

National Guard: Red Arrow veteran awarded Purple Heart medal posthumously

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One hundred and five years after the horrific battle that caused his wounds, a Wisconsin National Guard veteran received his Purple Heart medal at a ceremony Nov. 11 at Outagamie County Courthouse.

Pvt. George C. Arts, a member of Company I, 127th Infantry Regiment, was wounded Aug. 4, 1918 during the Second Battle of the Marne. The 32nd Division, composed of Wisconsin National Guard and Michigan National Guard Soldiers, had just arrived from the trenches of Alsace, Germany, to be part of the assault on the heavily fortified town of Fismes.

The 32nd began its advance Aug. 2, 1918, and gained 15 kilometers in two days of fierce fighting. The 127th moved on the town of Fismes on Aug. 4, capturing the town despite suffering horrific losses.

“In those eight days, some of the best German divisions put up a terrific fight to stem the advance,” Lt. Col. Byron Beveridge wrote in his historical sketch of the Wisconsin National Guard.

Capt. Paul Schmidt, commander of Company C of the 127th Infantry, wrote that the Germans spared no effort to make Fismes impregnable.

“Huge stores of ammunition and engines of destruction were located here,” Schmidt said, “and preparations made to withstand the most formidable attack.”

During the bloody fighting that day, Gen. Pairron de Mondesir, commander of the 38th French Corps, observed the American troops in combat against the Germans.

When he learned that the 32nd Division had taken all the German strong positions to the north of the Ourcq and had dug in and were holding their ground, he exclaimed, "Oui, Oui, les soldats terrible, tres bien, tres bien!" In English, that translates to "Yes, yes, terrible soldiers, very good, very good!"

The meaning of Mondesir's use of the word "terrible" is "terrifying" or "formidable," and his appraisal of the 32nd Division resulted in an official citation giving the division the nom de guerre of Les Terribles. The 32nd Division was the only American division to receive a nickname from an allied nation during the war.

Arts was one of thousands of Division Soldiers wounded in the assault by machine gun fire and gas artillery shells, suffering a fractured left knee and a bullet wound to his right hip. He was hospitalized in Europe for six months. In March 1919, he arrived at Fort Dodge, Iowa, for additional medical treatment. In August 1920, Arts was honorably discharged at Fort Sheridan, Illinois, with a medical rating of poor.

The U.S. military did not issue Purple Hearts at this time for battlefield injuries, but Arts was authorized to wear the American Expeditionary Force wound chevron to indicate he was wounded in combat. After the Purple Heart was reinstated in 1932, wounded veterans of any U.S. military campaign could apply for this award. However, Arts continued to suffer from complications of his wounds and died on Dec. 10, 1928, at the age of 35.

"If George received the wound chevron and sustained such injuries, why did he not receive the Purple Heart?" Kim Craddock of the Fox Valley Veterans Council asked during the Nov. 11 ceremony.

U.S. Rep. Mike Gallagher's office became involved, and after contacting the U.S. Army Human Resources Command, was able to confirm Arts' eligibility for the Purple Heart medal in less than three weeks.

"Congressman Gallagher and I and the rest of our staff could not be more happy to collaborate and serve in this instance," said staff member Kerry Niemceke. "The result is a fitting reminder to all in our community of the sacrifice of our veterans and to the sacrifice of the family members who wish to remember them."

Mike Muthig, Arts' grandson, said the approval process likely was aided because the family had kept his documents. He said there was always a strong family connection with his grandfather.

“I have always known my middle name was from him, and I’ve always felt a connection even though I never met him,” Muthig said. “When my mother passed, the name George Cornelius Arts was the last words she spoke on this Earth. And she never knew her father either, because he passed when she was only 17 months old.

“I promised my mother that people would remember the name George Arts,” Muthig continued. “To me the presentation of the award of the Purple Heart to the family was both the fulfilling of a promise and the completion after 105 years of appropriate recognition of extraordinary sacrifice.”

Command Sgt. Maj. Ryan Johnson, the current senior enlisted leader of the 2nd Battalion, 127th Infantry Regiment, presented the medal to Muthig at the ceremony. Johnson is also a Purple Heart recipient for wounds suffered during his deployment to Iraq in 2004-05.

“We felt it was fitting, with me being a recipient,” Johnson explained, “as well as being the current command sergeant major for the 2nd Battalion, 127th Infantry, which was the battalion Pvt. Arts fought with.”

The Fox Valley Veterans Council also presented the family with a replica of Arts’ wound chevron.