—Declined Flying Cross...

A much-decorated soldier

James Garner, the actor, and I have a thing in common, far-fetched though that might seem.

The thing is the Purple Heart, considered by many of us to be the most exalted of America's military decorations. The medal itself is heart-shaped, purple on a gold base, with a raised likeness of George Washington in heroic profile – in a word, striking, although it doesn't coordinate well with an argyle sweater.

The back of the medal says, "For Military Merit." Theoretically, you have to be wounded in combat to get one.

Garner was decorated with his Purple Heart a couple of weeks ago, the pinning being done with regular military honors. He was wounded 32 years ago while serving in Korea as a combat infantryman, known as James Bumgarner at the time. The Army often works in mysterious ways, accounting for the 32-year delay.

As Garner explained it, he was running south in Korea from enemy fire and dived head first into a foxhole. A bullet got him in the back of the leg, he said, putting it delicately.

My own military merit, attested to by the Purple Heart, was almost as glorious. I was decorated toward the end of World War II by an old friend, Buddy Douglas, a supply sergeant in the Quartermaster Corps at Fort Bragg.

A bunch of us, fresh out of prisoner-of-war camps in Germany, were being re-outfitted at Fort Bragg before going home for rest and rehabilitation.

Buddy loaded me down with khakis, olive drabs, shoes and the like. He tried to fit me with an officer's blouse but I was afraid that might be awkward, my being a Pfc. Then he said, "Okay, now what medals do you need."

I said I would take one of those Good Conduct Medals, figuring to make my mother swell with pride. I also picked a European Theater of Operations ribbon, to which I was clearly entitled, having been over there.

Buddy insisted on my taking a Unit Citation, on grounds that even if I hadn't done anything noteworthy, somebody in my outfit possibly had. The dark blue ribbon added a nice touch of color to the khakis, so I let him pin

one on me.

I also accepted pilot wings, bombardier and navigator wings and a captain's bars, not to wear but as keepsakes and for post-war dating purposes.

To my everlasting credit, I drew the line at the Distinguished Flying Cross. Buddy said, "What the heck, you rode in a plane, didn't you?" I said, yes, as a radio operator-gunner, never once firing a shot in anger.

When we got around to the Purple Heart, Buddy said, "You must have got hurt over there." I said no, not really, unless you counted losing substantial weight and missing regular dental care.

Buddy said, "Didn't they bang you around, hit you in the stomach or something like that? Fellow just came through here got punched at an interrogation center and I awarded him the Purple Heart."

When the planes collided, I explained carefully, trying not to sound heroic, my machine gun tore loose from the moorings and swung around and hit me in the head.

"Knock you out?" Buddy asked. "You bleed any?"

I might have shed a drop or two, I conceded. The main thing I got was a terrible headache.

"Well, there you are," Buddy said. "Here's your Purple Heart." He pinned it on me himself and gave me a nice simulated leather case to keep it in when I wasn't on parade.

"The trouble with some of you guys," Buddy said, "is that you're too doggone modest for your own good."

The wings and captain's bars have gotten away through the years, but I am still hanging onto the Purple Heart, for the grandchildren to admire. I expect James Garner will do the same.

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