



OFFICE OF ILLINOIS STATE TREASURER

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Illinois Treasurer Michael Frerichs Returns WW II Purple Heart Medal to Family of Late Veteran at Ceremony in Oak Lawn Ahead of Veterans Day

*Operation Purple Heart Finds 17th Family
Whose Military Honors Were Missing for Years*

VIDEO TO BE POSTED HERE: <https://cms.illinois.gov/agency/media/video/videos.html>

OAK LAWN, ILLINOIS – On the day before Veterans Day, Illinois State Treasurer Michael Frerichs returned a lost Purple Heart medal to the niece of a World War II veteran who was injured while fighting in France and Germany.

Frerichs reunited Army Rifleman James R. Bennett's medal with niece Patti Knies during a ceremony at VFW Post 5220 in Oak Lawn.

It is the 17th lost medal Frerichs has returned as part of [Operation Purple Heart](#), an unprecedented mission to reunite the military honor with the rightful owners. The iconic medal is awarded to individuals wounded or killed during military combat.

Bennett was wounded twice during his service: On Aug. 13, 1944, in France and again on Dec. 13, 1944, in Germany. He returned stateside to his wife, Ann, a year later, in December, 1945, and they made Oak Lawn their lifelong home.

"Rifleman Bennett served his country honorably. He frequently wrote his wife, assuring her of his safety and downplaying his sacrifice," Frerich said. "It is never too late to honor the men and women of the Greatest Generation."

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A few years after the war, the Bennetts had their only child, a daughter named Susan. She suffered from encephalitis and developed disabilities so severe she was not expected to survive beyond early childhood. Susan lived into her 50s.

James Bennett died in 1990 at age 76. Ann Bennett died seven years later. Patty Knies, Mr. Bennett's niece, became Susan's legal guardian. Frerichs presented the Purple Heart to Patty during a ceremony at the Johnson-Phelps VFW Post 5220 in Oak Lawn.

"He was such a wonderful man, and it is an honor to hold his Purple Heart," said Knies, who lives in Northwest Indiana. "So many soldiers and families suffered and sacrificed so much. It is important that they be remembered."

James Bennett served as a volunteer firefighter and part-time member of the police department. And he repaired toys for children with disabilities.

The Purple Heart and other items were in an Oak Lawn bank safe deposit box in Ann's name. Knies said her aunt never mentioned it. The box's contents were surrendered to the Illinois State Treasurer's Office as unclaimed property in 2022. 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.

This is the 17th 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 [online](#).

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

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.

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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 ICash program, which has returned a record-breaking \$2.4 billion since Frerichs was elected.

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