for the war effort with production reaching its peak as America geared up for the invasion of Japan. The unexpected ferocity of the Pacific fighting led to last-minute scrambling by the Navy to have awards ready for the invasion of the home islands. The Navy had believed that its initial 1942 order for 135,000 Purple Hearts would be sufficient for all wartime needs but found that it had to order 25,000 more in October 1944—and, alas, 50,000 more in the spring of 1945. These orders could not be fulfilled until as late as the next year—months after soldiers and Marines were expected to fight their way ashore while sailors battled fresh waves of Kamikazes. The director of the mint reprimanded her Philadelphia facility, which was responsible for producing the medal's central components: "Think of the 20,000 heroes at Iwo Jima, due to receive the Purple Hearts which we are unable to supply!" The Navy brass swallowed hard and made arrangements with the Army to "borrow" 60,000 decorations.

And then the war ended. The most wonderful of all its surplus: 495,000 unused Purple Hearts.

By 1976 roughly 370,000 of these had been earned by servicemen and women who fought in America's Asian wars as well as in trouble spots in the Middle East and Europe. This total included a significant number issued to World War II and even World War I veterans whose paperwork had finally caught up with them. That year also saw a small production run of additional Purple Hearts before a warehouse-load —125,000 decorations —of decades-old inventory was rediscovered after falling off the books.

Increasing terrorist activity in the late 1970s and 1980s resulted in mounting casualties among service personnel, and a decision was made to inspect the remaining stock. Thousands were labeled "unsalvageable," but thousands more were re-furbished and repackaged between 1985 and 1991. By the end of 1999, most of the refurbished medals had been shipped to other government customers, and the

Defense Supply Center Philadelphia entered into contracts with Graco Industries of Tomball, Texas, for the first large-scale production of Purple Hearts since World War II.

NATO had begun its bombing campaign in Kosovo less than two months earlier, and in the volatile political climate of the day, it was unlikely the order would escape notice in the press. It didn't. Nor was it missed by certain World War II veterans who five years earlier had worked with the Smithsonian Institution on the fiftieth anniversary display of the *Enola Gay*, the B-29 that dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima. Controversy had erupted over the presentation at the National Air and Space Museum when the veterans protested that the exhibit portrayed the Japanese as victims of a needless slaughter.

The veterans came under heavy criticism for insisting that the bomb had ended the war quickly and ultimately saved countless thousands of American—and Japanese—lives. Their opponents maintained that military men had later invented projected casualty numbers in order to justify the use of the weapon on a wholly beaten nation.

Bill Rooney, a former intelligence officer with the B-29s, said that if the information about Purple Heart production had been more widely known during the controversy, "the notion that Truman simply made up huge casualty estimates after the fact to justify dropping the bombs would have been more effectively countered." James Pattillo, then president of the 20th Air Force Association, stated that "detailed information on the kind of casualties expected would have been a big help in demonstrating to modern Americans that those were very different times." Medical and training information in "arcanely-worded military documents can be confusing," said Pattillo, "but everyone understands a half-million Purple Hearts."

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WHAT IS A WOUND?
IN CHANGING TIMES, IT'S NOT ALWAYS CLEAR

Douglas MacArthur wrote of the Purple Heart: "… it is the only decoration which is completely intrinsic in that it does not depend upon approval or favor by anyone. It goes only to those who are wounded in battle, and enemy action alone determines its award." But while the criteria for earning the decoration are apparently simple and straightforward, the ambiguities of modern war have clouded perceptions of what actually constitutes a "wound."

On October 24,1998, Chief Warrant Officer Steven McCoy was piloting his UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter during peacekeeping operations in Bosnia when a powerful laser was directed at his ship for four or five seconds. Both McCoy and his crew chief, Sgt. Juan Villareal, were temporarily blinded. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that an Army eye specialist had concluded that they had suffered "mild to moderate" burns.

Neither soldier received a Purple Heart, and when queried on the matter, the commander of the U.S. forces in Bosnia questioned their eligibility because it was unclear whether the laser was used with hostile intent. It is not likely, however, that the question of "hostile intent" would have even come into play if the soldiers had been wounded by bullets or a rocketpropelled grenade. Specialist Martin J. Begosh of the 709th Military Police Battalion received his decoration within hours of being badly injured when his reconnaissance vehicle struck a land mine on a contested road in Bosnia. There was also no ambiguity in the case of Navy Lt. Michael W. Watkins, who was struck by ground fire when traveling in a Spanish transport aircraft flying out of Zagreb, Croatia.

But while no one in McCoy and Villareal's chain of command thought to award Purple Hearts for their injuries, commanders in the twenty-first century may increasingly find their troops being attacked by unconventional weapons: blinding lasers, devices that induce severe acoustic trauma, weapons that create extreme overpressure to crush internal organs, and even psychotropic weapons that attack mental processes or kill by shutting down bodily functions.

Even when the injuries are clearly inflicted by an enemy, old perceptions die hard. Throughout World War I and for some time thereafter, unit rosters would list all soldiers who received combat injuries as “wounded in action” no matter whether those wounds came from shrapnel, flame, bullets, or barbed wire. Poison gas was another matter. It killed or incapacitated just as surely as a machine gun, but it was, well, *new* and did not produce the traditional wounds. Soldiers who fell prey to German (or their own) gas clouds would invariably be listed in the rosters as “gassed” or “gassed, died in hospital.” Soldiers’ and the public’s view of gas remained murky long after the war and was so uncertain that when the Army reinstituted the Purple Heart in 1932, it had to state specifically that “disablement by gas, or gas poisoning,” should be considered a wound.

—D.M.G. and K.M.

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