

## Veteran's family reunited with his Purple Heart award

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(Photo: Lex Dodson, Special to the Free Press)

The chance discovery in a Jerusalem consignment shop of World War II veteran Robert Mathis' Purple Heart certificate led U.S. Army Lt. Col. Matthew Yandura on a three-year journey to reunite the award with Mathis' family.

It was a quest that involved contacting military agencies, scouring the Internet and reaching out to suspected family members only to be told he had the wrong Mathis family. "It was maddening," said

Yandura, now a military science professor at Loyola University Chicago.

This summer, with the help of Army Cadet Jay Choi, Yandura tracked down Mathis' family, 72 years after he was killed in action defending the beachfront of Anzio, Italy, in 1944.

On Sunday, several family members and Jewish war veterans were among more than 100 people who attended an hour-long ceremony at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills to reunite Mathis' family with the Purple Heart certificate he earned on that beach in Italy. He is buried at a Jewish cemetery in metro Detroit.

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"In reuniting Robert's certificate to his family, we dutifully return a soldier's lost honor," Yandura said Sunday during the ceremony. "We also restore a piece of a family's proud Jewish history and we also remind ourselves of the price of freedom and the cost of war."

Born Reuven Matusevitch in Lithuania, Mathis immigrated to the U.S. around 1939 and changed his name. After a couple of years, Mathis enlisted in the U.S. Army and was deployed with the 36th Combat Engineers. About the same time, Mathis' wife and child — whom he planned to bring to the U.S. — were killed by Nazis in Lithuania, along with his parents, Mathis' family members said Sunday.

As a combat engineer, Mathis was an infantryman technically versed in all aspects of detonation and explosives. He helped clear routes for combat teams and discarded captured enemies' explosives, said Choi, who met Yandura through Loyola's ROTC program and joined the effort to help find Mathis' family.

In Italy, "Mr. Mathis and his unit held their defensive position for 47 long, cold, grueling, aching days on the line without any relief," Choi said. "This never-quit, bend-but-don't-break attitude helped develop a unit motto — rugged."

Faye Menczer Ascher of West Bloomfield, Mathis' niece, spoke at Sunday's ceremony and recalled memories of her uncle. She remembered going to a toy store in Detroit with Mathis while he was visiting on furlough. She also remembered, as a girl 9 or 10 years old, seeing Mathis' Purple Heart in its box in one of her mother's drawers.

Exactly what happened to the medal and its certificate is unclear. The family believes the Purple Heart certificate eventually was in the possession of Mathis' brother in New York. Later in life, the brother moved to Jerusalem to be near their sister. After they both died, the family thinks there was an estate sale and the certificate came into the

hands of an antique map dealer whose goods were for sale at the Jerusalem consignment shop where Yandura came upon it in 2013 while he was stationed at the Jerusalem consulate.

"While perusing the maps, my eye caught a small, nondescript gold frame resting on the ground against another map," Yandura said Sunday during the ceremony. "As I knelt down to get a closer look, I immediately recognized that the frame contained not a map, but a Purple Heart certificate."

Yandura said he asked for the certificate so it could be returned to the family. But the map dealer insisted on \$100, Yandura said. He paid for it and pledged to find Mathis' family. The certificate and a new medal were presented to the family Sunday.

The ceremony drew relatives from Israel, England and across the U.S. Family members said the experience brought them closer together and taught younger generations unfamiliar with Mathis about his service.

The Army's contact with his family began over the summer when a researcher contacted Allyse Denmark, Mathis' great niece who grew up in West Bloomfield and lives in Atlanta.

The U.S. is a nation of immigrants, Denmark, 48, said, and learning about Mathis helped Denmark and her family better understand its history.

"Not everyone understands their immigrant story. But so many people who come to America are either fleeing some place in adversity or they're coming for a better life," she said. "We all have a story. This was our story."

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