

History of the Purple Heart

On August 7, 1782, General George Washington established the “Badge of Military Merit,” directing “that whenever any singularly meritorious action is performed, the author of it shall be permitted to wear on his facings over the left breast, the figure of a heart in purple cloth or silk, edged with narrow lace or binding.” Award ceased with the closing of the War of the Revolution.

On February 22, 1932, the Purple Heart medal as we know it today was established by War Department General Orders No. 3., which read:

By order of the President of the United States, the Purple Heart established by General George Washington at Newburgh, August 7, 1782, during the War of the Revolution, is hereby revived out of respect to his memory and military achievements.

Army regulations authorized award for both wounds received in action against the enemy and for meritorious duty performance. Regulations authorized award to army personnel who “perform any singularly meritorious act of extraordinary fidelity of service,” and that “a wound which necessitates treatment by a medical officer and which is received in action with any enemy of the United States, or as a result of an act of such enemy,” may “be construed as resulting from a singularly meritorious act of essential service.” Soldiers awarded a Meritorious Service Citation Certificate (MSCC) issued by the Commander-in-Chief of the American Expeditionary Forces in World War I (WWI) were authorized to exchange the MSCC for a Purple Heart. Living members wounded in previous conflicts were authorized to apply for award of the Purple Heart. Posthumous award of the Purple Heart was prohibited.

On April 28, 1942, War Department Circular No. 125, revised Army award criteria, stating “the posthumous award of the Purple Heart is authorized to members of the military service who are killed . . . or who die as a result of a wound received in action against an enemy of the United States . . . on or after December 7, 1941.” This change allowed posthumous award to Soldiers killed during World War II (WWII). It did not authorize posthumous award for conflicts prior to WWII.

In September 1942, Army regulation 600-45 limited award of the Purple Heart to Soldiers who suffered combat wounds/deaths, eliminating its use as a meritorious duty performance award.

On December 3, 1942, Executive Order (E.O.) 9277, “*Award of the Purple Heart to Persons Serving With the Navy, Marine Corps or Coast Guard of the United States*,” authorized the Secretary of the Navy to award the Purple Heart to persons who, serving in any capacity with the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard, are killed or “wounded in action against an enemy of the United States, or as a result of an act of such enemy, provided such wound necessitates treatment by a medical officer.” E.O. 9277 also limited posthumous award to persons killed, or who died as a direct result of wounds received in action, after December 6, 1941. Prior to E.O. 9277, the Purple Heart was exclusively an Army award.

On February 12, 1952, E.O. 10409, “*Award of the Purple Heart to Persons Serving with the Navy, Marine Corps, or Coast Guard of the United States,*” superseded E.O. 9277. E.O. 10409 authorized award to “any persons who, while serving in any capacity with the Navy, Marine Corps or Coast Guard of the United States has been, or may hereafter be,” killed or “wounded (a) in action against an enemy of the United States, (b) in any action with an opposing armed force of a foreign country in which the armed forces of the United States are engaged, or (c) as the result of an act of any such enemy or opposing armed force.” The wound for which the award was made “must have required treatment by a medical officer.” E.O. 10409:

- Expanded award criteria to include those killed or wounded “in any action with an opposing armed force of a foreign country.” This provision appears to have been added to allow award to members killed or wounded during the Korean War, where U.S. members were fighting under a United Nations Security Council resolution authorizing military intervention in the war between the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea).
- Allowed retroactive posthumous award for pre-WWII conflicts.
- Required that “the regulations of the Secretary of the Navy and the regulations of the Secretary of the Army and the Secretary of the Air Force with respect to the award of the Purple Heart shall, so far as practicable, be of uniform application, and shall be subject to the approval of the Secretary of Defense.”

On April 25, 1962, E.O. 11016, “*Authorizing Award of the Purple Heart,*” superseded E.O. 10409. E.O. 11016, authorized the Secretary of a Military Department to award the Purple Heart “to any member of an armed force under the jurisdiction of that Department and any civilian national of the United States, who, while serving under competent authority in any capacity with an armed force of that department has been, or may hereafter be” killed or “wounded -- (a) In any action against an enemy of the United States; (b) In any action with an opposing armed force of a foreign country in which the armed forces of the United States are or have been engaged; (c) While serving with friendly foreign forces engaged in an armed conflict against an opposing armed force in which the United States is not a belligerent party; (d) as the result of an act of any such enemy or opposing armed force; or (e) As the result of an act of any hostile foreign force.” E.O. 11016:

- Standardized award criteria for all Military Departments. The previous E.O. applied only to persons “serving in any capacity with the Navy, Marine Corps or Coast Guard of the United States.”
- Limited award to members of the armed forces and to “any civilian national of the United States.” The previous E.O. authorized award to “any persons who, while serving in any capacity with Navy, Marine Corps or Coast Guard of the United States.”
- Expanded award criteria to include those killed or wounded “while serving with friendly foreign forces engaged in an armed conflict against an opposing armed force in which the United States is not a belligerent party.” This provision allowed award to military advisors killed or wounded during the initial phase of the Vietnam War.
- Required posthumous award, retroactive to April 5, 1917, encompassing U.S. involvement in WWI.

