

## Proper Notice Taken of World War II Duty

### Army veteran receives Purple Heart Medal and other military honors after 60 years

By Gina Kim - Chicago Tribune

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Huddled in a foxhole somewhere in the Philippines during World War II, Melvin Muehleman tried to sleep with one eye open and an ear cocked for any sign of the enemy. One night a hand grenade exploded nearby, wounding him in the hip.

After several months in the hospital, Muehleman returned to Chicago, where he worked, got married and moved to Skokie. He didn't think much about the medals he should have received.

But with age, things like honors earned but never awarded became more important, Muehleman said.

On Monday, nearly 60 years since the staff sergeant was discharged from the Army, Muehleman, 86, got his medals--six of them. He also received two military badges, a ribbon and a button with the help of U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.).

Wiping moist eyes with tissues, Muehleman held tight to the most important of them all: the Purple Heart.

"That's the one that came with the pain," he said.

Muehleman grew up on Chicago's North Side and graduated from Lake View High School. He was drafted into the Army in 1941, two months before the U.S. joined the war, and shipped out to California for training. After stints in Arizona, Washington and Hawaii, he was sent to the Philippines.

He mainly remembers the sleep deprivation.

"The days weren't bad, it was the nights," he said. "Every night, we would dig big foxholes and then just lay in them and wait for the Japanese to come. ... It was very scary at night because you couldn't see anything. You just listened for the sounds of people moving around."

Muehleman continues to regret the night in 1945 when he was wounded.

He recalls digging through the rocky soil to form a foxhole only 1 1/2 feet deep, leaving his hip exposed as he lay on his side.

"I should have dug the foxhole deeper," he said.

The relatively minor wound sent Muehleman to the hospital with an infection. He also suffered through hepatitis and a bout of malaria before returning to Illinois, where he was discharged from Ft. Sheridan in October 1945.

"Nobody ever mentioned anything about [medals], and I was anxious to get home. So I just went home," he said.

Muehleman worked for New York Life Insurance Co. for 47 years, becoming an assistant manager. He had three children and five grandchildren.

He didn't talk much about his military service, but many of his closest friends were fellow World War II veterans. He met one of them, the godfather of his daughter, during a poker game on the way to basic training.

Just before the recent death of that friend, Joseph Penczak of Chicago's North Side, Muehleman remembers talking to him about Penczak's "chest full" of medals.

Then he read about another soldier who received his medals years after his service.

"I thought, 'I should have a chest full of medals,'" Muehleman said.

His daughter, Carol, called Schakowsky's office last year. Because of a fire at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis in 1973, it took almost a year to confirm Muehleman's records, Schakowsky said.

The congresswoman, who says she gets dozens of requests each year from veterans about medals that weren't awarded, considers the work of securing them one of her favorite duties.

"It's a privilege for me to honor somebody who served our country and was a real war hero," she said. "Certainly it was long overdue and he should have been honored long ago, but these medals at this time are just icing on the cake."

For Muehleman's daughter, all those medals arrayed on a table were a powerful image.

In addition to the Purple Heart, her father received the Bronze Star, Good Conduct Medal, American Defense Service Medal, Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal, World War II Victory Medal, Combat Infantryman Badge, Expert Infantryman Badge, Philippine Liberation Ribbon and Honorable Service Button.

"When you're growing up, it doesn't dawn on you that [past wars] were for our country's freedom," said Carol Muehleman, 52, also of Skokie. "Now, with the current war, you realize all that went into it."