OFFICE OF ILLINOIS STATE TREASURER

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Illinois State Treasurer Michael Frerichs Returns WW II Purple Heart to Suburban Geneva Family

Operation Purple Heart Finds 14th Family Whose Military Honors Were Missing for Years

Video will be posted here: https://cms.illinois.gov/agency/media/video/videos.html

Illinois Treasurer Michael Frerichs today returned a lost Purple Heart medal to the grandson of a World War II veteran who earned it while fighting to liberate Germany.

The medal earned by Private First-Class Edward Gorski Jr. was returned to his grandson, Shawn Gorski, who also served in the Army.

It is the 14th lost medal Frerichs has returned as part of Operation Purple Heart, an unprecedented mission to return lost medals with the rightful owners. The iconic military honor is given to individuals wounded or killed during military combat.

"Mr. Gorski Jr. epitomized the selfless dedication of the Greatest Generation," Frerichs said during a reunification ceremony at the American Legion Post 75 in Geneva, where Shawn Gorski is a member. "It is our duty to honor him no matter how many years have passed."

Military records show Chicago's Gorski Jr. enlisted in April 1944 after turning 18 that January. He was part of the Army's 65th Infantry Division. The "Battle-Axe Division" fought through France and Germany. Gorski Jr. fought in the Battle of the Bulge, according to his family.

He earned the Purple Heart during a nighttime mortar attack reminiscent of a scene in the historical cable television miniseries "Band of Brothers." On May 2, 1945, Gorski Jr. was seeking refuge in a foxhole when a fire lit by his fellow soldiers for warmth drew enemy fire. The 19-year-old survived despite wounds to his face and nearly losing an eye.

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Gorski Jr. also earned the European African Middle Eastern campaign medal with two Bronze Stars, a good conduct medal and combat infantry medal, according to his military records. He returned home after the war and retired from a job in private security. In 1993, he died of a heart attack at his Westmont home at 67.

Gorski Jr.'s children knew their father wanted his Purple Heart to go to his grandson.

"To have this Purple Heart back with our family is amazing," said Shawn Gorski, who was a signal officer in Germany while in the Army. "I loved the time I got to spend with him fishing and hanging out as a kid."

The Purple Heart was among items in a bank safe deposit box submitted to the state treasurer's office in 2003. This is the 14th Purple Heart medal Treasurer Frerichs has returned to the soldier or the soldier's family, an unparalleled record in Illinois and the nation. A list of unclaimed Purple Heart medals in possession of the Illinois State Treasurer's Office is available at the Operation Purple Heart web page, as is a list of the medals returned.

"If you recognize a name, please reach out to them or their family. This is an honor that deserves to be in their loving hands, not the cold, dark vault of my office," Frerichs said. "You also can contact my office through operationpurpleheart.org."

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. Other examples of unclaimed property include bank accounts, unpaid life insurance benefits and uncashed rebate checks.

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. In most of these cases, the conflict in which the Purple Heart was awarded, such as World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, or Desert Storm, is unclear or unknown.

"These medals personify honor, sacrifice, and duty," Frerichs said. "I am grateful we returned this Purple Heart to the Gorski family, and we continue to seek the assistance of Illinois residents to help us return these medals to the loving care of their families."

Each of the Purple Heart medals was inside a bank safe deposit box. Each bank determined the safe deposit box abandoned because the owner(s) of the box had not touched it in several years. As a result, the contents were turned over to the Illinois State Treasurer's Office.

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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 $60 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 missing money I-Cash program, which has returned a record-breaking $2.3 billion since Frerichs was elected.

For more news about the State Treasurer's Office, please follow Treasurer Frerichs on Instagram at ILTreasurer, Threads @iltreasurer, LinkedIn and on Facebook at Invested in You – Treasurer Michael Frerichs. You can find our weekly newsletter here.

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