

Black WWII Vet from Brooklyn Gets His Purple Heart Back, and Rightful Respect



Navy veteran Reginald Johnson, 94, receives replacement for lost purple heart

Navy veteran Reginald Johnson, 94, received a replacement for his lost purple heart award that he received for his service during World War II. Newsday's Steve Langford has the story. Credit: Newsday / Reece T. Williams; Photo Credit: L. Johnson family

By Antonio Planas

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When World War II veteran Reginald Johnson received his Purple Heart more than seven decades ago, it was unceremoniously contained in an envelope. Like other Black veterans wounded in the war, Johnson was never properly recognized in an era of military segregation.

Sometime between then and now, he misplaced the iconic heart-shaped medal with a profile of George Washington, his family said.

On Wednesday, the 94-year-old Brooklyn resident was reunited with the symbol of his sacrifice during a video call from his home with Long Beach resident Christopher Webster, a Veterans Outreach director with the Manhattan-based nonprofit Visiting Nurse Service of New York.

<http://www.vnsny.org>

"This is one of the greatest days of my life," Johnson said in a video-conference interview while surrounded by proud family members as his daughter Lena, and son David, fastened the medal to the left side of his shirt.

"This is a great honor to me," the former Navy seaman said. "Money can't buy this."

Johnson's family said although their father's memory is spotty, they believe he received a Purple Heart sometime after being wounded while on a Navy ship in Guam in December of 1941. Back then, the military didn't hold ceremonies to honor black soldiers like white soldiers. Instead, Johnson received the award in an envelope and must not have realized its significance, according to his relatives.

Like many World War II era veterans, Johnson didn't boast when discussing his time overseas.

"It was something that we never bragged about, being a World War II vet," he said. "But as you get older, they begin to honor you."

Johnson said he was knocked out during the Japanese air attack when he was running to his battle station and a bridge on the ship fell on him.

He recovered for months at a military base in Seattle, he said. After his service, Johnson went on to earn a bachelor's degree in natural science through the GI Bill and master's in social work from Columbia University, relatives said.

Johnson's children, and his 91-year-old wife, Teresa, said they never saw the Purple Heart, even though Johnson had mentioned it over the years. Their father's military honor, and what ever became of it, instead grew into mysterious family lore.

"I was always very proud that he served in World War II," said his daughter, Lena Johnson, 58, of Brooklyn. "He told me he was injured and showed me the scars on his head. He would talk about being in Guam during the war."

Webster said he learned less than two weeks ago that Johnson had lost his Purple Heart. Since then, Webster said he has worked tirelessly to confirm Johnson was a recipient by contacting the National Archives and Records Administration. Officials with the agency confirmed Johnson did in

fact receive the award. A Purple Heart was mailed overnight to Johnson so he could properly be honored on Veterans Day.

Calls and emails to the National Archives Wednesday were not immediately returned.

"He had a hard time during his service, this, at a minimum, was a way to honor and repay that," said Webster, a 16-year Army veteran who worked as a flight medic. "Brother to brother, no matter how old, we are a giant family. We hold that to a degree that cannot be put into words."

Webster began working for the nonprofit in June and has since been in contact with about 300 veterans in New York City and Long Island. His duties generally entail helping veterans connect to the proper services for needs ranging from medical assistance to helping them secure benefits while navigating the difficult government bureaucracy. He said his work with the nonprofit has become even more important during the pandemic when veterans are facing more challenges and extreme isolation.

Johnson's challenges in the Navy stemmed from America's segregated past. Johnson, born in Blacksburg, Virginia, vividly recalled how the federal government treated him and other Black seaman as less than white servicemembers. He said his regiment, where he served as a machinist, stayed in separate quarters, ate after white soldiers and even prisoners of war. But that was just part of the indignity he faced. His unit was supervised by a Japanese prisoner of war, Johnson said.

Johnson said growing up in the South, he was used to segregation. But his son, David Johnson, 49, also of Brooklyn, said that aspect of his father's service is painful for him to this day.

"It's very disheartening," David Johnson said, noting how his father told him stories of segregation growing up.

Lena Johnson said Wednesday this was incredibly special for her entire family and her father's new Purple Heart will never be misplaced.

"We are already discussing how we are going to frame it in the shadow box and display it here in the main living room of the house," she said. "We will not ever lose it."