

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

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Veteran to get Flying Cross, 65 years later

Nazis held pilot in Buchenwald camp

Last updated January 27, 2009 11:27 p.m. PT

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Lest anyone doubt the significance that veterans and the armed forces place upon the medals they earn, for the second time in as many weeks a local veteran will receive recognition for bravery in wars decades ago.

Thursday is 87-year-old Joseph Moser's turn. The Whatcom County resident will receive the Distinguished Flying Cross at McChord Air Force Base on Thursday for his actions 65 years ago over Germany.



Photo by Gabriel Rodriguez
Joe Moser in 2008

Moser, originally a farm kid from Ferndale, on July 30, 1944 -- more than three weeks after the Normandy invasion -- earned the award as a first lieutenant piloting a P-38 fighter on a highly successful but dangerous bombing mission over a heavily fortified target. It was one of 43 missions Moser flew in the war.

Two weeks later, Moser, who served with the 474th Fighter Group, was shot down over Germany and became a POW, but in a rare move was first sent to the Buchenwald concentration camp. Moser's long-overdue recognition comes just as a book authored by Moser and Gerald Baron, "A Fighter Pilot in Buchenwald: The Joe Moser Story," is hitting book stores. According to the book, Moser was one of 168 Allied POWs who were held in the camp, a rarity for Allied prisoners of war, until late October 1944.

The airmen were subject to the same horrors as the nearly quarter of a million others in the camp until the German Luftwaffe discovered their presence and engineered their transfer to Stalag Luft III, a POW camp.

At Stalag Luft III, Moser was one of the POWs in Building 104, famous for the "great escape" of Allied POWs that had occurred several months before Moser and others arrived.

Air Force officials said Moser learned in the early 1990s that he had earned the DFC when he read about it in a friend's squadron diary.

Attempts by his family to acquire it for him, however, went nowhere until Baron learned of it while interviewing Moser for the book.

Baron, through some Rotary Club connections, got the ear of Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Rick Arnold, who probably deserves some kind of recognition himself for making things happen.



Photo courtesy of Joe Moser

Joe Moser's actual POW camp registration card taken after he got off the train from Buchenwald, weighing 113 pounds after losing 35 pounds in two months.

At least 30 of Moser's family members and friends are expected to attend the ceremony at McChord's annual awards banquet at the base's clubs and community center. Two former members of the squadron, Bob Milliken and Al Mills, are slated to attend.

When Baron told Moser he would finally receive the award, Moser, according to Air Force officials, said, "I thought he was pulling my leg -- I didn't really believe it. It still hasn't really sunk in -- it's quite an honor."

Earlier this month, a former Marine, Richard Beard, 62, of Bellevue received a Purple Heart in ceremonies at the Marine Home Site Training Center at Fort Lewis. He fought in Vietnam in 1965-66.

Beard was a private first class in 1965, serving with the 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment when he was wounded on Sept. 11 of that year by a mine on a hillside south of Danang. Beard served into early 1966 before he went home.

The discrepancy was discovered a year ago at a reunion when the corpsman who treated Beard learned of it and contacted Marine Corps officials.

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