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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

March 30, 2023

Secretary Frank Kendall III
Secretary of the Air Force
U.S. Department of Defense
1670 Air Force Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20330-1670

Dear Secretary Kendall,

I write to you today regarding a long-overdue Purple Heart Medal for **World War II** airman **Thomas P. Culkin**, a true American hero whose B-17 Flying Fortress was shot down over Belgium on May 14, 1943, injuring Staff Sgt. Culkin.

Tied as the most senior Member of the U.S. House of Representatives, and a representative of multiple Department of Defense installations in my 42 years in Congress (including Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst and Naval Weapons Station Earle currently), and also as two-time Veterans Committee Chairman and author of 14 laws for veterans, I have come to greatly respect servicemembers who have answered the call to arms. That deep respect extends to them as they go on to join the ranks of our veterans, as well as to their family members. This includes SSgt. Culkin, and his family who have contacted me.

In addition to the documented shutdown of his aircraft, a fellow survivor's hand-written testimonial (enclosed) of the injuries and of other crew killed in the same incident, provides clear evidence of his being wounded in action. SSgt. Culkin's fellow crewmember Ralph C. Farr, who served with SSgt. Culkin in the 351st Bomb Group and its 510th Bomb Squadron, wrote "I was really surprised, when I found out you had not received the Purple Heart... I saw both of your arms were bleeding and the piece of flak in your back..." **It is the family's contention—and my own—that this evidence alone should be sufficient to merit the Purple Heart Medal.**

SSgt. Culkin, who I believe has been inadvertently but nonetheless unjustly and mistakenly denied the Purple Heart to date, was captured by the Germans after he parachuted down, and remained a Prisoner of War (POW) for the duration of the war, except a brief period when he escaped from Stalag 7A and was recaptured after 24 days on the run. He was seriously injured in the escape attempt, and severely beaten by his Gestapo captors. It is possible that these other, later injuries—which are ostensibly NOT combat-related—have obscured the consideration of the medal he and his family want for *the wounds he sustained during the shutdown of his aircraft.*

Now deceased, SSgt. Culkin resided in my district nearly his entire life. He was unsuccessful at obtaining a Purple Heart in the 1980s when he was the State Commander of the New Jersey Department of Ex-POWs. Sadly, his widow passed in 2021. Recently, his daughter, Kathleen Maurer, also a resident of the Fourth Congressional District of New Jersey I represent, contacted me to carry on the battle to honor SSgt. Culkin.

The Purple Heart differs from other military decorations since recipients *are entitled* to the award upon qualification, rather than be recommended for it. According to one VA publication, (<https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/celebrate/purple-heart.pdf>), SSgt. Culkin seems clearly eligible, **solely by his injuries in the B-17 shutdown:**

*'President John F. Kennedy issued Executive Order 11016 in April 1962 that further extended eligibility to "any civilian national of the United States, who while serving under competent authority **in any capacity with an armed force..., has been, or may hereafter be, wounded" and authorized posthumous award [emphasis added] of the medal.'***

I note that paragraphs 1 of Executive Order 11016 (enclosed) authorizes the Secretary of the Air Force to "award the Purple Heart, with suitable ribbons and appurtenances, to any member of an armed force, under the jurisdiction of that department... who has been or may hereafter, be wounded," and specifically and firstly for being "In any action against an enemy of the United States." Paragraph 2 further details a Secretary "shall, in the name of the President of the United States, award the Purple Heart, posthumously, to any person covered by and under the circumstances described in paragraph 1." And lastly, paragraph 4 stipulates "The Purple Heart shall be forwarded to the next of kin of any person entitled to the posthumous award."

It is arguably a failure on the part of the U.S. Government not to have presented this medal to this POW when he was alive... but it will be a travesty if we cannot restore this honor posthumously for his daughter and other family members. It is my hope the U.S. Government can finally give the proper recognition to a U.S. Army Air Corps/USAF veteran and ex-POW, which is long overdue. SSgt. Culkin has earned his place in the Military Order of the Purple Heart of the United States of America.

In closing, allow me to thank you for both any assistance you can lend the family of SSgt. Culkin, and also for your own long history of service in the U.S. Army, and in many other defense-related positions you have held. Please do not hesitate to contact me, or my District Director, at jeff.sagnip@mail.house.gov, 732-504-0567, for further information.

Sincerely,


CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH
Member of Congress