American Airlines Newsroom

NEWS RELEASE

Returning symbols of valor

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Purple Heart Day, observed Aug. 7, was created to honor and remember members of the armed forces who were wounded or killed in combat. Dallas-based Captain Mitch Bell regularly volunteers for Purple Hearts Reunited, a nonprofit dedicated to making sure these brave men and women who received the nation's oldest military award are never forgotten. The organization returns lost or stolen medals to veterans or their loved ones. For three years, Mitch has used his own time and travel benefits to return around 30 of these priceless medals to their rightful owners.

> "[A soldier's] history stopped that day when he paid the ultimate price for our country. When his medal is rediscovered, it's like he comes back to life. No person is truly gone as long as their memory is passed down and honored."
> — Captain Mitch Bell

Just how are these medals lost? In many cases, they're misplaced during moves or estate sales. People have reported finding them in retirement homes, old furniture, and flea markets — one was even located after it was dug up in a backyard by a dog. Purple Hearts Reunited scours hundreds of records looking for either the medal's owner or their family. When neither can be found, the organization takes the medals to a home of honor, such as a military museum.

Mitch, a retired lieutenant colonel and former winged naval aviator with the U.S. Marine Corps, left active duty in 1998 to join American. But he continues to feel a strong sense of service to his country, volunteering for numerous charities and veterans' organizations in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. It was while volunteering at American Airlines Sky Ball — a fundraising event in support of the Airpower Foundation, a nationwide organization dedicated to helping members of the military and their families — that Mitch learned about Purple Hearts Reunited.

A mutual friend told Mitch about the organization's founder, Zach Fike, a major in the Vermont Army National Guard and a Purple Heart recipient himself. Zach was running the organization alone, returning approximately two medals each month to locations around the nation. Mitch had an idea: He reached out to a group of retired military service members who were current pilots and put together the Purple Hearts Reunited Valor Guard. The team is dedicated to helping return lost medals on their days off.

"It goes to show you that the veteran community is still united even after their service," Zach said. "It's often hard to transition out of the military, but to be able to not only continue to fly but to honor some of your brothers and sisters that served in military — it does something to you. It's therapeutic. It gives you a mission to be able to continue that service after leaving the military."

Being a part of these medal homecomings, often even conducting return ceremonies himself, is meaningful to Mitch in many ways. In some cases, the process of returning the medals has reunited families, helped grieving relatives find closure, and even brought understanding to the events surrounding a loved one's ultimate sacrifice. For example, in July, Mitch participated in the return of Pfc. Pasquale "Pat" Pepe's Purple Heart to his niece and nephew in Atlanta. Pat was the son of Italian immigrants, and his family had heard he died fighting Italians during WWII. Following Pat's death, his father would refuse to claim his Italian heritage, instead only calling himself American. However, through records of Pat's unit, Purple Hearts Reunited learned that he actually lost his life during a battle against German troops.

"This has been an almost spiritual journey for me to help Zach reunite these medals and to see the emotional reactions from the families," said Mitch. "That makes it all worthwhile."

American's Military and Veterans Initiatives program recently partnered with Purple Hearts Reunited and is providing them with travel assistance. Last year, the organization as a whole returned the medals of more than 100 veterans and is currently on pace to double that number this year.

"Our goal is to partner with organizations like American and great guys like Mitch so we can return as many medals home as possible and honor these veterans," said Zach. "We're not going to rest until they're all returned home."

If you're interested in donating AAdvantage® miles to organizations like Purple Hearts Reunited that work to support veterans, military members, and their families, visit **aa.com/giving**.

Mitch reunites the Purple Heart awarded to Melvin Allan Ritter Jr., a first sergeant in the U.S. Marine Corps, to his niece and her family in Houston. Melvin was wounded on July 25, 1953, in the Korean War. He survived the war and passed on Nov. 29, 1979.