

Leonard DeWitt would have been 100 years old February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021. This man had a remarkable life and serves to remind us in troubled times of character traits that are in short supply. Traits of duty, honor, and willing to fight overwhelming odds to achieve an objective.

While Leonard was still alive, there was a concerted effort to upgrade his Distinguished Service Cross to Medal of Honor status. Operation Eagles Wings formally pledges that, on the date of his 100<sup>th</sup> birthdate anniversary, we will renew that effort.

On 28 July 1943, Sgt. Leonard Dewitt was serving with Company I, 41<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, "Covert Force". The company was on a ridge top near Boise, New Guinea. It was the dark of night and Colvert Force faced a committed, larger, and entrenched enemy. Sgt. DeWitt voluntarily carried ammunition and grenades to the forward area. He established leadership in the absence of same, and fought the enemy single handedly with as many weapons as he could grab. He stood his ground when others ran and refused to back down. Sgt. DeWitt found an abandoned Browning Automatic Rifle and fired that until he ran out of ammo. He then used a Thompson Submachine gun until that too, was depleted. He threw two Australian hand grenades.

When all weapons were exhausted, he fell into a trench to avoid a Japanese hand grenade and fought the enemy hand to hand. At the end, and out of frustration, Sgt. DeWitt threw his helmet at the enemy. The enemy may have thought it was a satchel charge of explosives and fled. This action garnered Dewitt the nickname "Helmet Hero".

In correspondence dated 17 March 1944, Chief of Staff Kenneth Sweney wrote a letter for the Commanding General that Sergeant Leonard C. DeWitt, stating "The Commanding General directs you to be informed that he has recommended you to higher headquarters for award of the Medal of Honor for recognition of conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty."

The recommendation made it's way to General Douglas MacArthur's headquarters where it was delayed two years, and then changed to a Distinguished Service Cross. In recent years, the Army has been reluctant to upgrade the DSC to Medal of Honor, citing "conflicting testimonies". The largest conflicting story came from Lieutenant Robert Hudson. Hudson says he was with DeWitt during the night in question, and his narrative does not agree with others. In following interviews conducted in McMinnville, Oregon, DeWitt says Hudson was "no where around" that evening.

Based on research conducted by military historian Alisha Hamel, and taking into accounts from the book "The exclusion of Black Soldiers from the Medal of Honor", Operation Eagles Wings believes a case can be made about discrimination of National Guard and Reserve Soldiers in bestowing the nation's highest honor.

Leonard's name was included with several soldiers of color to be reconsidered. For some reason, Leonard's name was dropped from the list, presumably because he was white.

The mission statement of Operation Eagles Wings is "honoring all who serve, and leaving no one behind". We believe it is discriminatory to exclude Leonard DeWitt from the list on the basis of skin color and to reconsider giving DeWitt the honor he rightfully deserves.

Leonard's said he wanted this Medal of Honor not as much for him, but to acknowledge the sacrifice and achievements of the 41<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division. The 41<sup>st</sup> was comprised of National Guard members from

the western U.S. and was considered one of the best infantry divisions in America, due to the number of awards received in military competitions. The 41<sup>st</sup> became known as “the Jungleers” due to their unrelenting drive to fight the enemy and the heat, diseases, and obstacles in Pacific Island jungle warfare.

In keeping with Leonard’s standard of never giving up, we vow to continue pressing the Army to reconsider or further examine the issues of meritorious decorations being delayed by General Douglas MacArthur and his staff during World War 2 on basis of discrimination.

Accompanying websites are [www.jungleers.com](http://www.jungleers.com); [www.leonarddewitt.com](http://www.leonarddewitt.com), [www.ushelmenthero.com](http://www.ushelmenthero.com)