

LOCAL & REGIONAL

Troubled vet's medal may be returned with honor

A black granite monument honoring Medal of Honor recipient Pfc. Kenny Kays stands in front of the Hannah House Museum in Fairfield, Ill. Kays, a 1967 graduate of Fairfield Community High School, earned the medal for his heroic actions as a medic during the Vietnam War.



Kenny Kays

All the words describing the actions that earned Kays the medal are etched into that stone. There's even a picture of Kays and a likeness of the medal he earned May 7, 1970, on that distant Vietnam battlefield.

While Kays' wartime deeds and much of his



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troubled life have been well-documented, there's still one thing missing — his Medal of Honor.

After Kays took his own life in 1991, friends launched a search for the medal, hoping to include it in a memorial to the reluctant hero.

"I've investigated several rumors as to where the medal might be," said Mike Pottorff, the Fairfield fire chief who went to high school with Kays. "Every time, I found nothing but dead ends."

Randy K. Mills, a professor of social sciences at Oakland City University,

wrote a book about Kays and found no credible information about what may have happened to the medal.

"Some friends of Kenny that I talked to seem to indicate one of them might have it," Mills said. "Some of those folks seemed like pretty rough people."

To understand why Kays' medal is missing, you have to know a little about his deeply troubled life both before and after the war.

A vocal opponent of the Vietnam War, Kays fled to Canada to avoid the draft but returned home and reported for duty with the U.S. Army as a conscientious objector. Because of his stance on the war, the Army trained him as a medic.

Dropped onto a remote

hilltop in Vietnam by helicopter, Kays' unit was overrun quickly by the enemy. Assigned to the 506th Infantry, 101st Airborne, Kays rushed into enemy fire, dragging several of his comrades to safety. He treated their injuries despite losing the lower part of his own leg during the fierce battle.

Only after treating several other soldiers did he accept medical treatment for his own wounds.

Returning to Fairfield after the war, Kays drank hard, abused drugs and was about as welcome in the local service clubs as Jane Fonda. When he learned he had earned the Medal of Honor, he had to be talked into traveling to Washington, D.C., to receive it. Because he refused to shave his beard

and cut his hair, the Army would not allow him to wear his uniform when President Richard Nixon placed the medal around his neck.

Back home, Kays wound up in jail on numerous occasions, primarily because of his drinking and drug abuse. It was during one of those stays at the Wayne County Jail that Sheriff Thomas "Junior" Cannon asked local reporter Steve Hartsock to sit down with Kays and try to document his life's story.

"I remember like it was yesterday," Hartsock said. "He was jumping up and down, pounding his prosthetic leg against the jailhouse bars yelling at Sheriff Cannon, 'Where's my (expletive) cigars!' Junior brought him a big box of imported cigars. We

sat down and smoked as he began to talk."

Every time Hartsock tried to direct the conversation to the war, Kays changed the subject. When asked about the medal, Kays started talking about something else, Hartsock said.

Hartsock's notes from Kays' interview were lost in a flood, and the Medal of Honor is still missing.

"That medal meant nothing to Kenny," Pottorff said. "He may have thrown it off a bridge into the Wabash for all I know. But if someone out there does have it, I sure wish they would return it. There will be no questions asked."

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