

## French adopt Fort G.I.'s grave

By Pam Wilson Union staff writer | Posted: Monday, March 16, 2015 7:54 am

JEFFERSON — The Purple Heart lay forgotten in the bottom of a bin of miscellaneous items at a flea market when an unknown benefactor found it and started its journey back to the soldier who earned it.

A graduate of Fort Atkinson High School, Victor O. Draeger died at age of 19 after being wounded in Mirecourt, France, during World War II. He is buried in the Epinal American Cemetery in Mirecourt, where, unbeknownst to Draeger's home community, local citizens have adopted and cared for his grave ever since his death in 1944.

And now Draeger's Purple Heart medal is on display at the town hall in Mirecourt, where Draeger lies buried in the American Battle Monuments Commission's Epinal American Cemetery.

The Purple Heart, a symbol of sacrifice, is awarded to members of the U.S. armed forces who are wounded by an instrument of war in the hands of the enemy and posthumously to the next-of-kin in the name of those killed in action or who die of wounds received in action.

It was thanks to that unidentified benefactor that this connection has come to light at all, fostering a bond between the two communities half a world apart.

After purchasing the bin of miscellany at the flea market and realizing the significance of the Purple Heart, the buyer did some research on the name handwritten on the medal and determined to return the medal to that soldier's family.

The buyer dropped the medal off with Jeff Johnson, a retired Marine from Lake Mills, who serves as the Wounded Warrior Project coordinator at the William S. Middleton Veterans Administration Hospital in Madison.

Johnson, in turn, brought the medal to Yvonne Duesterhoeft, veterans service officer for Jefferson County.

"My job was to find the next-of-kin to give the medal to," Duesterhoeft said.

That didn't prove all that easy, however. Draeger's mother, Augusta Ruth Alvine Bogenschneider, died in a Jefferson nursing home in 1995. His father, Otto Julius Draeger, had committed suicide some years before. Draeger left no wife, no children.

Draeger's obituary was found in the Watertown newspaper, as his mother was living there at the time of his death.



### GOING HOME

GOING HOME — Jefferson County veterans service officer Yvonne Duesterhoeft presents the purple heart for the late Fort Atkinson soldier Victor O. Draeger to Carl Hale, commander of American Legion Paris Post 1, at NATO Headquarters in Brussels, Belgium. Hale, in turn, took it to the Epinal American Cemetery, where Draeger is buried.

Duesterhoeft enlisted her own mother to research Draeger on Ancestry.com. Watertown historian William Janke sought out additional information on the soldier, and the research librarian at Watertown Public Library found other Draegers in the area, but no close relatives remaining.

When they finally turned up Draeger's photo in an old Fort Atkinson High School yearbook, Duesterhoeft said, it was exciting to put a face to the name.

"That kind of makes it more real," she said.

Draeger was born Nov. 19, 1924, and graduated from Fort Atkinson High School with the Class of 1942. He entered the service in March 1942. He trained at Camp Butner in North Carolina and in Tennessee. Before his induction, he worked for Moe Brothers Manufacturing Co., the lighting company in Fort Atkinson.

With no close relatives remaining in the area, the question remained as to where the Purple Heart belonged.

Just by coincidence, this Purple Heart came into my possession two weeks before I was to leave for France to attend the 100th anniversary conference of the American Field Service," Duesterhoeft said, noting that this was a personally financed trip and was not officially sanctioned in any way, with no tax dollars going toward her travel or expenses.

"It seemed like a sign," she said of the medal coming into her hands at a time when she had the opportunity to personally return it to Draeger at his place of burial and to pay her respects to him.

She made plans to visit Mirecourt as she traveled from Strasbourg to Paris Nov. 1, but holiday interruptions to the train schedule on All Saints Day delayed the visit. Instead, when she arrived in Paris, she made connections with American Legion representatives in the area to continue her search.

"I had rented a little apartment in Paris, but before I unpacked, I got on the Internet to try to find an American Legion comrade who could help me," she said.

