

## **Soldier Killed in WWII Receives Overdue Honor**

Skokie man accepts war medals on behalf of his brother, who was killed on a battlefield in Germany in the final months of World War II

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George Sklena had always thought of his older brother as a hero, but it was nearly 60 years after John Sklena died on a World War II battlefield in Germany that his family learned he was also a hero in the eyes of his country.

On Wednesday, George Sklena of Skokie accepted six medals, including a Bronze Star, on behalf of his brother.

"I'm proud," Sklena said after the presentation ceremony in the North Side office of U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.). "I figured he had to be [a hero]. He was always on the front lines."

Last fall, Sklena heard that Schakowsky had helped another constituent obtain medals that never were received during World War II.

Sklena knew his brother had been wounded in battle and thus had earned a Purple Heart among other honors, so he wrote to Schakowsky for help Oct. 28, which would have been his brother's 85th birthday.

About a month later, news came that John Sklena was owed six medals, including a Bronze Star for heroism or meritorious achievement of service; the Purple Heart, for being wounded; and the American Defense Service medal, for serving in the armed forces between Sept. 8, 1939, and Dec. 7, 1941.

No one knows exactly what John Sklena did to earn the Bronze Star or when it happened. A soldier in the 36th Armored Infantry Regiment, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Armored Division, he was

wounded in the fierce fighting around St.-Lo, France, on July 9, 1944, about a month after D-Day, according to his brother.

He returned to action a month later and was killed in combat on Sept. 17, 1944, after his unit had crossed into Germany, military records show.

John Sklena was one of six children born in Chicago to Hungarian immigrant parents. He was drafted at 22 in June 1941, six months before Pearl Harbor, and shipped out a year later.

George Sklena, 74, still remembers the last time he saw his brother. "We ate together as a family. We were happy for him for what he had to do," Sklena said, but "my mother was crying."

John Sklena died a month shy of his 25th birthday, leaving behind the woman he married just before shipping out. She later remarried.

Daniel Aldis, an aide to Schakowsky, said servicemen or their families often had to apply for or even pay for medals that were their due. Death notices sent to survivors listed the decorations, but not how to claim them, he said. Many families did not realize the steps they had to take to get the medals.

Schakowsky said it was remarkable that the Army sent John Sklena's medals so quickly, noting that it sometimes takes years for the military to award medals earned in long-ago wars.

"It was obviously very easy to establish the heroism of John Sklena," she told a gathering of his family members. Sklena recalled the last mail his parents received from their son, dated four days before he died.

In it, Sklena said, his brother derided Adolf Hitler's claim of a German master race, writing, "We're in the land of the Supermen, but they're not so super anymore."