

MANCHESTER RESIDENT RECEIVES PURPLE HEART 56 YEARS AFTER BATTLE

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MANCHESTER -- Manchester resident William Leonard will never forget March 6, 1944. That was the day the Germany Army fired approximately 45 rounds of large artillery shells into his battery area. Fifty-six years later he has another day that he will never forget. In a ceremony presided by U.S. Congressman John B. Larson (CT-01), today Leonard was presented with the Purple Heart for his bravery in battle.

Despite his injuries on March 6, 1944, Leonard insisted on helping his fellow soldiers move to a new position due to the advancement of the German Army. He has had to endure a lifetime of therapy to deal with the disability caused by the injuries he received. He was discharged from the Army on December 30, 1944.

Leonard waged a one-man battle for a number of years to obtain the Purple Heart that he had earned. He finally enlisted Congressman Larson's assistance and got results. Eleven months after learning about Leonard's case, Larson was able to obtain his medal.

Larson, who is a member of the Armed Services Committee, stated, "Bill Leonard represents what makes this country so special. His bravery not only protected the freedom we hold so dear, but it helped energize our nation. It was Bill Leonard and thousands of other World War II veterans who took charge of this nation and created our roads, our bridges, our new businesses, and our neighborhoods. Unfortunately, their efforts are often taken for granted by many in today's society."

He continued, "In Bill Leonard's case, not only did he fight for democracy and suffer a severe injury, but he worked with his wife Jessie, to whom he has been married for 55 years, to instill respect and responsibility in his children. He did so by becoming active in his community, and serving as a Boy Scout and Cub Scout leader. Hoping to pass along strong values to his children, he volunteered to teach Sunday school in church. As a father of five children, grandfather of eleven, and great-grandfather to nine, he truly embodies what it takes to be an American. Bill Leonard, I thank you for being a truly great man."

In addition to Larson, also honoring Leonard at today's ceremony was Manchester Boy Scout Troop 25, Bolton Cub Scout Pack 157, Woody Lechause (Connecticut Disabled American Veteran Commander), local veterans, Manchester High School's Roundtable singers who performed the National Anthem, and Reverend Kathy Faber, Pastor of the Second Congregational Church in Manchester who led the invocation.

The Order of the Purple Heart for Military Merit, commonly called the "Purple Heart," is the oldest military decoration in the world, and is awarded to members of the United States armed forces who are wounded by an instrument of war in the hands of the enemy, and posthumously to the next of kin in the name of those who are killed in action or die of wounds received in action.

A detailed description of Mr. Leonard's military action on March 6, 1944 is below.

WILLIAM LEONARD, MANCHESTER:

EVENTS THAT EARNED HIM THE PURPLE HEART AWARD

On March 6, 1944, Service Battery 10th Field Artillery Battalion was in position approximately six miles north of Nettuno, Italy on the "Anzio Beachhead." The members of this battery* were quartered in a large two-story house. At that time, Private Leonard served as an orderly for the battalion officers.

On the morning of March 6, 1944, between 9:00 a.m. and 9:30 a.m. approximately 45 rounds of large artillery shells hit his battery area. One shell ripped through the house and landed less than four feet outside the door to officers' room. The shell did not entirely explode, but the fuse detonated and killed one man instantly and seriously wounded another. Private Leonard was sitting with his back to the door inside the officers' room when the fuse detonated. The force of the blast blew out the door and threw Leonard across the room. The impact of the explosion severely injured his back.

Mr. Leonard was not hospitalized at the time because the battery was moving to a new position that night, and Mr. Leonard insisted on participating in the move. The German Army was steadily pushing the Allied Forces back in order to drive them off the beachhead. The U.S. Navy was extracting many soldiers due to the alarming loss of life. Though depleted, the U.S. troops were able overtake the Germans and continue forward toward Rome.

Through the course of his service, Leonard was involved in the invasion of Southern France, Sicily and Anzio.

Mr. Leonard was discharged from the Army on December 30, 1944. In early 1945, Mr. Leonard's back, legs and feet went completely numb. Through traction and constant therapy Mr. Leonard learned to live with his disability.

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