

'It Was an Honor and a Privilege'

A Connecticut VFW Life member and his wife, an Auxiliary chaplain, returned a lost Purple Heart and certificate to its recipient, who had no idea it was lost

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The unspoken bond between veterans brought an 18-year-old Purple Heart and its adjoined certificate into the hands of Russ Martin on a late morning last June.

A Vietnam veteran who often wears his 25th Infantry Division hat with pride, Martin was on his way home when he decided to stop by a local pawn shop in his hometown of Shelton, Connecticut, in search of a power tool.

Entering the Shelton Pawn and Jewelry store downtown, Martin was met with an inquisitive look from the owner, a veteran himself, who noticed the Army's 25th Infantry Division logo on Martin's cap. This prompted an exchange that rerouted fate.

"He said, 'I have something to give you,' and went off to his safe," said Martin, who deployed with the Army's 25th Infantry Division to Cu Chi, Vietnam, from November 1966-1967. "When he came back, he had a Purple Heart and certificate in his hands."

The Purple Heart and certificate had been issued to Army Reserve Master Sgt. Heather Awner, a former Connecticut resident now living in El Paso, Texas. She was the recipient of the Purple Heart after being wounded while deployed to Iraq in 2004. It was there that Awner suffered a severed tendon from a piece of shrapnel when the Army transport vehicle she was riding in struck an improvised explosive device.

Martin read the plaque and gathered his thoughts. The pawn shop owner told Martin that he had received the Purple Heart and citation as part of a collection of material from a storage unit. Then he asked Martin to return it to its rightful owner.

"I was surprised by this," said Martin, a life member of VFW Post 9460 in Stratford,

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Connecticut, about 10 miles south of Shelton. “He said he had planned to take it to the VFW himself, but he saw my hat and decided to give it to me instead. I said OK. I took it [from him] and brought it home.”

Martin showed up to his home with the Purple Heart and certificate, telling his wife, Audrey, the story behind the unfortunate separation between the Purple Heart and its recipient. An active member of Post 9460, Martin resolved to take it to his Post at first. But Audrey, the Post’s Auxiliary chaplain and a Life member herself, asked her husband to let her try and contact Awner before making the decision to take it to the Post members for their assistance.

“I was just moved by what Russ had told me of the owner keeping it in his safe and wanting to bring it to the VFW for help,” Audrey said. “I imagine when he saw Russ’ Vietnam Army hat, he knew he was giving it to the right person to return it.”

Audrey took to the internet, where she was quick in finding Awner’s contact information. There was an address and a number for her, and Audrey decided to send her a text message photo of the Purple Heart and plaque before calling and leaving a voicemail.

“Russ brought the Purple Heart home around noon, and by 1:29 p.m., I had sent her the text,” Audrey said. “Heather called us right away and had no idea that it was even missing.”

Though Awner has refrained from comment due to legal counsel (there is a pending lawsuit filed against Oakdale Self Storage, the Connecticut-based storage company that Awner used to store her belongings), Audrey recalled the Purple Heart recipient crying over the phone after the harsh reality that items from her time in Iraq had been sold off without notice.

Awner, who plans to retire from the Army, coordinated with Audrey on a way to have her Purple Heart returned. Despite being unable to travel to Connecticut for it, Awner had the Martins meet with a family member in town for the return instead.

“It was on Father’s Day,” Audrey said of the June 19 meeting. “Her sister’s father-in-law, Chuck Garbor, a retired Navy commander who lives in Stratford, came to the Post and picked up the Purple Heart and certificate for her.”

The return of the Purple Heart to its recipient was a special moment for Audrey and Russ, who still keep in contact with Awner. For the Martins, the good deed was the reward itself.

“It was an honor and a privilege to be able to do that for her,” Audrey said. “I know it meant so much to her to have that back.”

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