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German artist uses jewel to say 'thanks'

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BY CATHY JETT

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The 42nd Rainbow Division battalion soldiers who helped liberate Dachau on April 29, 1945, were horrified by what they found.

The oldest Nazi concentration camp in Germany was not only crammed with more than 30,000 emaciated prisoners, but there were roughly 40 railroad cars filled with the bodies of others who hadn't survived a four-week train trip there from Buchenwald.

James "Pete" Pettus, who was in one of two other 42nd battalions that arrived on the heels of the liberation, said that his group showed military footage of the atrocities at every German village and town they marched through afterward to sear the images in people's memories.

Yesterday, Pettus, now a 42nd Rainbow Division Veterans Memorial Foundation reunions officer, was on hand for a ceremony at Hurkamp Park in Fredericksburg to honor both those who took part in the liberation and all soldiers who sacrifice their blood and, in some cases, lives to preserve freedom and democracy.

He accepted a diamond-studded, 18-carat gold replica of the Purple Heart medal created by Dachau native and master goldsmith Ludwig Stoeckl, and presented it to Jay Ipson, executive director of the Virginia Holocaust Museum, where



The Purple Heart Jewel, a representation of the Purple Heart award, was made of 18-carat gold and 29 diamonds.



Stoeckl

it will go on display along with Rainbow Division memorabilia.

"My gift shall be a sign of thankfulness and remembrance to the 42nd Rainbow Division," said Stoeckl, addressing a crowd of about 100 people as the division's flag fluttered behind him.

"It is also my wish that this Purple Heart Jewel is understood as sign of friendship between the people of the United States and Germany, a friendship that I want to affirm herewith," he said. "And it shall be also a sign of thanks and honor of all those who fought and presently fight for freedom, liberty and justice."

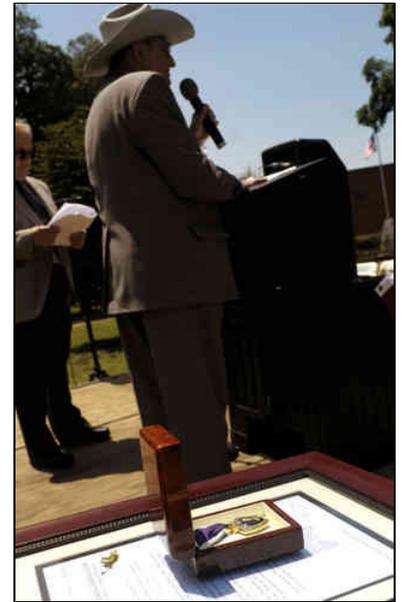
The hour-long ceremony also kicked off a fund drive to help the 42nd Infantry Family Readiness Group, a volunteer organization that provides a support network for soldiers and their families.

Stoeckl, who attended with his wife, Evelin, said afterward that he decided to create his one-of-a-kind version of the Purple Heart after his wife just missed being in New York City on Sept. 11, and German chancellor Gerhard Schröder opened his 2002 election campaign by saying he'd refuse to provide troops or money to invade Iraq.

"I was angry. My friends in Germany were angry," said the 47-year-old artist, whose father was persecuted because he didn't support Hitler. "I thought, 'You have to stand up for your friends.' That was the start of the Purple Heart Jewel."

Yesterday's event drew such dignitaries as City Councilman Matt Kelly, who told the crowd that it was fitting that it be held in the place known as "America's most historic city;" Del. Rob Wittman, R-Montross; and George Schaefer, a retired director of the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

Also on hand were Sgt. Maj. John Willsey of the 42nd Infantry Division, Mechanized, who accepted a \$1,000 check for the Family Readiness Group, and several Iraq war veterans.



Jay Ipson, Virginia Holocaust Museum director, addresses the crowd after receiving the jewel.



Sgt. Myles Beecham presents the National Guard Team Medal to German goldsmith Ludwig Stoeckl, who created the Purple Heart Jewel that was presented to the 42nd Rainbow Division Veterans Memorial Foundation.

Four costumed impersonators representing famous Revolutionary War leaders participated, as well. Among them was Dr. David Valuska as Gen. von Steuben, who said it was important to remember Germans' contributions to this country, and Greg Fisher as Gen. George Washington, who described his creation of what would become known as the Purple Heart.

Originally known as the Badge of Military Merit, Washington established it on Aug. 7, 1782, to honor any soldier, regardless of rank, for a singularly meritorious action. It was a revolutionary idea in an age when such awards and promotions went to aristocrats, not the common soldier.

"As you see today, that medal has certainly changed from that humble piece of white and purple cloth," he said, "but its meaning has not."

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