

Donald L. Betts holds the first World War II Honors Award he received at the ceremony Sunday at Richland Post 849, American Legion.

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Recognition and respect

Daisytown vet first recipient of Legion award

BY EDWARD KANE
FOR THE TRIBUNE-DEMOCRAT

A tall, 90-year-old Donald L. Betts proudly stood at attention as he was honored Sunday for heroism and service to his country nearly seven decades ago.

Betts received the first World War II Honors Award presented by Richland Post 849, American Legion, at ceremonies in the post home at 390 Oakridge Drive.

A Johnstown native and a resident of Daisytown, Betts is a veteran of 51 missions in the Army Air Corps as a waist gunner in a Flying Fortress, a veteran who survived when his plane was shot from the skies in a European air battle. He wears the Air Medal with five oak leaf clusters and he has received a Presidential Unit Citation.

In presenting the award, Post Commander Matt Morgan said it was created this year "as a means of recognizing the contributions to our nation's freedom today by the men and women of an earlier generation. We don't want to forget them. And we (members of Post 849) are going to recognize one of them each year."

Morgan's remarks were echoed by former State Rep. Edward Wojnarowski, founder and chairman of Conemaugh

Valley Veterans, who said he was "extremely proud to join in honoring Don Betts, a veteran who set the guidelines for heroism."

In accepting the award and the honors, Betts said he wanted to share them with the "World War II veterans who are here today. They certainly deserve it."

Betts recalled "a world that was so different in the 1940s when the skies were filled with bombers. I

left the United States on Dec. 7, 1943, the second anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and my first Flying Fortress mission was to bomb Rome. Can you imagine anyone bombing Rome today?"

Betts recalled when his Flying Fortress was shot down.

"We had to make a crash landing. When we slid to a stop, we all jumped out of the plane and kissed the ground. And later, we counted the flak and bullet holes in our ship ... 152 of them. Talk about being lucky."

Despite that close scare, Betts volunteered and did go on a 51st bombing run even though he was eligible for relief after 50 missions.

Asked how he felt when he had to fire to kill young German fighter pilots, Betts replied, "It

was either them or me and our entire bomber crew. I had no trouble making that decision. I never thought twice about it."

How many German fighter planes did he shoot down? Betts said he never knew.

"Our squadron flew in formation with other Flying Fortresses and when the German fighters came at us, all our gunners in the formation were firing at them. You couldn't tell what individual gunner made the kill. Perhaps that was a good thing," he said.

The idea of honoring Betts 67 years after the end of the war came from a friend of his, Allen Young, a post member who was an Army parachutist in the Korean War.

Young said he was fascinated by Betts' war stories and believed that his friend, as a real World War II hero, deserved recognition.

Young took that idea to Peter Mider, adjutant of Post 849, where he and Betts are members.

Mider worked with Morgan and other post officers and staff to arrange the tribute to Betts.

Betts' plaque reads: "World War II Honors Award to Donald L. Betts for 51 missions as a Flying Fortress waist gunner in the 20th Century fight to keep the world free for his generation and for all of us who were to follow."



Betts
1944-45