

**Two determined teenagers
fight to have two World War II
veterans awarded
Silver Stars
that were
50 years
overdue**

Nilver

Vicki Gaylord, shown at Western Kentucky University's Guthrie Bell Tower and plaza that is in memorial to freedom and those who gave their lives defending it, worked for five years to ensure two World War II veterans received their Silver Stars. Photo: Joe Imel

For Charles and Vicki Gaylord, their most memorable civics lesson didn't involve a textbook or a classroom. It was taught through a friendship forged by modern technology, a 60-year-old air battle, and a determination that resulted in Silver Star medals for two World War II veterans.

The Breckinridge County siblings began their lesson five years ago with a model plane and attention to detail. Along the way, it included a personal plea to a U.S. congressman and writing letters to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the White House.

It began with Charles, who enjoyed building model airplanes, agreeing in 1999 to build a replica of a World War II B-24 for a teacher. "He wanted more information on what the inside of the plane looked like, so he got on a Web site for the Jolly Rogers, a unit who flew B-24s in World War II," explains sister Vicki, now a sophomore at Western



Silver Star Individual Decoration

The Silver Star was established by Action of Congress July 9, 1918. It is awarded to a person who, while serving in any capacity with the U.S. Army, is cited for gallantry in action against an enemy of the United States while engaged in military operations involving conflict with an opposing foreign force, or while serving with friendly foreign forces engaged in armed conflict against an opposing armed force in which the United States is not a belligerent party. The required gallantry must have been performed with marked distinction.

Source: www.americal.org/awards

Kentucky University. Charles posted an e-mail message and the next day a response came from Ray Smeltzer, who lived near St. Louis, Missouri. It was the first of many and the beginning of a friendship that eventually included the entire Gaylord family—Charles, Vicki, and their parents, Bruce and Anna Mary.

They received firsthand accounts of life in World War II and service in the Army Air Corps. It was through the e-mails that the Gaylords first heard the story of Roarin' Rosie and her heroic mission in January 1943.

1943: The South Pacific

Smeltzer and his crew had flown a reconnaissance mission over Ambon Island, in the South Pacific. They discovered three Japanese transport ships suspected of carrying ammunition. The next day, January 21, 1943, a bombing mission was mounted that included three B-24Ds

Stars

by Karen Combs



James Case with his medals from World War II, including his Silver Star awarded in May 2003, shown in the upper left of the medal case. Photo courtesy Gaylord family

from the 90th Bombardment group.

Sgt. Smeltzer was on a plane piloted by Lt. Alden Currie, and Lt. James Case was its bombardier. The crew dropped their bombs and successfully sank one of the Japanese ships. Currie's crew safely made their way out of the harbor, even though they had been hit by anti-aircraft fire. They were headed back to their base when they

heard over the radio, and were notified by the tail and waist gunners, that the other bombers were drawing fire from Japanese fighters.

According to Smeltzer, one crewman on another plane had been killed and both planes had sustained serious damage. "With total disregard for his safety

or that of his crew and his aircraft's assumed safety, (Currie) brought his plane around to engage the enemy and try to give some relief to the other bombers," wrote Smeltzer and crewman Case in their account of the mission.

"By swinging around and coming back, this put his plane as a straggler in the formation trying to leave Ambon air space...

Thus we were now the sitting duck. The Japanese rather quickly broke off their engagement with the now front two bombers, and directed their total undivided attention on us."

Lt. Case's responsibility, after the bombs had been dropped, was to man one of the nose 50-caliber machine guns. Sgt. Smeltzer ran ammo to the gunners. "For the next 30 minutes, we battled the Japanese fighters in a running air battle out over the sea as we tried to make our way home...When the Japanese broke off contact and Roarin' Rosie finally pulled away, the plane had over 100 bullet and cannon holes in the air frame, had lost the tail gun and the number-two engine. Also, a Japanese fighter had been downed. Due to our efforts, all three B-24s were able to return to their bases with only one fatality."

As a result of their service in the South Pacific, the crew of Roarin' Rosie was recommended for the Distinguished Flying Cross, for a separate action. Smeltzer, who was wounded in action, thought he might also be eligible for the Purple Heart. Just as

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Pilot Lt. Currie's crew from World War II in 1943, with Ray W. Smeltzer, radio gunner standing in back row, first on left, and James Case, bombardier, front row, last on right.

he began to inquire about the other medal, their enlistment was up. "They just said, 'Let's forget the medals, and let's go home,'" Vicki says.

Fifty Years Later

Almost 50 years passed, with Smeltzer and Case, living in Oklahoma, as the only two surviving crew members left from the 1943 mission. In 1990, Smeltzer received a shoebox of World War II records and memorabilia from pilot Lt. Alden Currie's widow.

Stuffed in the box was a recommendation for the Silver Star from the commander of one of the B-24s saved by the Roarin' Rosie.

When the Gaylords heard their story, Vicki and Charles wanted to help the aging veterans get the recognition they earned.

