

Our Unsung Heroes

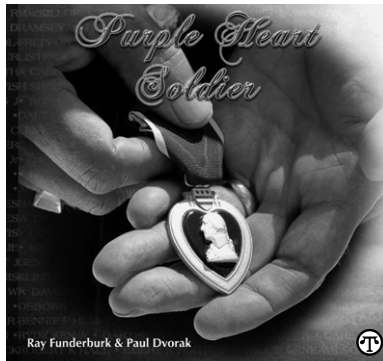
A Purple Heart's Journey Home

(NAPSM)—African Americans have fought bravely in conflicts throughout U.S. history. Many of them have joined the ranks of the more than 1,500,000 servicemen and -women who have been awarded Purple Hearts. The medals are among the military's top honors and are usually found proudly displayed on uniforms, resting places or in family homes. They're not the kind of items you'd expect to find in a thrift shop—and when one recently was, it sparked a cross-country effort.

Gene Dobos was browsing through a secondhand store in California when he came across a worn, heart-shaped medal mixed in with the knickknacks. It was a Purple Heart bearing the name "Frank N. Smith." Purple Hearts are awarded to American soldiers who are wounded by the enemy and to the next of kin of soldiers killed in action or who die from wounds received in battle. Dobos, who understood the significance of the medal, purchased it from the shop and helped set off a national search for its owner.

Dobos contacted the Military Order of the Purple Heart—an organization of combat veterans who work to honor the medal and its recipients. They call themselves the "Keepers of the Medal." Ray Funderburk, the group's public relations chief—who is a Vietnam veteran with two Purple Hearts himself—researched the medal and eventually found that Frank N. Smith was a private in the U.S. Army who died in Vietnam nearly 40 years ago.

Smith, who was 20 at the time,



The Purple Heart is awarded to combat-wounded soldiers or to the families of soldiers killed in battle.

was in a convoy that was ambushed on December 17, 1968—just two weeks before he was scheduled to return to his home state of Ohio for good.

After learning Smith's story, Funderburk turned to an Ohio genealogist for help in tracking down Smith's resting place and surviving family.

"It looks as if the medal has been handled many times," said Funderburk. "I envisioned his mom and dad taking the medal out and holding it in their hands, thinking of their son."

Eventually, Smith's grave was found in a cemetery not far from his childhood home in Ohio. His parents had died, but his siblings were found using e-mails they had sent memorializing their brother at an online registry for fallen Vietnam War troops. They did not know the medal had gone missing and were "overwhelmed" that a group of strangers had worked so hard to return it to them.

Frank N. Smith was married and had a child shortly before shipping off to Vietnam (he enlisted voluntarily). After his death, his widow and daughter moved west, presumably taking the Purple Heart with them. It is not known how the medal landed in a thrift shop.

For Smith's sister Jonna, the return of the medal brought with it a flood of emotions—and she was not alone in her reaction. Funderburk, of the Purple Heart Order, was so inspired by the number of people who came together to return the medal to Smith's family that he penned a poem. His son-in-law helped him set the words to music and a CD was created that is being sold. Proceeds help pay for a scholarship program that joins young people with veterans who are bedridden and living in Veteran Affairs facilities.

The song's chorus reads:

Purple Hearts are won in battle;
grenades explode, machine guns rattle;
a soldier dies, a mother cries;
that's how Purple Hearts are won.

The Order and Smith's family planned a small ceremony to be held in the cemetery. The Purple Heart will be encased in glass and attached to Smith's headstone.

Private First Class Frank N. Smith's legacy will be seen in every VA hospital in America as young people move among the veterans and tell the story of a young man who left Seneca County, Ohio to defend freedom—and who finally got his medal.

To order the CD, visit www.TXRRecords.com. To learn more about the Purple Heart, visit www.purpleheart.org.