

1945 March 19-25

Purple Hearts

This week in the county newspapers, there are reports of a dozen county men being wounded in action or recovering from wounds. Being wounded in battle earned them a medal called the Purple Heart.



The Purple Heart
(Medals of America)

The Purple Heart has its origins in George Washington's Badge of Military Merit that was awarded for "gallantry or extraordinary fidelity and essential service." In 1782, General Washington "ordered a heart-shaped badge of purple cloth edged with a narrow lace or binding," and this was the very first American military medal. Only three of them were ever awarded.¹



George Washington's original Purple Heart
(Army Historical Foundation)

It was revived in 1932 with dual categories for qualification, one of them being wounded in action. An executive order by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1942 stipulated that it would be awarded to members of all the armed forces wounded by direct enemy action.² This led to Purple Heart medals for most of the 405,400 killed or missing and 670,800 wounded Americans in World War II.³

Rudolph "Rudy" Meyer of West Salem was one of them. His professorial countenance never betrayed a hint that he had ever fired a shot at another human being. But he had.



Rudy Meyer
(1986 Melrose Rotary Calendar)

Rudolph A. Meyer was born in September 1910 at Barre Mills near West Salem.⁴

He graduated from La Crosse State Teachers College in June 1933.⁵ Meyer had a major in physics and a double minor in biology and music. His instruments were the trumpet and clarinet.⁶

In January 1936, Meyer became one of four teachers on the faculty of Melrose High School with a starting wage of \$85.00 per month. He taught general science, physics, algebra, U.S. History, civics, and band. There were about 19 students in his band, and they wore uniforms sewn by their mothers. Each student had to buy a hat and cape for \$9.00 to complete their outfit.⁷

World War II interrupted Meyer's teaching career. In September 1942, he enlisted in the United States Army.⁸

His training in the United States took him to various locations around the country. In April 1943, he was in Camp Crowder, Missouri.⁹ By the summer of 1943, Meyer was at the University of Wyoming at Laramie, Wyoming as part of the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP).¹⁰ Manpower shortages caused the Army to dissolve the ASTP and transfer these men to combat units.¹¹ By April 1944, Meyer was transferred to the 303rd Infantry Regiment of the 97th Infantry Division at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.¹² In late summer 1944, his unit was moved to San Luis Obispo, California.¹³ The 97th Infantry Division was sent there so it could train in amphibious warfare under the direction of Navy and Marine Corps personnel because the division was slated for deployment to the Pacific Theater. Due to losses in the European Theater, however, a substantial number of men were "stripped" from the division to serve as replacements in other units. This is what happened to Rudolph A. Meyer.

Meyer landed in France about a month after the June 6 Normandy Invasion and was in the 35th Infantry Division. They fought through the Normandy hedgerows in the area of St. Lo and the Cotentin Peninsula as part of the drive toward the key port city of Cherbourg. Then it was the advance east across France during the summer and fall of 1944. Meyer could speak some German, so he could understand a bit of what German prisoners of war were saying. He recalled that many of them "were very arrogant." One time Meyer mildly taunted a young German POW by asking him "Wo ist der Luftwaffe?" (Where is your air force?).¹⁴ The Germans had little tactical air support because their fighter planes had been pulled back to protect German cities and factories from Allied bombing. The Allies had clear tactical air superiority; any large German troop or vehicle movement during the day risked being pounced on by Allied fighter-bombers.

Meyer was an infantryman in General George "Blood and Guts" Patton's Third Army in France.¹⁵ The 30th Division crossed the Moselle River on December 8. Two days later, Meyer was wounded in the chest and the abdomen.¹⁶

There are many ways to be wounded in war. The most obvious are by bullets of varying size or fragments, which is to say red-hot shards of steel produced by exploding grenades, land mines, mortar and artillery shells, and aerial bombs. Explosions and pieces of metal traveling at great speeds do terrible things to the human body. The concussive force of such explosions alone is enough to put a soldier out of commission. Then there are bayonets, fire, and a myriad of other ways to get injured on the battlefield.

