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May 2, 2023

The Honorable Christine Wormuth  
Secretary of the Army  
U.S. Department of Defense  
1670 Air Force Pentagon  
Washington, D.C. 20330-1670

Dear Secretary Wormuth,

I write to you today regarding long-overdue Purple Heart Medals for SSgt. Thomas P. Culkin, a true American hero whose B-17 Flying Fortress “Annihilator” (aircraft 42-29859) was shot down over Belgium on May 14, 1943, killing two crew members and injuring SSgt. Culkin.

My own position in Congress—tied for most senior Member of the U.S. House of Representatives, with multiple Department of Defense installations (including Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst and Naval Weapons Station Earle currently in my district), and also as a two-time Veterans Committee Chairman and author of 14 enacted laws for veterans—has taught me immense respect for 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, a resident of my congressional district for most of his life, and a World War II veteran and a Prisoner of War for two years. His daughter and other family members have contacted me to right a wrong done to him.

In 1984-85, just before his death in 1986, SSgt. Culkin sought and was denied a Purple Heart he felt he should have been given at the end of the war for the severe injuries he endured when he escaped Stalag 7. After escaping he was free for more than three weeks trying to get to Allied-controlled areas. He was badly injured when he jumped from a train and injured his spine and one leg, and was later recaptured by the Germans. Already starved, dehydrated and exhausted from exposure, he was further beaten to the verge of death by the Gestapo in retaliation for the escape attempt. He suffered broken ribs and facial wounds/lacerations from the brutal Gestapo beating.

SSgt. Culkin strongly believed—as his family still does today—that *either* the escape-related injuries incurred after he escaped Stalag 7 OR the injuries from the Gestapo (or BOTH), entitle him to a Purple Heart.

Solid evidence (enclosed) bolsters the veteran’s entitlement to the Purple Heart, excerpted here:

- 1) testimony from SSgt. Culkin’s fellow crewmember in the 351<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group and its 510<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron, the late SSgt. Ralph C. Tarr. SSgt. Tarr stated, in a hand-written letter to SSgt. Culkin, “*You should have received a Purple Heart with cluster when you surely were wounded again when you were recaptured when you escaped from 17A for a short period;*”
- 2) a July 29, 1945 transcript copy from Fort Dix, recording SSgt. Culkin’s claim that “*Being the only Americans in Stalag V-A, we were placed in semi-solitary, and denied medical attention, which was badly needed for injuries received from the Gestapo.*”
- 3) a hand-written statement from a fellow POW, Lucien Lebovici, a French Army medic at a POW hospital who treated SSgt. Culkin in 1943 after the Gestapo was done with him. Wrote Mr. Lebovici in a 1983 testimonial letter: “*He had been recaptured by Germans after an escape from a POW camp*”

*near Munich, Germany. He had a broken nose, severe lacerations of the face, broken ribs, and a badly injured spine and leg. His broken nose was reset, lacerations stitched, and ribs taped.”*

- 4) a May 4, 1946 letter from SSgt. Culkin to the War Department , in which he wrote: “We were handed over to the German Gestapo in the town of Rudesheim. The Gestapo beat us nearly all the next day, stopping only when they thought we could take no more. My nose was broken and also about three of my ribs... .”

Please know that because of the apparent U.S. Army Air Corps aspect **I initially and previously reached out to the Secretary of the Air Force** regarding SSgt. Culkin’s deserving of a Purple Heart for *shrapnel wounds during the shutdown*, (not the Gestapo beating) and was informed in April 2023 that case has been turned over to the U.S. Army Human Resources Command’s Soldier Programs and Services Division (SPSD), Awards and Decorations Branch, at Fort Knox. SPSD has been highly attentive and extremely helpful, and I hope to have a Purple Heart for the shutdown/flack injuries shortly to present the family.

As you know, 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:

*‘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 respectfully note that paragraphs 1 of Executive Order 11016 (enclosed) authorizes the Secretary of the Army 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.”

**As I also wrote AF Secretary Kendall, it is arguably a failure on the part of the U.S. Government not to have presented this medal to this POW and/or his widow when they were 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 my and his family’s view, with one medal for the shutdown flack injures, **and a second Purple Heart for the injuries sustained connected to the escape** (from EITHER the jump from the train, OR from the beating inflicted by the Gestapo, or BOTH).

Sadly, his widow passed away in 2021. His daughter, Kathleen Maurer, also a resident of my district, contacted me to carry on the battle to properly honor her father—a POW and hero at only 21 years of age. Please help us obtain the second, long overdue Purple Heart, for SSgt. Culkin’s family.

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 Department of Defense, as well as in the many homeland security-related positions you have held. Please do not hesitate to contact me, or my District Director, at [jeff.sagnip@mail.house.gov](mailto:jeff.sagnip@mail.house.gov), 732-504-0567, for further information.

Sincerely,

  
CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH  
Member of Congress