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Man of mettle: East Moline war hero keeps collecting medals

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EAST MOLINE -- The old World War II medals are grouped on the table, near their owner. After 60 years the ribbons have dulled, but the designs haven't changed. So much else has.

Harry V. Arvanis, now 83, served in the U.S. Army in Europe during World War II and received several medals, including a Silver Star and a Purple Heart.

In 1965 he and his wife, Alfreda, received a letter indicating he was eligible for more medals. But in the crush of daily life the letter was forgotten.

After finding the letter recently, the couple's children - Harry, John, Sam and Sandra -- convinced their father to pursue it. "They drove me nuts 'til I went, so I went," Mr. Arvanis said.

He talked to Dan Bebber, an area veterans service officer, and in less than four months he had his additional medals.

"We don't get a lot of what they call heroes," Mr. Bebber said. "This is a man who really went out of his way."

The son of a Greek immigrant, the elder Mr. Arvanis grew up in East Moline. He played football at the then-East Moline High School and was a Golden Gloves boxer at Henry Rothier's gym. Later, he played for the Quad City Mohawks, a semi-professional football team.

"I was really tough," he said of himself back then. "I took nothing from nobody."

He married Alfreda, "the only girl I ever dated," in July 1942, and seven months later, he received a draft



Photo: Dan Videtich

Harry V. Arvanis of East Moline served in the U.S. Army in Europe during WWII with the 106th Division where he received a Silver Star, pictured at left, and a Bronze Star, pictured at right, among other awards, for courageous acts during battle.

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notice. After training at various bases, including paratrooper school at Fort Benning in Georgia, he was shipped overseas with the 106th Infantry Division.

He talks a good game, about wild car rides through the Scottish countryside, about wandering onto the campus of Oxford University.

"I went in the door and I talked to some professors, who looked they were 16 or 17," he said. "I don't have a degree, but you can take my word for it."

He was wounded several times in the 106th's travels through France, Luxembourg and Belgium.

When the division moved into Germany, "I spent a lot of time in enemy territory by myself, looking to see what they got. I'd get a German uniform and get in the chow line, because I was hungry," he said. "I spoke a little German. Then after I got done eating, I'd go somewhere else. I was lucky to get a sergeant's uniform. They were in charge.

"After two or three days, I'd come back and tell the captain to go ahead and either bomb it or artillery. It was up to them. I'd just tell them what their supply division was, their fuel supply, the number of people. It was a lot of fun."

Out of 160 original soldiers in the 106th headquarters division at the Battle of the Bulge, he was one of three who survived. That's how he earned his Silver Star.

On Dec. 18, 1944, artillery fire from the Germans damaged a mortar base that he was manning. Instead of abandoning it, he held the mortar tube together with his legs and aimed by hand, firing off 50 rounds.

Then, he saw 12 Germans coming up the hill toward him. He fired off his last 30 rounds, killing or wounding eight of them. Then-Staff Sgt. Arvanis and his assistant gunner stopped three more who were charging at them with bayonets, emptying their service pistols in the process. Out of ammunition, Mr. Arvanis threw his pistol at the remaining attacker, which killed him, his son Harry said.

The elder Mr. Arvanis has other stories, some which he's not comfortable sharing. How he earned the Bronze Star is one of those. "We don't talk about that," he said. "That was real gory."

After he returned from the war, Mr. Arvanis and his wife had a successful ceramics and carpentry business, retiring in the 1980s. Now, they spend more time with family, including their 17 grandchildren and 23 great-grandchildren.

In all, the elder Mr. Arvanis has more than 18 medals from the United States, France and Belgium, including a good conduct medal. "That's the one we don't believe," his son said jokingly.

Mr. Arvanis just laughs. "Yeah, I was a good boy -- when an officer was around."

His medals

Harry V. Arvanis received the following medals for his service in World War II:

-Silver Star

-Bronze Star

-Purple heart

-Good Conduct Medal

-American Campaign Medal

-European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal & Bronze Star Attachment (Triple)

-World War II Victory Medal

-Army of Occupation Medal and Germany Clasp

-Combat Infantryman Badge 1st Award

-Expert Infantryman Badge

-Belgian Fourragere (a red and green shoulder rope)

-French Croix de Guerre Bronze Star

-French Croix de Guerre avec Etoile de Bronz

-Belgian Decoration Militaire de Classe avec Palme

-Royaume de Belgique

-Belgian Croix de Guerre avec Palme

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