

By MICHAEL HILL, Associated Press Writer Fri May 26, 1:49 PM ET

VAILS GATE, N.Y. - Cpl. Robert Frink was captured in Germany during the final months of World War II. He and two comrades were forced to swap uniforms with their Waffen SS captors, lined up and shot in the back of the head.

Miraculously, the bullet entered Frink's neck and exited his cheek without shearing his spine or jugular vein. He even felt a German kick him as he lay bleeding. "Believe me, I played dead!" After his captors left, Frink fled, found some Canadian troops, and was saved.

The wound earned him a Purple Heart.

Sixty-one years later, it is earning him an entry on the "Roll of Honor," a database being compiled for a museum honoring Purple Heart recipients. When the museum, the National Purple Heart Hall of Honor, opens in November, visitors will be able to search out facts and stories about soldiers wounded or killed. New York officials heading the project think — though no one knows for sure — there are up to 1.7 million soldiers who belong on the list.

So they're putting out a call: If you or a family member has been awarded the Purple Heart, they want you.

More precisely, they want your information for the most comprehensive list of American military sacrifice.

"Somewhere, in every family tree, this is going to hit home," said state Parks Commissioner Bernadette Castro.

The Hall of Honor is being built at a woodsy historic site north of New York City where George Washington's army camped toward the end of the Revolutionary War. It was here in 1782 that Washington created the Badge of Military Merit, which he decreed would be "the figure of a heart in purple cloth."

"The end of the war was coming," said Michael Clark, manager of the New Windsor Cantonment State Historic Site. "He thought that this was an opportunity to recognize the troops before the army was disbanded and went home."

The original badge was awarded for exceptional performance, not battle wounds. Surviving records show three sergeants received the medal, though Clark said more soldiers might have been honored.

The badge fell into disuse after the war, but was reintroduced as the Purple Heart in 1932. Thousands of World War I veterans received Purple Hearts retroactively — as did a few very old Civil War veterans. In 1942, Purple Hearts were restricted to those "wounded in action against any enemy."

How many have been awarded, no one knows. Clark has heard of wounded World War II soldiers told to simply grab one from a box. But a tally of the wounded and dead from World War I on is about 1.7 million, most from World War II.

It's impossible to find and verify every single award. But the modest staff at the state historic site is trying. After quietly collecting information for years, parks officials in March put out a widespread plea for veterans and families to share stories and materials for hall. Clark said about 5,000 responses have come in, everything from e-mails from [Iraq](#) to packages with typed stories and sepia-tinged photos.

Ronald Vellner sent in a tiny piece of metal shrapnel that pierced his right thigh in Korea. Survivors of Frank Emberson sent in a small envelope stuffed with photos; a corner of the envelope is frayed off where a bullet caromed off his breast pocket into his arm during World War II.

Gold Star mother Deborah Tainsh sent in the story of her son Patrick, a rebellious young man obsessed with surfing who shocked friends when at age 29 he sought his father's blessing to follow his footsteps into the military.

The 33-year-old sergeant was on patrol in Iraq in a Humvee when he was killed by an explosion in February 2004.

"I just want you to know I tried to do the right thing," he wrote in a note to his family in the event of his death. " ... I didn't always do things on your time line, but I've always looked up to you, Dad, as the man I've always wanted to be."

The men and their stories will be included on the Roll of Honor. Clark also is coaxing wounded veterans to tell their story in front of cameras for the museum's exhibits and archives.

There's a sense of urgency because the number of surviving World War II veterans is shrinking quickly. Ironically, members of that legendarily stoic generation are providing a lot of the stories. Project workers think older veterans realize it's finally time to talk.

Frink, for instance, barely mentioned his near-miss execution in Germany since coming home to California in 1945. Now 81, he still chokes up recalling how his two comrades who were killed. He finally wrote down his story recently and e-mailed it to a veterans' Web site.

"I've had a hard time grappling with this baggage I've been carrying around all these years," Frink said.

"Years later, it still hurts."

On the Net: Purple Heart Hall of Honor:

http://nysparks.state.ny.us/heritage/purple_hrt.asp