

Shot down over France, North Shore WWII flyer gets POW Medal 75 years later

Bob Warren, *NOLA.com* | *The Times-Picayune*

Two things, perhaps, will tell you all you need to know about Jim Siracusa Sr.

As his bomber was falling from the sky over France in World War II, he waited until all the crew had gotten out before he jumped out. Nearly 75 years later, he doesn't think he did anything special.

Siracusa, 98 and still trim enough to wear his U.S. Army Air Corps uniform, was front and center Friday (April 5) in Covington as he received another medal for his service during the war. This one was the Prisoner of War Medal to mark the 14 months he spent in a German prisoner camp after he parachuted from the crippled bomber as it plunged to the ground.

"I've never had anything like this, and I don't deserve it," Siracusa said from the podium at the American Legion post, where a big crowd had gathered to watch U.S. Rep. Steve Scalise pin the medal on his uniform jacket.

The crowd, of course, would have none of that. "You do, you do," people shouted from across the room.

"I appreciate all of your favor and your love and you honoring the Lord," Siracusa added.

Stationed in England, Capt. Lucian James "Jim" Siracusa was a pilot for U.S. Army Air Corps and flying his 23rd bombing mission when his bomber was hit May 27, 1944. His daughter, Karen Arnold, said her father, a native of New York, often told the story of how he made sure all other crew members had gotten out of the plane before jumping himself.

"He would tell us how he hit the tail on the way out and hurt his ankle," Arnold said. "But then when the parachute opened, he would say how peaceful and quiet things were."

Peaceful and quiet, that is, until he found himself dodging machine gun fire from the German soldiers chasing him through the orchard in which he had landed.

"After he was captured, he said there was a German who kept asking him about the invasion (the Germans thought was coming)," Arnold said. Siracusa said nothing, she said.

Finally, she said, "the (German) man put a gun against his temple and asked again. (Siracusa) said all he could think of at the time was to just smile at the German."

Siracusa was sent to a prisoner camp in Poland, then moved several months later to another in Germany as Russian forces pushed toward Germany. His last stop was

the huge prison camp in Moosburg, Germany, where one more harrowing experience awaited before he and the other prisoners were liberated.

“(Gen. George) Patton was coming from the west,” his son, Jim Siracusa Jr. of Mandeville, said. “There was an artillery battle over the camp, right over their heads.”

Siracusa survived the battle and was liberated by Patton in 1945, his son said. “He said he knew when he saw the (American) flag.”

Scalise said Siracusa exemplifies the “greatest generation,” legions of soldiers who fought and sacrificed “not to take land but to liberate people.”

Siracusa had previously received the Distinguished Flying Cross Medal, the American Campaign Medal, the European African Middle Eastern Campaign Medal, the World War II Victory Medal, the Distinguished Unit Badge and the Purple Heart.

But as he spoke to reporters afterward, it was clear that Siracusa wondered what the fuss was all about.

“Hero?” he replied when asked about being one. “What is a hero?”

But later, he acknowledged the toll his service required. “It means a year and a half of sacrifice and suffering,” he said.

After the war, Siracusa was stationed in Alabama, where he met and fell in love with Mary Hazel Hill. They married in 1946 and found their way to New Orleans in the early 1950s, where they bought the Simcock advertising agency, Jim Siracusa Jr., said. Siracusa worked at the ad agency until 1999, when his wife died.

He came out of retirement to work in the ad agency and retired again five years ago, at age 93.

Siracusa lives with his son in Mandeville. He’ll be 99 in two weeks.

“What a life,” Siracusa Jr. said.