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Heroic dog is honored 75 years after saving the lives of U.S. soldiers

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Joe Cullatto.

Chips receives Britain's Dickin Medal for bravery in World War II.

By Marylou Tousignant January 15

Everyone in the Wren family knew that Chips was a special dog. Just how special, though, it would take a war to discover.

In 1942, shortly after the United States entered World War II, Americans were eager to aid the war effort. The military even asked people to donate their dogs to be trained for guard and patrol duty. More than 11,000 dogs ended up serving with the Army and Marine Corps.

Chips was one of them.

"He was a rascal," recalls John Wren.

The German shepherd-collie-husky mix chased and barked at the mailman and trash collectors.

"It killed my mother to part with him," says Wren, then a toddler. "But Chips was strong and smart, and we knew he'd be good" at Army duty.

So good, in fact, that in 1943 Chips became the only animal ever awarded the Silver Star, the U.S. military's third-highest medal for bravery in combat. He was also nominated for the Distinguished Service Cross (the second-highest award) and a Purple Heart for wounds he received while in Italy.

His story was big news back home. But some people didn't think animals should get the same medals as humans. They made a fuss, and Chips's Silver Star was taken away. John's mother reacted by telling reporters that Chips would probably like a pound of hamburger more than a medal, anyway.

Chips returned home a hero in 1945. He died the following year, but this week he's back in the news. On Monday, he was awarded the Dickin Medal, the highest honor for wartime bravery by an animal, from a group called PDSA. (See story at right.) A very proud John Wren flew to London, England, for the big event.

Chips spent 3½ years in the Army. He served in North Africa, Italy, France and elsewhere in Europe. He met President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and General Dwight D. Eisenhower (a future president). When Eisenhower tried to pet Chips, the dog nipped him, having been trained to respond only to his handler.

July 10, 1943, was Chips's date with history.

An Italian machine-gun crew had U.S. forces pinned down on a beach in Sicily. Chips broke from his handler and charged the enemy's hut. A shot rang out. Moments later, a soldier appeared, with Chips at his throat. Three more soldiers followed, hands in the air.

Chips had a scalp wound and burns to his mouth and left eye, but that didn't stop him. Later that day his keen sense of smell detected 10 enemy soldiers, who also were captured.

Chips's platoon leader cited him "for extra heroism in action." Four months later, he was awarded the Silver Star. And even though Chips didn't get to keep it, Wren says his family always knew that their dog was a true hero.

(Teachers can find a K-2 lesson plan with more info about Chips and the military's Dogs for Defense program at eisenhowerfoundation.net/documentcenter/view/906 [eisenhowerfoundation.net].)

The Dickin Medal

Chips is the 70th recipient of the PDSA Dickin Medal, which honors exceptional bravery or devotion to duty by animals during wars or other conflicts. Winners have included lots of pigeons and dogs, four horses and one cat.

"PDSA" refers to the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals, a British charity begun in 1943 by animal welfare activist Maria Dickin.

Chips was nominated for the medal by Robin Hutton, a California writer who loves stories about brave animals. Another of her nominees, a Korean War horse named Reckless, won a Dickin Medal in 2016.

Older KidsPost readers will enjoy Hutton's book "Sgt. Reckless: America's War Horse." And this fall you can read more about Chips in her new book, "War Animals: The Unsung Heroes of World War II."

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