

# Decorated WWII veteran receives POW medal 75 years after he was shot down over France

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Lucian James Siracusa was a 24-year-old Army Air Force pilot flying his 23rd mission in 1944 when his navigator told him, "I have a hot date in London. Get me back soon," according to his son, Jim Siracusa.

"Daddy had a feeling that came over him: 'We're not coming back,' " his son said. His premonition was on target. Their A-20 attack bomber was shot down over occupied France, and he was captured by the Germans, the start of more than a year as a POW.

A lifetime later, Siracusa, wearing his World War II uniform, was recognized Friday for the time he spent in captivity. U.S. Rep. Steve Scalise pinned the POW medal on the Mandeville man, who smiled as he received the medal in a ceremony at the Covington American Legion Post.

"I don't deserve this," Siracusa, who will turn 99 in a few weeks, told the crowd of well-wishers. "I'm overwhelmed."

His humble reaction didn't surprise his family.

"That generation is not taken with itself," his son said. "There's no ego. They don't complain; they are low-maintenance. They do what job is in front of them to do."

For Siracusa, that job was a bombing mission, which he completed. When his plane was hit by anti-aircraft gunfire, he made sure the other two members of the crew bailed out immediately, but he did not.

"He stayed with it. He said, 'I'm going to drop my bombs no matter what,' " bailing out only after he had done so, his son said.

"It was hairy," the elder Siracusa, also known as Jim, said of the day he was shot down. "But I'm back here. They can't get rid of me."

After the POW camp where he was held was liberated, Siracusa, a native New Yorker, returned to the U.S. He met Mary Hazel Hill, an Alabama girl. "They were married 53 years," his son said. "She was the love of his life."

The couple ended up in New Orleans, where Siracusa started an advertising agency and raised a son and daughter. He worked until he was 93, his son said.

He was always open and willing to talk about his wartime experiences, including his time as a POW, his children said.

When he was first captured, his son said, a German interrogator who spoke perfect

English seemed friendly at first, but lost his patience when Siracusa wouldn't give him any information. The German officer was bent on getting the number of his plane, the younger Siracusa said, but his father said he would give only his name, rank and serial number.

"Finally the German interrogator lost his patience and began cussing him out," his son said. "He said 'I'll tell you,' and began telling Daddy just about every personal thing in his life."

Siracusa was sent to a POW camp for allied pilots in Poland, but as the Russian Army got closer, the Germans moved them, an ordeal that involved a 53-hour forced march in freezing temperatures.

The prisoners were loaded on a train, and at one point they saw Allied bombers overhead and were sure they were about to be bombed. But the train tracks apparently were not their target.

Siracusa ended up at the POW camp in Moosburg, Germany, enduring what his son called terrible conditions. But when asked by reporters what his year in captivity was like, the elder Siracusa was succinct.

"Not good," he said.

Already highly decorated, Siracusa holds the Distinguished Flying Cross Air Medal with Clusters and the Purple Heart as well as others. But he didn't have the POW medal, which didn't exist in the WWII era.

Siracusa had applied for the medal a few years ago, according to Lane Carson, a longtime family friend and previous secretary of the Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs.

The application had gotten bogged down, Carson said, but two weeks after Scalise's office was contacted, it was approved.

His daughter, Karen Arnold, said her father's reaction to the medal is simply one of appreciation.

"Today we're paying tribute to a man who is one of those heroes, one of the members of the greatest generation, somebody who epitomizes why we call them the greatest generation," Scalise said as he called Siracusa to come forward for his honor. "He spent more than 400 days in captivity, and they never broke him."

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