Soon, she heard from Beth Harwood, an American who had been living in Paris for the last four decades and who had been serving as president of the auxiliary for Paris Post 1 of the American Legion for the past 30 years.

"Beth wrote me back and within a few days, she arranged to come and meet me at this little apartment," Duesterhoeft said.

Harwood got her in touch with Carl W. Hale, commander of Paris Post 1 of the American Legion.

Hale wasn't in Paris at that time. He was in Brussels, but again, coincidentally, that happened to be where Duesterhoeft was headed next.

Duesterhoeft said she met Hale in front of the European Parliament building, where he works at NATO headquarters. He got in touch with officials from Mirecourt. Duesterhoeft also reached out to the superintendent of the American cemetery in Paris, who connected them to his associate at the cemetery where Draeger is buried.

During World War II, Duesterhoeft said, there were so many casualties that the American government gave each family a choice whether their loved one's body would be brought home or whether they would be buried where they died. For those who chose the latter option, the government offered family members the opportunity to come

to France to see their loved one's grave.

Duesterhoeft said that 60 percent of families chose to have their soldiers buried where they were killed.

“What I found so heartwarming is that all of the cemeteries, the French people have cared for the Americans' graves for all this time,” she said.

With their greater span of history, Duesterhoeft said, the French view World Wars I and II as “not that long ago.

“The French citizens have not forgotten. It's common for a community to adopt particular graves and to care for them,” she said.

In Draeger's case, a local group has adopted the Fort Atkinson soldier's grave, visiting it on his birthday, on the anniversary of his death and on all of the veterans' holidays during the course of the year, Duesterhoeft said.

“You will see piles of flowers at the graves,” Duesterhoeft said, adding that she witnessed this happening at other American cemeteries during the course of her travels while she was in France.

“In another community I was visiting, there was the grave of an American pilot who had been shot down in their community, and for the last 70 years, they've been paying their respects.”

Duesterhoeft said this continuing gesture of honor and respect has resonance not only for Draeger, any distant relatives that might remain in the area and his home community, but for all soldiers.

“To celebrate the life of this one person, a farm boy from Fort Atkinson, is to honor all who served,” she said.

Hale later shared his reflections on the experience in an article he wrote for the American Legion online newsletter.

“What does it matter?” he asked. “Why would someone bother to return an old war medal found in the bottom of a flea market box? Who else would care, especially if no remaining family were alive.”

He responded, “As members of the American Legion, we pledge to serve other veterans and their family members. The preamble to our Constitution includes ‘To preserve the memories and incidents of our associations in the Great Wars.’ We are bonded by mutual respect from the experiences of our own military service. We know why it does matter that this found Purple Heart, this symbol of sacrifice given to a grieving mother so long ago, be reunited with family.”

Hale was present at the Epinal cemetery to return Draeger's medal to a place of honor, as was Hale's son, the Epinal superintendent, and representatives of French veterans' associations, along with the U.S. Memory Grand Est France Association, and the Mirecourt mayor, Yves Sejourne.

“I was surprised to see nearly 50 participants on a Monday afternoon gathered at the cemetery,” Hale wrote. “I was emotionally touched by the number of people who traveled to be present on this cold December ... afternoon.”

Hale shared the story of how the medal had come to France and discussed the importance of returning it. Then he presented the medal to Sejourne, who informed all present that the town of Mirecourt has adopted Draeger's grave and pledged to honor his memory.

“He is the symbol of an historic act for the town of Mirecourt — its liberation, just a day after his death,” Hale

said.

Without any close family members left, Draeger's medal returns to him at his gravesite, "with his family of brothers of war who rest together in peace," Hale said. "By honoring one, we honor all. We have not forgotten and we never will."

Duesterhoeft commented that to dishonor the Purple Heart given to this one World War II soldier is to disrespect the Purple Hearts still being awarded.

"It was worth taking the extra effort to make sure we never lose that respect," Duesterhoeft said.

A couple of weeks after her trip, Duesterhoeft realized it was Draeger's birthday. He would have been 90. She emailed Hale and together, though separated by an ocean and half a continent, they raised their glasses in a toast to Draeger's memory.