During World War II, about 65% of wounds were caused by the explosion of shells. Bullets from small arms caused 25% of wounds, and land mines accounted for 5%.¹⁷ Seventy percent of wounds were to the arms and legs, which was the same as it had been in the Civil War and World War I.¹⁸

We do not know how Rudy Meyer was wounded, but his experience was probably typical for the infantryman in World War II. The first person to tend to him after he was "hit" may have been a fellow soldier. Combat soldiers usually carried a battle dressing in one of the pouches on their belt. They were trained to use the wounded man's battle dressing on him because their own may need to be used on them in the near future.

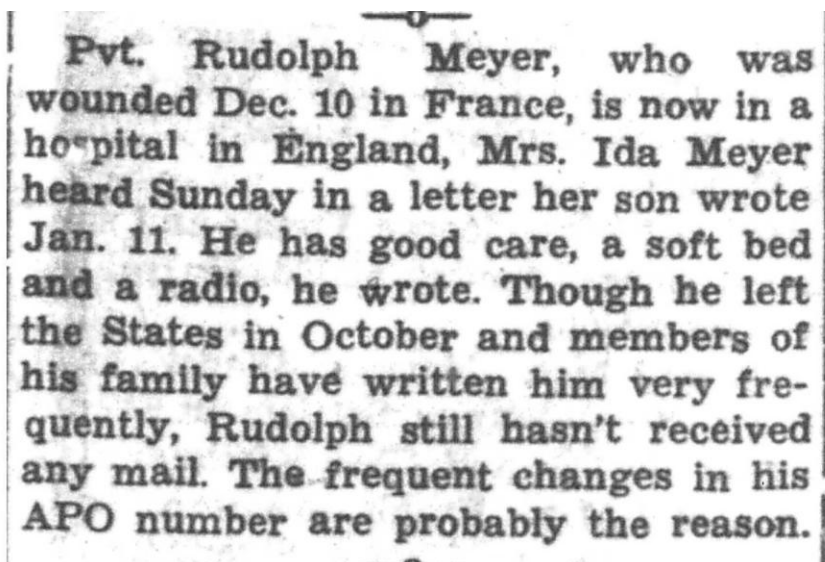
An unarmed medic (Navy corpsman for the Marines) would race to wounded men, often regardless to the danger to himself, and do what he could with just a few tools: a scissors to cut away clothing, sulfa powder to prevent infection, bandages to stop bleeding, and morphine to treat shock and pain. (One World War II medic cut pieces out of his raincoat to seal sucking chest wounds.)¹⁹ Medics were trained to stop bleeding, restore breathing, and treat for shock. A person can go into shock if they lose 20% of their blood or bleed to death in as little as five minutes.²⁰ Many times a medic would have to carry or drag a wounded man out of danger.

A forward aid station was located a few hundred yards behind the front line. Four stretcher-bearers from that position would be summoned by radio or telephone. They carried the wounded man from the battlefield to a jeep rigged to carry four stretchers. The jeep would take wounded men as fast as possible to a battalion aid station or field hospital just over half a mile to the rear. There casualties were triaged, had bandages removed, wounds cleaned, and new bandages applied. Ambulances hauled casualties farther to the rear for evacuation to a military hospital.²¹

Military medicine achieved a remarkable record in World War II. Less than four percent of wounded men who made it to a field hospital died of their wounds. By comparison, it had been about 50% in the Civil War.²² During the first three years of World War II, 98 out of every 100 Navy and Marine Corps personnel who were wounded survived.²³

In the cold calculus of war, it is often better to wound your enemy rather than kill him. Dead men can no longer fight but neither can wounded men. Wounded men also require more men to evacuate them, treat their wounds, care for them, transport them, and rehabilitate them. Enormous resources in personnel, facilities, supplies, and time are consumed in treating and protecting the wounded. These are resources that cannot be directed toward fighting your opponent.

