



# WWII vet's service, suffering recognized

Written by

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Roman A. "Ray" Ciesinski on Sunday was presented the Military Order of the Purple Heart, the Bronze Star for meritorious or exemplary conduct in ground combat and the Prisoner of War Medal.

All for his service in World War II.

"I've waited so long," the 89-year-old said. "It's wonderful."

His quest for a Purple Heart began just after his honorable discharge from the Army in 1945, but was caught in a tangle of government red tape and lost records. He hadn't expected a Bronze Star, or for his Purple Heart to have two oak leaf clusters signifying separate combat wounds.

"He made a couple of attempts to get his medal," said son Raymond Ciesinski of Bethesda, Md., "but it didn't materialize."

When the recognition materialized Sunday -- largely thanks to two persistent young veterans, one his honorary grandson -- dozens of family and friends gathered from

around the state and nation at Ciesinski's home in Coffee Run Condominiums near Hockessin to help him celebrate.

His guests applauded, took pictures and wiped away tears as his award certificates were read and medals pinned by the Military Order of the Purple Heart Region 1 Commander J. Patrick Little and Department of Delaware Commander Richard M. Magner.

"Thank you all for coming," Ciesinski said, "and I hope it doesn't take 61 years to get anything else."

His vocalist daughters Katherine Ciesinski of Rochester, N.Y., and Kristine Ciesinski of Victor, Idaho, sang "America the Beautiful" and a song their father requested, "The Bermudas," a Pilgrims' hymn of praise written by the composer Lee Hoiby.

The 89-year-old, who recently got a pacemaker, was too frail to join a reception in his honor at the condo clubhouse, where guests slowly went after visiting with

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Ciesinski, giving congratulations and kisses.

At his side was longtime companion Nellie Ray Mackie, whose grandson, Brendan Mackie, led the push for his Purple Heart.

Getting the medal, she said, "is just such a blessing, as badly as he felt that he didn't have it."

### Wounded, captured

Ray Ciesinski grew up in Michigan, a big galoot at 6 feet 3, and was in college but enlisted after World War II broke out.

A corporal, he was an anti-tank gun crewman in the 3rd Battalion, 71st Infantry Regiment, 44th Infantry Division, in Europe as part of Gen. George S. Patton's forces. On Thanksgiving 1944, the group was attacked by Germans at Ratzwiler, France.

He recalls shrapnel hitting his right arm, but not being shot. Army records say he was hit by a rifle round that left his leg with a compound fracture. As a POW, "he was forced to treat his own wounds since there was no hospital," records say. He was a POW at Stalag IV-B Muhlberg, used in forced labor, until June 1945.

Thousands died in the camp about five miles north of the town of Muhlberg in the German state of Brandenburg. The camp was said to have held 30,000 when liberated.

Ciesinski recalls its conditions as terrible. His size helped keep him alive, as did his

size 13 Army winter boots, but he lost more than 100 pounds. "They stole all my bread," he said, "but not my boots." At night, he tied them around his neck for safekeeping.

If his wounds had been documented after his POW release, his advocates say, Ciesinski would have qualified for discharge, but they weren't. He later got assigned to Camp Upton, N.Y., served as a lifeguard there and met his wife-to-be, Kay, a USO employee.

His commanding officer was Capt. Bob Carpenter, who asked him to come to the University of Delaware to play football. He did.

He played defensive tackle on UD's famed 1946-49 team with Harold R. "Tubby" Raymond and got recruited by the National Football League, but became a teacher instead. He taught physical education and coached track, cross country and other sports at Newark High School. He retired in 1981 and later was inducted into the

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Delaware Sports Hall of Fame.

He, his wife and his family lived in Newark. Longtime neighbor Debbie Wilson, who grew up with his kids, said Sunday that "he was like a father to us all. ... A wonderful man."

His daughter Katherine recalled, "He was completely involved in giving." She and her siblings knew he had been a POW, but he didn't dwell on that -- or that he outlived all 10 of his siblings.

Their mother died in 1996, as did Nellie Ray Mackie's husband. The wives were sorority sisters in Phi Mu and the couples were best friends for decades; the surviving spouses remained close, then became inseparable.

"He's a big part of our family ... and I've always called him my grandfather, Grandpa Ray," said Brendan Mackie, 27.

He and his grandmother were working on documentation for the medal when the grandson's Delaware Army National Guard unit -- 153rd Military Police Company at Fort DuPont, near Delaware City, got deployed to Iraq from May 2007 to May 2008.

After attending another MP's funeral, learning the meaning of the saying "soldiers take care of soldiers" and gaining more appreciation of the "hell-storm" they faced in World War II, Mackie got home even more intent on Ciesinski's Purple Heart.

As they worked on it, he said, his grandmother told him "sometimes the worst things turn out to be the best." He said that helped him see that if Ciesinski had gotten discharged after being a POW, he wouldn't have gone to Camp Upton, met his wife, gone to UD or met his grandparents.

"I guess it was all as it was supposed to be," he said, except he lacked the medal he deserved.

Sen. Chris Coons, D-Del., got word of his effort -- via Mackie's uncle, New Castle County Police Chief Col. Michael C. McGowan -- and connected him with Cheryl L. Yard, the national representative of the Military Order of the Purple Heart in Delaware -- who also served as an Iraq War MP.

Mackie and Ciesinski's kids say she worked tirelessly to get his medals issued. The effort was complicated by his papers apparently being among those of 18 million service members lost in a 1973 fire at the

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National Personnel Records Center.

"However, there were sufficient documents remaining in a reconstructed record ... to conduct a fair and impartial review," the Army Board for Correction of Military Records said in records of proceedings on his case. The board approved the medals.

They were authorized May 25.

Ciesinski said his only regret was that his wife didn't see him get them Sunday. Though he sought only a Purple Heart, he called his other medals "a nice addition."

Daughter Katherine called them "icing on the cake." Fighting tears, she said, "Daddy was a hero to us and he didn't need medals to prove it."



Roman "Ray" Ciesinski shortly after joining the Army during World War II.



Roman A. Ciesinski receives a hug from companion Nellie Ray Mackie after receiving his medals, including a Purple Heart and a Bronze Medal, in a ceremony at his residence in Coffee Run Condominiums near Hockessin. / THE NEWS JOURNAL/BOB HERBERT

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Roman A. Ciesinski proudly wears his World War II medals during a ceremony at his residence Sunday. THE NEWS JOURNAL/BOB HERBERT

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