

# WWI Soldiers Received County Medals Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

Two weeks ago we wrote of a small cedar box, containing a soldier's dog tags and the insignia of a major. After considerable sleuthing around, I found the veteran I thought was the owner, only to have the articles be property of his deceased son, Donald J. St. Hilaire. How they got to the American Legion was a puzzle partially solved.

That is not the end of the story, for the cedar box had another story to tell. Along with several military medals could be found two medals, strongly protected by very heavy paper, carefully folded to enclose and protect the medals.

## The Medals

With no other information attached, one wondered their source. The multi-colored red ribbon seemed bright as ever, leading to the assumption (wrong) that they were WWII medals. Your scribe, a WWII veteran, had never seen any similar award except for what we ungratefully called the "ruptured duck", a metal eagle pin of doubtful heritage which was given to every WWII serviceman.

Each of these two medals had the name of its recipient on a cast display panel, the back of which served as the pin to attach the medal to one's shirt or coat. This was followed by the colorful ribbon, below which was suspended a casting with an eagle with widespread wings. Below that was a very small replica of the old outdated Wisconsin State logo. It took a magnifying glass to read the encircling inscription:

Circled above the Wisconsin logo was "County of Sauk" and below was "State of Wisconsin" completing the encircling below. State of Wisconsin? We WWII vets in Iowa never got such recognition from our county, or even from the state!

## The Names on the Medals

We've saved the names on the medal until now, expecting the owners or kin to step forward and claim their apparently lost ribbons, but I was in for surprise. Neither of the men, Eddie O'Malley or Frederick Reardon was a recent war veteran, despite the colorful and un-faded ribbon. They were World War I veterans!

Even more than just veterans, they were World War casualties, for centered on each of the ribbons was a Gold star, the universal military sign of a fatal casualty. But when were they awarded?

## The 1919 County Fair

I returned to the large file box from which all these materials had come, including the little cedar box. Hiding elsewhere was a letter dated October 27, 1981 from Ronald C. Phillips, Sauk County Veterans Service Officer at the time.. Phillips gives a good explanation:

"In September of 1919 they had a special day at the Fair at which time the veterans of WWI were to be honored and presented with this medal. Ones who had died in service or died prior to being discharged were awarded the medal with a gold star, and that was presented to the next of kin."

Only those next of kin who were present at the Fair's Honor Day received the medal with the gold star. The letter infers that any unwounded veteran present also received the medal, but without the gold star of course. But you had to be present.

So ends the stories of the cedar box and its contents, mementos of Donald J. St. Hilaire, Eddie O'Malley, and Frederick Reardon. Someone in each case cared enough that the articles were preserved and placed with people who care. We felt honored to see them, handle them, and to write about them.

