

New Purple Heart stamp unveiled in San Diego

BY NATHAN MAX

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Carroll Sweet didn't exactly get a hero's welcome when he returned from Vietnam.

Sweet, who received a Purple Heart in 1970 after being shot in the leg and hit in the head with grenade fragments, remembers being spit on by civilians and having projectiles dropped on him as he sailed with other veterans under the Golden Gate Bridge.

Then there was his introduction to a high school friend's newlywed wife.

"She called me a baby killer and told me a real man would have gone to Canada," Sweet said.

It may look like ordinary postage to some, but the U.S. Postal Service's new Purple Heart stamp — unveiled Thursday morning aboard the USS Midway Museum — represents much more to Sweet and others.

It represents respect. It represents appreciation.

"It's an emotional thing," said Sweet, 60.

The stamp was unveiled in front of about 200 people, including about 40 recipients of the Purple Heart, which is bestowed on service members wounded or killed in action. Many were Vietnam War veterans and were grateful for the gesture.

"It helps ameliorate the Vietnam experience," said Ulysses Miller, 67, a San Diego resident who took shrapnel in the back of the head and shoulder during his two combat tours.

The release is the Postal Service's first Purple Heart "forever" stamp. The value of "forever" stamps equals the price of first-class postage at the time of use.



Ronald Stroman (left), the deputy postmaster general, and Clayton Jones, commander of the Military Order of the Purple Heart unveil the new Purple Heart stamp Thursday. / Photo by Earnie Grafton, U-T

There will be 500 million stamps printed in this run, said Postal Service spokesman Don Smeraldi. When the Postal Service released its original Purple Heart stamps in 2003, there was an initial print run of 120 million, Smeraldi said.

The latest Purple Heart stamp joins several other military-themed stamps over the past decade. Last month, the Postal Service released a stamp commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Civil War.

Thursday's ceremony on the carrier's flight deck featured San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders, Deputy Postmaster General Ronald Stroman and a group of purple-clad veterans. The Camp Pendleton-based 1st Marine Division Band performed patriotic music.

Stroman called the timing and location of the ceremony poignant and appropriate because of San Diego's connection to the military and its proximity to the Navy SEALs' training headquarters in Coronado.

"It's our hope that with the issuance of this stamp, the Postal Service along with the rest of our nation can pay tribute to those whose sacrifices have given all of us a country that is truly the land of the free and the home of the brave," Stroman said aboard the flight deck.

Listening intently was Sweet, who finished a 26-year military career and is now senior vice commander for the Military Order of the Purple Heart's Department of California. He sat front and center during Thursday's presentation.

There, he heard the praise he failed to get four decades ago.

"The American people really do appreciate us," Sweet said. "They really do care for the military, and I'm really proud to have served."

nathan.max@uniontrib.com (619) 718-5252 Twitter @natemax

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