"The road to glory..."

The story of the Purple Heart

Attached to the piece of dark blue cloth is a purple heart of silk, bound with braid and edged with lace. The cloth is believed to be part of the uniform tunic of a soldier of the Continental Army.

There is no name, rank or regimental insignia on the piece of cloth. The purple heart is displayed in Washington, D.C., at the Society of the Cincinnati's Anderson House Museum. The purple heart itself is what signifies a hero of the Revolutionary War.

On Aug. 7, 1782, at his Newburgh, N.Y., headquarters, Washington devised two badges of distinction to be worn by enlisted men and noncommissioned officers. The first was a chevron to be worn on the left sleeve of the coat. It signified loyal military service. Three years of service with "bravery, fidelity, and good conduct" were the criteria for earning this badge; two chevrons means six years of service.

The second, named the Badge of Military Merit, was the "figure of a heart in purple cloth or silk edged with narrow lace or binding." This badge was for "any singularly meritorious action" and permitted the wearer to pass guards and sentinels without challenge. The honoree's name and regiment were inscribed in a Book of Merit.

After the Revolutionary War, no more American soldiers received the Badge of Military Merit. It was not until Oct. 10, 1927, that Army Chief of Staff Gen. Charles P. Summerall directed a draft bill be sent to Congress "to revive the Badge of Military Merit."

The Army withdrew the bill on Jan. 3, 1928, but the Office of the Adjutant General filed all correspondence for possible future use.

Although a number of private efforts were made to have the medal reinstituted, it wasn't until Jan. 7, 1931, that Summerall's successor, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, confidentially reopened the case. His object was to have a new medal issued on the bicentennial of George Washington's birth.

Miss Elizabeth Will, in the Office of the Quartermaster General, created the design from guidelines provided her. The only difference in her design is that a sprig appeared where the profile of Washington is on the present Purple Heart.

President Harry S. Truman retroactively extended eligibility on April 25, 1962, to "any civilian national of the United States who, while serving under competent authority in any capacity with an armed force..., has been, or may hereafter be, wounded."

John R. Sinnock of the Philadelphia Minit made the plaster model in May 1931. The War Department announced the new award on Feb. 22, 1932.

After the award was reinstated, recipients of a Meritorious Service Citation Certificate during World War I, along with other eligible soldiers, could exchange their award for the Purple Heart.

At the same time, revisions to Army regulations defined the conditions of the award:

"A wound which necessitates treatment by a medical officer and which is received in action with an enemy, may, in the judgement of the commander authorized to make the award, be construed as resulting from a singularly meritorious act of essential service."

At that time the Navy Department did not authorize the issue of the Purple Heart, but Franklin D. Roosevelt amended that. By Executive Order on Dec. 3, 1942, the award was extended to the Navy, Marine Corps, and the Coast Guard beginning Dec. 6, 1941.

Army regulations, amended June 20, 1969, state that any "member of the Army who was awarded the Purple Heart for meritorious achievement or service, as opposed to wounds received in action, between Dec. 7, 1941, and Sept. 22, 1943, may apply for award of an appropriate decoration in lieu of the Purple Heart."

There are no records of the first individual who received the revived and redesigned Purple Heart. Local posts of the American legion and the Adjutant Generals of state National guards both held ceremonies to honor recipients.

What Washington wrote in his orderly book on Aug. 7, 1782, still stands today:

"The road to glory in a patriot army and a free country is thus open to all. This order is also to have retrospect to the earliest stages of the war, and to be considered as a permanent one."

For more information on the Purple Heart, contact the Military Order of the Purple Heart, 5413-B Backlick Road, Springfield, Va. 22151, phone number (703) 642-5360.