

WWII Bomber Navigator honored as March Veteran of the Month

By Sherri Onorati, Special to The Leader

Mervin Byson Howard, better known as M.B. to friends and family, was honored last week as the March Veteran of the Month by the Tipton County Veterans Council and the Tipton County Museum, Veteran Memorial and Nature Center at a recognition ceremony held at the museum.

Nominated by his grandson, Joel W. Howard, the honoree is a U.S. Army Air Corp veteran of World War II and a career Air Force officer.

“I won’t steal his thunder cause I know he likes to talk about it,” said Joel Howard, laughing, “but I just appreciate everything he’s done for me and I love him.”

Kathy Desjarlais, president of the Tipton County Veterans Council, read Howard’s impressive bio and presented him with a certificate of honor for his selection as the March Veteran of the Month. In addition to the certificate, Howard was also presented with an American flag, which was over the Tennessee state capitol in his honor from Representative Debra Moody, a voucher for a free 11x14 canvas portrait courtesy of Munford Funeral Home, a challenge coin honoring his service in WWII, a Veteran of the Month coffee mug and a year membership in the Tipton County Veteran’s Council.

Born April 1923 to Mervin and Annie Waits Howard of Garland, Howard graduated from high school in 1942 and enlisted in the Army on Jan. 27, 1943 as a private at Fort Oglethorpe, Ga., after being unable to find a job because of his eligibility for the draft. He began his career in combat engineering in Louisiana, but because of his desire to fly, he took an entrance exam for the Army Air Corps and passed.

“My unit was getting ready to ship out when my first sergeant pulled me aside,” said Howard. “He told me I wasn’t going with them because I had been selected for the Air Corps.”

Howard’s selection to the U.S. Army Air Corps, which was the predecessor of the U.S. Air Force, meant months of aviation training in preparation to become apart of a B24 aircrew.

“They sent me to Miami Beach and then to Montana, to what is now the University of Montana, and then to Santa Ana, Calif., and then navigation school in Hondo, Texas,” explained Howard. “After graduation, I met my crew of 10 people and we went to Tucson, Az., and trained together for several months.”

Once his training was completed, Howard was appointed a flight officer and he and his crew were sent to Italy where they joined the 98th Bomb Group.

Life as an aircrew member was inherently dangerous and many considered each mission flight possibly their last.

“Someone told me after the war that each mission that a person in an aircraft flies in a bomb group is considered their D-Day,” explained Howard somberly. “I made 21 of those.”

Howard recounted missions and the beautiful scenery of Italy that he had to fly over but said that the longest day of his life during the war was the one where he was forced to witness the loss of his entire crew.

“March 8, 71 years ago tonight, I sat down and wrote my wife a letter, wrote my parents a letter and said something terrible happened today and whatever you hear from anybody, don’t worry I’m okay,” he said. “That morning we got up to fly and I was placed in the lead ship as the lead navigator. To my left was my crew in another plane, eleven men aboard... one was just onboard for an extra flight,” he added, shaking his head and choking back emotions. “We were over the Adriatic Sea at about one o’clock at 10,000 thousand feet high... you could see the town of Dubrovnik [Croatia], a beautiful city on the coast and another plane knocked the tail off the ship my crew was... I looked over and saw the flames and the plane over on its back and spinning and there was no way those people could get out. They call those B24s a flying boxcar or some people call it a flying coffin. I had to lead that mission and it was one of the longest days of my life, leading this group of planes dropping bombs on Koleran, Hungary – a rail yard that had oil in it. We were after Hitler’s oil and we did a good job, but it sure cost a lot,” he added softly.

After that fateful day, Howard flew a few more missions and then was released from active service and came back to Tipton County and his bride, Cathryne, whom he had married in 1944. He stayed in the Air Force reserve until his retirement in 1972 as a Lieutenant Colonel.

After the war, Howard went to work for the U.S. Postal Service in 1949 and retired from that position in 1984.

Covington resident Tobie Griffin formerly served under Howard and has nothing but fond memories and gratitude for him.

“He and Ms. Cathryne raised me along with my parents,” explained Griffin. “In 1963, Col. Howard enlisted me, Jerol Erwin, Benton Hughey and sent us together to Lackland AFB. We came back to Memphis and then served under the Colonel in 1968. He became my commander with the 3rd Air Postal Flight.

Griffin says that Howard was a great man to serve under.

“I would say that Col. Howard was probably one of the strictest on the rules, but the most lenient if you weren’t breaking them,” grinned Griffin. “He was a great mentor, he didn’t ask you to do anything he wouldn’t do.”

Like many WWII veterans, Howard didn’t share his experiences with his family until recently.

“He didn’t talk a whole lot growing up,” said son, Mike Howard. “He’d talk about it if I asked, but didn’t start really saying much about it until a few years ago, until he started writing his memories down.”

Although he didn’t talk about it growing up, Mike said he is very proud of his father, especially after learning what he had to experience during the war.

“I am real proud of him and makes you realize who the heroes are today,” added Mike. “People in the military have it rough, but nothing like they had it back then. To be a navigator now, you have GPS to help you, but back then they had nothing... the bombing raids and everything they had to do was based strictly on what they could visually see or by using the stars or the moon. He’s one of the smartest guys I know.”

The Covington resident and his wife are the proud parents of five children and the grandparents of 11 and great-grandparents of 12 and they are members of Oak Grove Baptist Church.

The Veteran of the Month program is sponsored by the Tipton County Museum, Veteran Memorial and Nature Center and the Tipton County Veterans Council. Sponsors of the monthly event include premier sponsor Tipton County Veterans Council, Patriot Bank, The Bank of Tipton and Munford Funeral Home. Underwriters include the VFW Ray Pinner Post 4840 and the Disable American Veterans Auxiliary Unit 116 in Millington and Dunham Loge 50. The next honoree will be named on Tuesday, April 12 at 6:30 p.m. The public is invited to both make nominations and attend the ceremony.