On November 28, 1967, E.O. 11382, "*Amendment of Executive Orders Relating to Functions of the Department of Transportation*," revised E.O. 11016 by replacing "Secretary of the Treasury" with "Secretary of Transportation." The revision provided the Secretary of Transportation with authority to award the Purple Heart to members of the Coast Guard when not operating as a Service in the Navy.

On February 23, 1984, E.O. 12464, "*Award of the Purple Heart*," amended E.O. 11016. E.O. 12464 expanded award criteria to include those killed or wounded:

- "After March 28, 1973, as a result of an international terrorist attack against the United States or a foreign nation friendly to the United States, recognized as such an attack for the purposes of this Order by the Secretary of the department concerned, or jointly by the Secretaries of the departments concerned if persons from more than one department are wounded in the attack."
- "After March 28, 1973, as a result of military operations, while serving outside the territory of the United States as part of a peacekeeping force."

E.O. 12464 was published four months after the October 23, 1983, Beirut barracks bombings that resulted in the deaths of 241 U.S. Service members who were part of an international peacekeeping force, the Multinational Force in Lebanon. The "After March 28, 1973" caveat limits award to events subsequent to the Vietnam Conflict.

On November 30, 1993, Section 1141, Public Law 103-160, "*National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1994*," expanded award criteria authorizing award to members killed or wounded "in action by weapon fire while directly engaged in armed conflict, other than as the result of an act of an enemy of the United States, unless (in the case of a wound) the wound is the result of willful misconduct of the member."

On February 10, 1996, Public Law 104-106, "*National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1996*," Section 521, "Award of the Purple Heart to Persons Wounded While Held as Prisoners of War Before April 25, 1962," required the Military Department Secretary concerned to "treat a former prisoner of war who was wounded before April 25, 1962, while held as a Prisoner of war (or while being taken captive) in the same manner as a former prisoner of war who is wounded on or after that date while held as a prisoner of war (or while being taken captive)." E.O. 11016, signed April 25, 1962, expanded award criteria to include those wounded "while serving with friendly foreign forces engaged in an armed conflict against an opposing armed force in which the United States is not a belligerent party," but limited retroactive award to members killed under this provision. Section 521 authorized retroactive award to qualifying POWs who were wounded prior to April 25, 1962.

On November 18, 1997, Public Law 105-85, "*National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1998*," Section 571, "Purple Heart to be Awarded Only to Members of the Armed Forces," limited award to "a person who is a member of the armed forces at the time the person is killed or wounded under circumstances otherwise qualifying that person for award of the Purple Heart."

On December 19, 2014, the “Carl Levin and Howard P. ‘Buck’ McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015,” Public Law 113-291, Section 571, “Medals for Members of the Armed Forces and Civilian Employees of the Department of Defense Who Were Killed or Wounded in an Attack by a Foreign Terrorist Organization,” enacted section 1129a of title 10 United States Code, “Purple Heart: members killed or wounded in attacks by foreign terrorist organizations,” which authorized award of the Purple Heart after September 11, 2001, to active duty members who are killed or wounded in an attack by a foreign terrorist organization in circumstances where the death or wound is the result of an attack targeted on the member due to such member’s status as a member of the armed forces. An attack by an individual or entity is considered to be a foreign terrorist attack if the individual or entity was in communication with the Foreign Terrorist Organization before the attack and the attack was inspired or motivated by the Foreign Terrorist Organization. An award is not authorized if the death or wound was the result of the willful misconduct of the member. A foreign terrorist organization is defined as an entity designated as such by the Secretary of State pursuant to section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, section 1189 of title 8, United States Code.

On January 12, 2017, E.O. 13758, “Amending Executive Order 11016 to Update Eligibility Criteria for Award of the Purple Heart,” updated E.O. 11016 to reflect statutory changes to Purple Heart award criteria from 1993 through 2017.