The type of weapon used to cause the wounds influenced the average amount of time a serviceman was incapacitated: land mine = 174 days, bullet = 158 days, shell = 123 days, grenade = 104 days, bomb = 94 days.²⁴



Pvt. Rudolph Meyer, who was wounded Dec. 10 in France, is now in a hospital in England, Mrs. Ida Meyer heard Sunday in a letter her son wrote Jan. 11. He has good care, a soft bed and a radio, he wrote. Though he left the States in October and members of his family have written him very frequently, Rudolph still hasn't received any mail. The frequent changes in his APO number are probably the reason.

(*The Nonpareil-Journal*, West Salem, Wisconsin, 1945 January 25, page 1)

Meyer's hospital stay in England was notable for two reasons: the nurses and penicillin. Meyer had good memories of both the American and English nurses. He and some of the other patients were the first wounded servicemen to receive penicillin shots. They were poked up and down their legs every few hours. Those who got this treatment formed "a club" in the hospital.²⁵

The wounded were eventually shipped back to the United States. By March 1945, 1,200 wounded men were being returned to this country *every day*.²⁶ There were constant appeals for more nurses and other medical professionals to help care for the wounded.

With Our Boys In The Service

Pvt. Rudolph Meyer, who was wounded in action Dec. 10 in Germany, has landed in the United States and is now at the general hospital at Staten Island, N. Y., a telegram received by Mrs. Ida Meyer Wednesday announced. Rudolph expects immediate transfer from Staten Island to a hospital nearer home. He has four shrapnel wounds, one resulting in a compound fracture of his left shoulder, and the others in his forehead, left arm and right heel. He is still unable to walk. Since the first of January Pvt. Meyer has been at a hospital in England, where he was transferred from France.

(The Nonpareil-Journal , West Salem Wisconsin, 1945 March 22, page 1)

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Pvt. Rudolph Meyer, who returned to the United States a few weeks ago after being wounded in Germany and subsequently hospitalized in England, is now at Kennedy General hospital at Memphis, Tenn. His address there is Pvt. Rudolph Meyer 16095352, Ward 13-A. X-rays have revealed more shrapnel in his shoulder, as a result of which he must undergo further surgery. Additional skin grafting on his heel is also necessary.

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(The Nonpareil Journal, West Salem, Wisconsin, 1945 April 19, page 1)

It was the end of May 1945 before Meyer was well enough to visit his home in West Salem.²⁷ But on June 29 he had to return to Kennedy General Hospital in Memphis for more treatment.²⁸

Meyer was discharged from the Army on August 11, 1945. He returned home to complete his recovery from his wounds.²⁹ Meyer was one of over one million service personnel to be awarded the Purple Heart for being wounded or killed in service during World War II.³⁰



Purple Heart and Presentation Case
(WW2 US Medical Research Centre)

The medal was the same---whether it was awarded to a general or a private, a case of full recovery or a permanent disability or disfigurement, a minor wound or even death.

When the school term started in 1947, there was a shortage of teachers because many of the prospective teachers had been in the armed forces from 1941 to 1945. Melrose High School Principal R. G. Gunning asked Rudy Meyer if he could come back and teach just one hour a day. Meyer did and eventually regained enough stamina to teach a full day.³¹



Rudy Meyer, standing left, shortly after World War II
(1947 Melrose High School Yearbook)

Meyer had to take a leave of absence during the 1949-1950 school year because his war wounds required further surgery.³²

Upon his return to Melrose High School in the fall of 1950, he taught chemistry, geometry, physics, and algebra.³³ Meyer became the principal of Melrose High School in 1951, and he also taught mathematics.³⁴ He remained the high school principal until the Melrose school district consolidated with the Mindoro district in the mid-1960s. Meyer then became the guidance counselor at the new high school. On the wall of his office hung this quotation: "Many people fail to reach the top of the ladder of success because they mistake it for an escalator." Meyer once said, "I always tell the students that whatever they decide to do, no matter where, or for whatever reason, if they do just a little more than

