

# MILITARY DECORATION: BADGE OF MILITARY MERIT

## “PURPLE HEART”



*The American Independence Museum, located in Exeter, New Hampshire, holds one of the only remaining Purple Hearts from George Washington's era.*

### Essential Questions

What is the Badge of Military Merit?

Why did George Washington create the Badge of Military Merit?

Who was eligible to receive the Badge of Military Merit and how was this a departure from tradition?

### Teacher Background

George Washington announced two awards in the summer of 1782, late in the Revolutionary War. The first award recognized soldiers who honorably served in the Continental Army for more than three years, called the Honorary Badge of Distinction. It consisted of strips of white cloth to be sewn above the left cuff of regimental coats, one for every three years of service. The second—the Badge of Military Merit—would be granted to enlisted men for “singularly meritorious service” and given only for “instances of unusual gallantry. . . extraordinary fidelity and essential service.” Candidates were to be recommended by a soldier or officer and then approved by the commander in chief. General Washington designed the badge to have “the figure of a heart in purple cloth, or silk, edged with narrow lace or binding” to be worn on a soldier’s coat above the left breast. The soldier’s name would be entered into the army’s Book of Merit. The recipient would be permitted to pass guards and sentinels without challenge. The Badge of Military Merit honored

soldiers from the lower ranks at a time when European armies only granted awards to officers. Introducing the awards in his August 7, 1782 General Orders, Washington wrote that “The road to glory in a patriot army and free country is thus open to all.”

Only three soldiers are known to have received the Badge of Military Merit and all came from Connecticut. The Book of Merit is lost, so more recipients are not known. Elijah Churchill was the first to receive the award for his valor during two raids behind British lines. William Brown received it for his courage in the attack of the British redoubt at the Siege of Yorktown. Sergeant Daniel Bissell received the Badge of Military Merit for boldly pretending to desert the Continental Army for the British army, where he acted as a spy. Sergeant Bissell operated under Washington’s personal direction. In August 1781, Bissell traveled to New York and joined the regiment the traitor Benedict Arnold had been appointed to command. Sergeant Bissell served for more than a year in New York City on Staten Island. Just before he planned to escape from the British forces, Bissell became sick with a fever and nearly died. While in a delirium, he made some incriminating admissions. The British surgeon treating him guessed he was a spy, but did not expose him. Bissell made it back to American lines with valuable intelligence for Washington.

In April of 1931, Army Chief of Staff Douglas MacArthur announced plans to revive the Badge of Military Merit on the bicentennial of Washington’s birth. The Purple Heart, as it came to be known, was established as an award for soldiers who received wounds during combat. The modern medal bears Washington’s portrait.

## For Students

Read George Washington's General Orders issued on August 7, 1782 and answer the reading comprehension questions. Prepare to have a class discussion about what you read.

### GENERAL ORDERS

Head Quarters, Newburgh,

Wednesday, August 7, 1782.

Parole Winchester. Countersigns York, Lancaster.

*Honorary Badges of distinction are to be conferred on the veteran Non commissioned officers and soldiers of the army who have served more than three years with bravery, fidelity and good conduct; for this purpose a narrow piece of white cloath of an angular form is to be fixed to the left arm on the uniform Coat. Non commissioned officers and soldiers who have served with equal reputation more than six years are to be distinguished by two pieces of cloth set in parellel to each other in a similar form; should any who are not entitled to these honors have the insolence to assume the badges of them they shall be severely punished. On the other hand it is expected those gallant men who are thus designated will on all occasions be treated with particular confidence and consideration.*

*The General ever desirous to cherish virtuous ambition in his soldiers, as well as to foster and encourage every species of Military merit, directs 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. Not only instances of unusual gallantry, but also of extraordinary fidelity and essential service in any way shall meet with a due reward. Before this favour can be conferred on any man, the particular fact, or facts, on which it is to be grounded must be set forth to the Commander in chief accompanied with certificates from the Commanding officers of the regiment and brigade to which the Candadate for reward belonged, or other incontestable proofs, and upon granting it, the name and regiment of the person with the action so certified are to be enrolled in the book of merit which will be kept at the orderly office. Men who have merited this last distinction to be suffered to pass all guards and sentinals which officers are permitted to do.*

*The road to glory in a patriot army and free country is thus open to all. This order is also to have retrospect to the earliest stages of the war, and to be considered as a permanent one...*

## Reading Comprehension

1. What are the reasons General Washington gives for creating the Badge of Military Merit?
2. Who was eligible to receive the Badge of Military Merit?
3. What benefits would a recipient of the Badge of Military Merit receive?

## Class Discussion

1. Why would General Washington want to recognize the amount of time soldiers had served in the army?
2. Why would General Washington want to severely punish soldiers who wear the Honorary Badge of Distinction signaling three or six years of service in the army when they did not earn it?
3. What was General Washington trying to accomplish by creating the Badge of Military Merit?
4. How was it a departure from tradition to make the Badge of Military Merit an eligible award for ordinary soldiers? What did this award indicate about the type of country General Washington envisioned?



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