

Forgotten Bronze Star returned to rightful owner

Tommy Fenton receives medal from State Treasurer Dan Rutherford

BY RICK HAYES

SENTINEL NEWS STAFF

MT. VERNON — As part of his Operation Reunite program, Illinois State Treasurer Dan Rutherford on Monday returned a Bronze Star to Tommy Fenton of Mt. Vernon.

Fenton earned the medal for his service in the Army's Second

Ranger Battalion, 75th Infantry, based out of Ft. Lewis, Wash. The Bronze Star was one of dozens of items in a safe deposit box, the contents of which were transferred to the treasurer's office in 2010.

"I am the keeper of property that for multiple reasons have become disconnected from families personally. What we're talking about

here today is the contents of a lock box," explained Rutherford. "After five years if the institution that had that lock box or the entity that was the caretaker of it couldn't find the rightful owners they are obligated to turn it over to me as the state treasurer.

"We are the holders of military recognitions and we are very sensitive to that in our office," Rutherford further explained. "I have 16 Purple Hearts that we can not find the individual or the family mem-

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bers to return those treasured recognitions."

Rutherford said the good days like Monday—when he is given the opportunity to return the metals to families—are rewarding.

"The Bronze Star is awarded for military acts of heroism, acts of merits or meritorious service in a combat zone. It was established in 1944," noting that Fenton's medal is based on his service in the mid-1980s.

"I am personally glad to have my medal back. It gives me a real connection to my father, who was at Normandy on D-Day, earning a Silver Star for his actions in that combat zone," Fenton said. "He is the reason I went into the service. Sadly he's gone now, but every time I look at this I'm reminded of my father. I hope to install the same sort of values in my daughter."

Fenton said he has asked his daughter, and reminded others, to shake a veteran's

hand when given the opportunity.

"These guys went through incredible things, much more than I ever did. I've been told I'm a hero. I'm not a hero. The real heroes are the ones that didn't come back, guys that fought and died for our freedoms," he said.

Fenton's daughter, 18-year-old Rebecca, attended the ceremony.

"I am so proud of my dad. He doesn't talk about it [military service] much, but I know he went through a lot to make him the man he is today and I love him for it," she said.

Rutherford said he hopes that word of the return of Fenton's Bronze Star will encourage more people to

look through the list of names in Operation Reunite, a program established a year ago, which is available online through the treasurer's office.

The military awards in Rutherford's care are in a vault in the basement of the state capitol building that spans more than a century of American conflict, including one medal that dates back to the Spanish American War. Other priceless items include service records, dog tags and commendations from World War II, Korea and Vietnam.

After leaving Mt. Vernon, Rutherford went to McLeansboro to present 10 certificates to World War II veterans in Hamilton County.

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Sentinel Photo/RICK HAYES

MEDAL RETURNED — Illinois State Treasurer Dan Rutherford, LEFT, returned a Bronze Star belonging to Tommy Fenton, RIGHT, during a presentation Monday at the Veterans Memorial Museum at Mt. Vernon Airport. Fenton had lost track of the medal, which had been stored in a safe deposit box and returned to the treasurer's office