

98-Year-Old Carlyle Resident Is One of Last Living WW II Prisoners In Southern Illinois, Is Grand Marshal Of NHRA Event

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September 30 2022 2:30 PM



ALBERS - Wilbert Vincent "Vince" Rolves was born in Albers, Illinois, in 1924. The 98-year-old resident of Carlyle, Illinois is one of the last living WW II prisoners of war in Southern Illinois. On Sunday, October 2, Rolves will serve as Grand Marshal for the

annual NHRA Camping World Drag Racing Series Midwest Nationals at World Wide Technology Raceway in Madison, Illinois.

Rolves was drafted into military service in 1942. After 13 weeks of basic training, he was assigned to the U.S. Army's 45th Infantry Division and shipped overseas to the North African region of the European Theater.

In December of 1943, Rolves was shot and wounded during a battle in L'Aquila, a mountainous region in central Italy. He and his fellow soldiers were captured by German troops and endured a 45-day march to a prison camp. They survived the march on rations of only three potatoes per day and a slice of what is referred to as "black bread," a concoction of most unappetizing ingredients.

At Stalag 13 in Hammelburg, Germany, the American POWs were forced into hard labor under unimaginable conditions. For the next 18 months, Rolves and his men toiled under the threat of death while subjected to a bitter, icy environment and extreme malnutrition. Rolves, who also tended the camp's farm animals and milked the cows, lost 83 lbs. during his imprisonment.

Near the end of the war (June 1945), invading Russian forces liberated the prison camp.

"They came through and shot the locks off the gates and let us loose," said Rolves. "There was about eight or 10 of us left on that farm. They told our guys, 'Hey, you're free. The gates are open. Go!'"

But the liberated soldiers still had to trek to reach American forces.

"We were about 50 miles away from the river and they told us how to get there on foot," said Rolves. "We made it."

His decorated military career is marked by a passionate perseverance through dire circumstances. He was honored for his sacrifices with a Silver Star, a Bronze Star, a Purple Heart, and a Prisoner of War Medal.

"There was plenty of times I didn't think I'd make it back to the good old USA," said the decorated WW II veteran. "But thank God, I made it."

Rolves returned to Illinois after the war and eventually settled in Carlyle. He married his wife, the former Loretta Hilda Thouvenin, in 1946. He opened a trucking business and later transitioned to a position that he held for 30 years as a government employee within Scott Air Force Base.

Rolves was honored before the Illinois House of Representatives on Tuesday, November 12, 2019. In recognition of his service and sacrifice, the House of Representatives adopted House Resolution 569 sponsored by Rep. Charlie Meier (R-Okawville) during Rolves' visit to the state capitol.

The resolution stated, "We commend, honor, and thank Wilbert Vincent "Vince" Rolves for his passionate and dedicated service to Illinois and his exemplary leadership during the Second World War and as a private citizen within the State of Illinois."

"Without our veterans, our freedom wouldn't be what it is today," said Meier. "It doesn't matter what is going on, Vince Rolves is always there to help his community. It was a privilege and honor to recognize Vince at the Illinois capitol. The sacrifice he made to protect and serve our country is something we must never forget.

Rolves has established an organization for former POWs in the area, and he has shared his experiences with local students in the hope of offering an appreciation for the services and sacrifices of American servicemen and servicewomen.

"I first learned of Sgt. Rolves in one of our Military Affairs Committee meetings through Col. Rob Lowe, who is the Vice Commander of the 375th Air Mobility Wing at Scott Air Force Base," said WWTR Executive Vice President and General Manager Chris Blair. "Col. Lowe told the heroic story of Sgt. Rolves and told me the Air Force base would be honoring him. His story is incredible and all of us at World Wide Technology Raceway believe that our American heroes should be recognized, and their stories shared with our fans. It is a great honor for us to have Sgt. Rolves attend the NHRA Midwest Nationals and serve as our Grand Marshal."

THE EVENT

The world's quickest and fastest race cars will converge at World Wide Technology Raceway in Madison, Illinois, from September 30 to October 2 for the annual NHRA Camping World Drag Racing Series Midwest Nationals. The series' premier classes are Top Fuel Dragster and Funny Car, with nitromethane-burning 12,000-horsepower engines that rocket the cars from zero to more than 330 miles per hour in less than four seconds.