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Nanticoke Native Earns Distinguished Service Cross for World War I Heroism

(Guest Post by: PHMC/BHSM Museum Curator, Rachel Yerger)



Photo of Distinguished Service Cross.

Tali Esen (sometimes written as Taliesen) Waters was born in Nanticoke, Pennsylvania on March 19, 1894, and was the youngest son of two Welsh immigrants. Tali, as he was affectionately known, enlisted as a private in the PA National Guard's 9th Regiment on August 15, 1916. Undoubtedly influenced by his two brothers and a sister, who were all physicians, Tali served as a medical student in the Hospital Corps. He served with the Pennsylvania National Guard on the Mexican Border from September 1916 through March 1917, and when the United States entered World War I, Tali Esen, re-enlisted with the 28th Division. As a 2nd Lieutenant in the 107th Field Artillery Unit, Tali Esen earned five battle stars during his deployment as well as multiple service awards. He earned the Distinguished Service Cross while in action on September 6, 1918 near Baslieux-les-Fismes France. The Distinguished Service Cross is the second highest award given out by the US Army and is awarded for "extraordinary heroism". According to military records, "Lieutenant Waters voluntarily went to the assistance of a large number of wounded soldiers, who were in an exposed position awaiting aid, and continued for several hours to dress their wounds throughout a severe bombardment of gas and high-explosive shells, while hostile airplanes flew low and swept with machine-gun fire the line of litters bearing the wounded. After administering aid to 36 wounded men, Lieutenant Waters helped carry them to a place of safety."



Photo of French Croix de Guerre.

For these actions, Second Lieutenant Waters was also awarded the French Croix de Guerre with a gilt star on January 24, 1919. The Croix de Guerre is awarded to military personnel who perform acts of bravery or heroism in combat with the enemy. It is rare for high ranking military honors to be awarded for acts of humanitarianism, like those performed by Lt. Tali Esen Waters, as opposed to combat service. In fact, these are the only high-ranking medals held by the Pennsylvania Military Museum that were earned for humanitarian actions.



Photo of Purple Heart.

In addition, Tali Esen received a Purple Heart in 1932 when it was reinstated through the War Department's General Order No. 3. Purple Hearts were awarded to WWI veterans who received General Pershing's certificate for meritorious service or those who had been wounded in action. He also earned a Silver Star, a United States Victory Medal (service medal), a New Jersey Medal for Distinguished Service (Tali Esen moved to New Jersey after the war) and, interestingly, also donated, was a badge for his role as a medical assistant in the Inter-Allied Games, an international military athletic event, which was held in Paris in 1919.

After the war Tali Esen did not continue to pursue a medical career. Without a doubt, the war had taken a toll on his medical ambitions. Instead he and his wife, Isabelle, moved to West Orange, New Jersey where Tali lived a quiet and happy life as the manager of a carpet factory in New York City. It was in West Orange where the Waters' would befriend the Heselton Family. The Heselton and Waters households became so close that upon Tali's death in 1959, his wife Isabelle gave the Heselton's his military medals. The Heselton Family, honoring Tali Esen Water's contributions and sacrifices, donated the medal collection to the Pennsylvania Military Museum, where they now serve to help educate the public. These medals, along with other World War I artifacts and stories preserved by the PA Military Museum, provides us a with a glimpse into the sacrifices ordinary Pennsylvanian men and women made during The Great War.