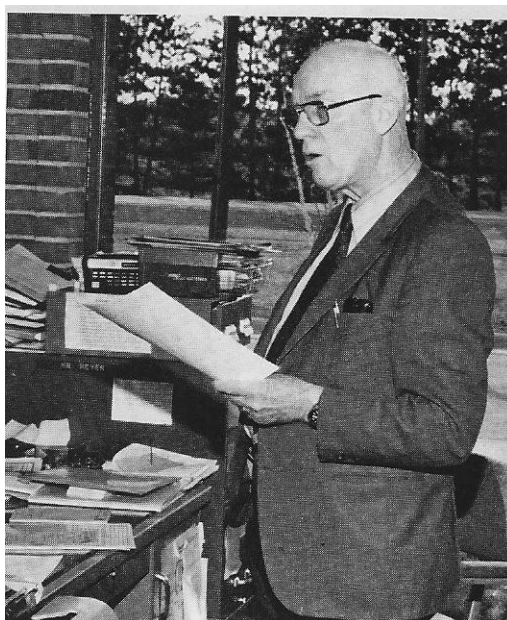
what is required of them, that little more will be worth more than all the rest, because anything that has intrinsic value to it demands hard work."³⁵

Meyer was an early advocate of using 16mm films in classrooms as part of instruction.³⁶

When Meyer was the full-time guidance counselor at Melrose-Mindoro High School during the 1973-1974 school year, there was nobody on the staff who could teach physics or fit it into their schedule. He had taught physics earlier in his career, so Mr. Meyer stepped in to teach the senior physics class. His prime classroom years were behind him, but he did his best to give the students basic knowledge of physics.³⁷

One day the discussion somehow turned to military service. The students in the classroom suddenly became a little more attentive than usual. Yes, Mr. Meyer said, he had been in World War II with General George S. Patton's Third Army. He had carried a bazooka, which was a shoulder-fired rocket launcher primarily used against tanks. His loader carried three rockets for the bazooka, so they had three chances to hit a tank in a vulnerable spot to destroy it, or at least stop it, before it destroyed them. With a slight, rueful shake of his head, Mr. Meyer remarked that the German tanks were so much better than the American tanks.³⁸ He explained how artillery fire was zeroed in by bracketing the target with long and short rounds. He casually mentioned that he had only one lung because "Adolf Hitler" had taken the other one. After this five-minute interlude, the class returned to its lesson on electricity, light, or whatever else was the topic of the day.

Had we only known the whole story of what he had gone through to earn that Purple Heart.



Rudy Meyer in 1973
(1974 Melrose-Mindoro High School Yearbook)

Rudy Meyer retired in 1976 after more than 40 years of service as a teacher, principal, and guidance counselor in the Melrose and Melrose-Mindoro school system.³⁹ Former students remembered him as

someone who demanded respect and tolerated no fooling around in his classroom. One quoted him as saying, "I like intelligence, but I hate smartness." A fellow teacher recalled him as someone who liked kids and went to all extracurricular events so he could see another side of his students. The former school secretary called him a great guy who got along with everyone.⁴⁰

In his retirement years, Meyer lived in West Salem. He established the Rudy A. Meyer Scholarship Fund at Melrose-Mindoro High School, and he was a major contributor to the West Salem Community Foundation. Meyer was a member of the Disabled American Veterans Chapter 12 of La Crosse, the Neil S. Lewison American Legion Post 439 of Melrose, and the West Salem Senior Citizens.⁴¹ He volunteered at Lutheran Hospital, as well as volunteering for about 13 years serving meals at the West Salem Senior Citizens nutrition site. The manager of the nutrition site said he was very pleasant and never complained.⁴²

Meyer had joined the Melrose Rotary Club in 1936 when he began his teaching career in Melrose. In 1988, the Melrose Rotary Club presented him with a Paul Harris Fellowship Award for his years of service to the club and the Melrose-Mindoro community. Club President Steve Zeman said Rudy Meyer had "lived and breathed the Rotary theme of 'Service above Self.'"⁴³

