

Spotlight on Russell Dunham - this area's most highly-decorated veteran

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November 9 2017 6:04 AM



ALTON - Veterans Day is this Saturday, Nov. 11, and Alton VFW Post #1308 will be remembering this area's highest-decorated veteran Russell Dunham, among thousands of others who gave their all defending the United States.

Dunham's daughter, Annet Wilson, will be laying a wreath in honor of her father Saturday during Post #1308's tribute to veterans. His name is on a portion of Interstate-255 and Highway 67. Many people pass the large green sign showcasing his name, but how many Riverbend residents know who Russell Dunham was? First of all, Dunham is remembered for attaining the highest American military recognition - The Congressional Medal of Honor.

Dunham died in 2009 at the age of 89, and he was remembered in newspapers across the nation for his service. But, how did Dunham attain the highest honor in all the land?

Well, on Jan. 8, 1945, Dunham found himself leading infantry toward German lines in Alsace-Lorraine in France. After breaking through the German lines, Dunham found himself and his men under fire by three different German machine gun nests. He decided those machine gunners posed a clear and present danger to himself and his men, so he resolved to take care of them.

To do that effectively, Dunham wrapped himself in a white mattress cover, so he could not be spotted in the snowy terrain. He retrieved an automatic rifle, ammo and grenades and charged toward the German machine gun nests.

Dunham was almost instantly shot in the back, and the bullet's impact caused him to fall down the hill, leaving a trail of blood behind him. It also ruined the camouflage the mattress cover once offered him, because it went from snow white to blood red.

Despite his wounds and ruined camouflage, Dunham continued charging up that hill with his rifle blazing, slinging grenades into the nest. He said at one point, he was able to stare into the eyes of a German soldier before clearing the machine gun nest.

According to his official Medal of Honor citation, Dunham 's back wound was a 10-inch gash, and the Germans threw grenades toward him as well - many exploding only inches from him.

After emptying his carbine rifle, the citation said Dunham jumped into the machine gun nest and literally ripped a German soldier from the fixed gun by his collar and hauled him from the nest.

But, Dunham did not stop there. There were two more machine gun nests to go, and Dunham had only begun to fight.

The second nest was located 50 yards ahead of him, and a flurry of bullets and grenades stood against him and his goals, not to mention the giant bullet gash in his back.

Fueled by a sense of duty and protection for his men following just behind him, Dunham threw two hand grenades at a distance of 25 yards away from the machine gunners, which destroyed the gun and disabled its crew. He subsequently fired from his carbine into the adjacent foxhole, which dispersed the machine gun's support crew.

The third nest was another 65 yards ahead of him, and his now red, blood-soaked mattress cloak made him an easy target against the snowy backdrop. So, instead of

rushing toward the final machine gun, Dunham dropped to the ground and crawled, with rifle-launched grenades exploding 10 yards away from him.

At 15 yards from the final objective, Dunham leaped to his feet and threw hand grenades at the third machine gun nest. The grenades upheld their purpose and killed the gun crew.

A German rifleman then fired at Dunham from point-blank range, but missed. Dunham then killed that soldier, and continued firing his carbine and throwing grenades into adjacent foxholes - driving the rest of the Germans from the area.

The final count, according to his official Medal of Honor citation was nine Germans killed, seven wounded and two captured after 175 rounds of carbine ammunition fired, and several grenades. He did all of this with a 10-inch gash in his back while wearing a bloody mattress cover.

Alton VFW Post #1308 Commander Tom Wilson said Dunham served with his brother, Ralph Dunham, who was honored with just as many accolades as Russell Dunham - except for the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Russell Dunham was also awarded a Purple Heart for his service, among many other medals.

He was born outside of East St. Louis, Illinois in 1920, and entered the service with his brother Ralph in Brighton, Illinois. Following the war, Russell Dunham retired to a farm outside Jerseyville with his wife, Wilda Dunham before he died in 2009 with a piece of steel shrapnel still in his leg, always reminding him of his service to the United States.