In 2001, the family contacted Congressman Ron Lewis' office and supplied information on the mission and details of the veterans' military service. "Someone had told us that was how you go about getting the medals," Bruce Gaylord explains,

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TURKEY REUBEN MELTS

1 cup sliced green onions
1 tsp. oil
1/2 cup Thousand Island dressing
8 slices rye bread
8 slices turkey breast, cooked
8 slices Swiss cheese

Butter

In a nonstick skillet, sauté green onions in oil. Spread each slice of bread with a thin layer of dressing. Layer each slice with turkey breast and Swiss cheese. Combine sandwiches to make 4. Melt a small amount of butter in skillet and brown each sandwich on both sides. Slice and serve hot. Serves 4.

OLD FASHIONED TURKEY CASSEROLE

2 cups macaroni
2 Tablespoons butter
1 cup sliced mushrooms
1/4 cup minced onion
1 can (11 oz.) condensed cheddar cheese soup
1 can (11 oz.) condensed cream of chicken soup
1/2 cup milk
2 cups cooked turkey, diced
1 teaspoon tarragon
1/4 teaspoon pepper
1/2 cup buttered breadcrumbs

Preheat oven to 350°. Cook macaroni in boiling salted water until al dente, or still slightly firm. Drain. In saucepan combine butter, mushrooms, and onion. Sauté over medium-low heat until tender. Stir in remaining ingredients, except macaroni and breadcrumbs. Heat sauce five minutes over low heat. Stir in macaroni. Pour into 2-1/2-quart buttered casserole and bake 30 minutes. Remove from oven and top with breadcrumbs. Continue baking 10 more minutes. Serves 6.

Coming Next Month

Fireside Supper



Linda Allison-Lewis writes from her home in Bullitt County. She is the author of *Kentucky's Best—Fifty Years of Great Recipes*. Send letters, recipes, or requests to Kentucky Cooks, Linda Allison-Lewis, P.O. Box 40, Hillview, KY 40129, or go online at www.KentuckyLiving.com and click on Kentucky Cooks.

Silver Stars

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“that you had to go through a congressman’s office.”

The information was forwarded to the military’s National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Missouri. Because the men served in the Army Air Corps, which later became the Air Force, the information was then sent to the U.S. Army Soldier Systems Directorate in Philadelphia, where it was processed and a decision made on the medals. Just before Sept. 11, 2001, Smeltzer received word he had been awarded the Silver Star, but strangely, Case was notified he would be awarded the Bronze Star.

Smeltzer received his award on his 82nd birthday in January 2002, and Vicki was determined to see that Case received the same.

“They were in the same plane, they were on the same mission,” Vicki explains, “and according to the medal requirements, the Bronze Star isn’t even awarded for air missions.”

While a junior in high school, she was selected to attend the Kentucky Association of Electric Cooperative’s Washington Youth Tour. During her visit to Washington, D.C., Vicki was more determined than ever upon hearing news of this latest refusal. So she courageously took the opportunity to personally ask Congressman Lewis for help with an appeal on the Bronze Star.

The family later appealed the decision, but once again, Case was notified he would be receiving the Bronze Star.

“We got a letter from Mr. Case and he said that he wasn’t upset about this latest turn-down for the award,” Bruce Gaylord says about the process. “He felt that he was one of the luckiest persons alive, just to have survived his nine months of service in the South Pacific and the completion of 30 combat missions. He said that he was no hero, the guys who didn’t come back were the real heroes.”

Bruce suggested that the teenagers write to high-ranking government officials and tell them the story of Roarin’ Rosie. They mailed letters to President George W.

Bush, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and Gen. Richard B. Meyers, the Commanding Officer of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Meyers sent a personal letter in December 2002, telling the family that he had forwarded the information to the Air Force Personnel Center at Randolph Air



This model plane replica of a WWII B-24 was built by Charles Gaylord and served as the beginning of a very special friendship for the Gaylord family with WWII veterans Ray Smeltzer and James Case. Photo courtesy Gaylord family

Force Base in Texas. And in February 2003, Case received a letter from Col. Marcia Rossi notifying him that he would receive his Silver Star.

May 7, 2003: Case Awarded Silver Star

It arrived at his home on May 7, 2003, and Case sent this note to the Gaylords: “There are very few people, if any, who would go the full mile and you have overcome the obstacles thrown in your way. It is, of course, very hard for most of us to understand that busy people like you would go to this trouble to help this perfect stranger. My wife and our three sons (and their families) are aware of the honor involved in receiving this medal and join me in our gratitude to all of you.”

A few months later, in October 2003, his crewmate Ray Smeltzer passed away.

Bruce Gaylord says he was glad his children had the opportunity to get to know two such unassuming, gallant men. “They also learned, never give up, keep trying and there is a willing ear to hear your plight and help you resolve your issue,” he adds. “It was a lesson in civics they would never have gotten in school.”