Even when he lived in West Salem, Meyer would make weekly trips to Melrose for the Rotary Club meetings. Along the way, he would stop at the Melrose-Mindoro High School to visit with the administrators and teachers. He was well liked, so his visits were welcomed.⁴⁴

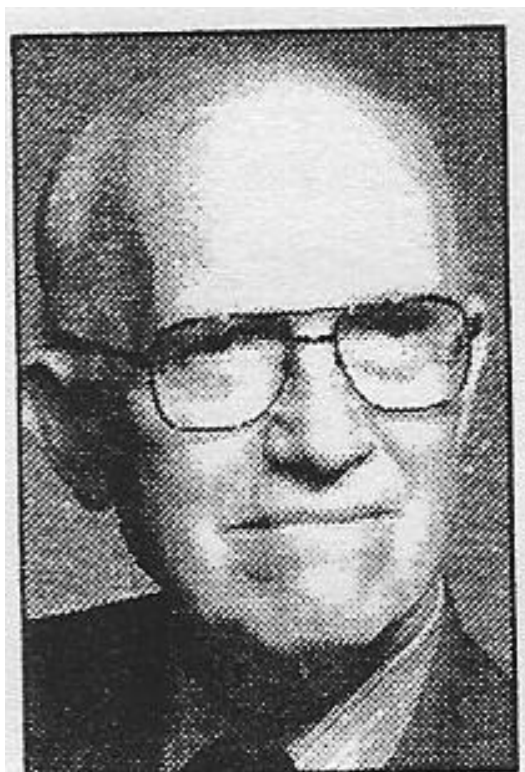
James "Randy" Ebert has been a social studies teacher at Melrose-Mindoro High School for over 40 years, and he was also a member of the Melrose Rotary Club. He remembers Rudy Meyer as "a good friend and sort of pseudo-father."⁴⁵ Ebert put up a display in the high school every year for Veterans Day, and Meyer would always loan his World War II "Ike" jacket and purple heart to be exhibited.⁴⁶

Sue (Kirchner) Kneifl, Melrose-Mindoro High School Class of 1974, knew Rudy Meyer both as a teacher and as a neighbor.

When Rudy moved to West Salem, he lived next door to me. He and my son became fast friends. My son often would go over to play a few games of pool with Rudy or just to chat, and help Rudy mow his lawn, or other chores he needed help with. His love of kids never changed, he even bought little gifts for my son and daughter for Christmas! Amazing man!⁴⁷

Rudy Meyer died on August 1, 1995 at St. Francis Medical Center in La Crosse. He was laid to rest, with military honors, at the St. John's Lutheran Church cemetery in Barre Mills. He was survived by two nieces and one nephew.⁴⁸

George Washington's original purple heart medal was awarded for "extraordinary fidelity and essential service." Rudolph "Rudy" Meyer, through his military service, career in education, and volunteer work, exemplified those qualities his entire adult life.



Rudy Meyer
(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1995 August 5, page A-3)

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Jeff Rand
Adult Services
La Crosse Public Library
jrand@lacrosselibrary.org

Sources & Notes:

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² Robles, 57-58.

³ John Ellis, *World War II: A Statistical Survey: The Essential Facts and Figures for All the Combatants* (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 254.

⁴ Rudolph A. "Rudy" Meyer obituary, *The Chronicle*, Melrose, Wisconsin, 1995 August 9, page 28.

⁵ "Hold Baccalaureate Service At Teachers College Here Today," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1933 June 4, page 6.

⁶ Mary Murray, "Mingling With Mary," *Banner Journal*, Black River Falls, Wisconsin, 1975 September. The day and page are missing from this clipping. Rudy Meyer also earned a masters degree from the University of Wyoming at Laramie.

⁷ Murray, 1975 September.

⁸ Murray, 1975 September.

⁹ [List of servicemen's addresses], *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1943 April 27, page 4.

¹⁰ [List of servicemen's addresses], *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1943 July 3, page 7.

