

VETERANS DAY: COOKEVILLIAN HONORED BY FRENCH LEGION

by Megan Trotter

First Lieutenant William “Bill” Barenkamp points out some of the medals he earned over the years during his military career. Ty Kernea | Herald-Citizen



First Lieutenant William (Bill) Barenkamp displays the certificate he received along with a medal from France for his involvement in helping to defend that country in World War II. Ty Kernea | Herald-Citizen



BAXTER — First Lieutenant William “Bill” Barenkamp had only been married to his wife June six weeks when he got the call that he was needed to fight in the Korean War. He had been drafted at the age of 21 along with his twin brother to fight during World War II in 1942, and was now a reserve officer.

“I never dreamed he was going to get called back,” June said. “He was inactive. But we were married for six weeks and then he was gone for 15 months. And we didn’t have the communication that soldiers have today. Wives and husbands can talk and see each other (through the internet). I didn’t have that. I got two phone calls during that first year. We just wrote letters.” The two passed letters back and forth for over a year, sometimes going long stretches without hearing from each other. June’s father had served in World War I, and through maps printed in the local newspaper, he was able to help map out where Barenkamp was during those long periods of silence.

“I just kept working and that helped. I kept my mind on my job. But that’s not a good way to start your marriage,” June laughed. “But it was worth it all.”

The couple has been married 62 years and is now living in Baxter.

Before his service in Korea, Barenkamp first went overseas during World War II. He went through Officers Candidate School, was commissioned as a second lieutenant and worked in various training camps to training troops. He served in the 2nd Battalion of the 120th Infantry Regiment in the 30th Infantry Division.

“We went up on Omaha beach,” he said. “Omaha beach was already taken care of, but we went up and that’s when they first started putting white crosses for the men who had fought up the beach.”

From there he went to France and fought through Magdeburg, Germany, and all the way to Mortane, France, where the troop was cut off for six days. The media referred to them as “The Lost Battalion.”

His group continued fighting through the hedgerows in France, into the Battle of the Bulge and at the Rhine River.

“I was blessed though, because I was with battle-tested soldiers when I got into combat,” he said.

In October of this year, Barenkamp was one of four American men honored with the insignia of the Legion of Honor from France.

“It’s only for those who are not French, but you have to fight on French soil and be wounded in order to get the award,” Barenkamp explained.

“This was started with Napoleon when he knighted his men for bravery,” June added.

While at the ceremony, June got the opportunity to talk to the great-granddaughter of a former president of France. “I said, ‘This is such an honor.’ But she said, ‘Oh, it’s an honor for us as French to be able to give this to men who left their country of safety and came here and fought for freedom for us. We’ll never forget these men who came over and sacrificed their lives to give us freedom.’ I thought that was really something.”

The now 91-year-old Barenkamp is retired after having been a substitute teacher for special ed children in kindergarten and high school. He especially enjoys have former students recognize him around town and come up to chat with him.

He and June have three children of their own: Sandy Way in Kansas; Bill Barenkamp II in Knoxville, who also manages the Lifeway book store in Turkey Creek; and Shari Gansebom in Nebraska; as well as four grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

“We’ve certainly had a journey,” June chuckled.

Barenkamp nodded with a smile. “And I couldn’t have done it all without the Lord.”

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