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- ¹¹ Bob Rowland, "The 97th Infantry Division During World War II," accessed 2020 March 24, <http://www.97thdivision.com/index2.html>.
- ¹² [List of servicemen's addresses], *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 April 25, page 5.
- ¹³ "Address changes," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 July 31, page 3.
- ¹⁴ James "Randy" Ebert, email to the author, 2020 March 26.
- ¹⁵ Murray, 1975 September.
- ¹⁶ Ebert, 2020 March 26.
- ¹⁷ Chris Hedges, *What Every Person Should Know About War* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 50.
- ¹⁸ "Limb Wounds Still the Greatest in War's Toll," *Bangor Independent*, Bangor, Wisconsin, 1945 March 15, page 3.
- ¹⁹ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers: The U.S. Army From the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany: June 7, 1944-May 7, 1945* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 318-319.
- ²⁰ Kimberly Holland, "Bleeding to Death: What Does It Feel Like, How Long Does It Take, and Am I at Risk?" *Healthline*, 2018 April 11, <https://www.healthline.com/health/bleeding-to-death>.
- ²¹ Ambrose, page 320.
- ²² Ambrose, page 311.
- ²³ "98 Of 100 Wounded Navy Men Recover," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 March 21, page 2.
- ²⁴ Hedges, 53.
- ²⁵ Ebert, 2020 March 26.
- ²⁶ "1,200 Casualties Returning Daily," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 March 18, page 1.
- ²⁷ "Bostwick Valley," *The Nonpareil Journal*, West Salem, Wisconsin, 1945 May 31, page 4.
- ²⁸ "With Our Boys In the Service," *The Nonpareil Journal*, West Salem, Wisconsin, 1945 June 14, page 1.
- ²⁹ Murray, 1975 September.
- ³⁰ Fred L. Borch, "The Purple Heart--The Story of America's Oldest Military Decoration and Some Soldier Recipients," *Army Historical Foundation*, accessed 2020 March 20, <https://armyhistory.org/the-purple-heart-the-story-of-americas-oldest-military-decoration-and-some-soldier-recipients/>.
- ³¹ Murray, 1975 September.
- ³² Murray, 1975 September.
- ³³ Murray, 1975 September.
- ³⁴ "Melrose Area Schools Ready," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1951 August 24, page 9.
- ³⁵ Murray, 1975 September.
- ³⁶ Fred Marini, email to the author, 2020 March 25. Marini is the retired media center director at Melrose Mindoro High School. He and Meyer would chat during the latter's weekly visits to the high school.
- ³⁷ As was typical of the time period, the teaching method was read a chapter in the textbook and take a test on it. There were few experiments or other hands-on experiences.
- ³⁸ The quality of American tanks versus the quality of German tanks in World War II has been the subject of numerous debates. The German Panther and Tiger, and later King Tiger, tanks were more heavily armored and featured the outstanding 88-millimeter cannon. American tanks were primarily the medium Sherman tank with its 76-millimeter gun. American tanks had to be shipped overseas on ships, so this was a factor in their size and weight. A German soldier once remarked that they kept destroying American tanks, but the Americans never ran out of them. Such was the productivity of American industry during the war.
- ³⁹ *The Chronicle*, 1995 August 9.
- ⁴⁰ Joan Kent, "'Rudy' liked intelligence but hated smartness," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1995 August 5, page A-3.
- ⁴¹ *The Chronicle*, 1995 August 9.
- ⁴² Kent, *La Crosse Tribune*, 1995 August 5.
- ⁴³ "Rudy Meyer Receives Rotary Award," *The Chronicle*, Melrose, Wisconsin, 1988 August 24, page 20.
- ⁴⁴ Marini, 2020 March 25.
- ⁴⁵ James "Randy" Ebert, email to the author, 2020 March 25.
- ⁴⁶ Ebert, 2020 March 25.
- ⁴⁷ Sue (Kirchner) Kneifl, West Salem, Wisconsin, Melrose-Mindoro Class of 1974 Facebook page comment, 2020 March 25.

⁴⁸ *The Chronicle*, 1995 August 9.