

INDEPENDENCE DAY SPECIAL FOR WWII NAVY VET

By LINDSAY McREYNOLDS

COOKEVILLE — Monday was Independence Day, but now the day will have a new meaning for 94-year-old Cookeville resident **John Stafford**.

July 4 will now be the day the World War II Navy veteran received his medals.



In a ceremony attended by Stafford's family, other veterans, elected officials and others, Stafford received a wide series of honors: American Campaign Medal with Ribbon, World War II Victory Medal with Ribbon, Asiatic Pacific Campaign Medal with Ribbon and two Silver and one Bronze Battle Star, Navy Good Conduct Medal with Ribbon, Navy Occupation Service Medal with Ribbon and Asia Claps, Philippine Liberation Medal with Ribbon and one Bronze Star, Philippine Presidential Unit Citation and the Presidential Unit Citation Ribbon.

It was a process that began when Stafford's son, Ron, came across a website where one of his father's shipmates was receiving medals. When he discovered his own father had few of his original medals, he applied with the Navy for his father's service file so that he could also be honored.

Then Ron contacted Cookeville Mayor Ricky Shelton and asked if he would present the medals to his father. The mayor suggested tying in the ceremony with the Little Patriots Parade as part of the city's Independence Day festivities.

Stafford, a Gainesboro native, was born in 1922 and enlisted in the Navy on Oct. 23, 1942, shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. After he completed basic training, Stafford was assigned to the USS Dyson, a destroyer, where he served as a Ship Cook 3rd Class. Stafford was part of the squadron that defeated the Japanese in many historic battles, including the Battle of Cape St. George.

Between November 1943 and February 1944, his squadron was credited with destroying one Japanese cruiser, nine destroyers, one submarine and approximately 30 aircraft, resulting in the group's receipt of 11 battle stars and the Presidential Unit Citation in 1945.

Prior to the Monday morning ceremony, Stafford made his way through the crowd, where he was treated like a celebrity, shaking the hands of friends, family and other veterans who had come to see him honored.

In addition to his son, Ron, Stafford's son, Gary; his brother, Jimmy; and his wife, Julia were present Monday to witness the medal reception. The couple will celebrate their 70th wedding anniversary on July 13.

"I hope I don't have to swim," Stafford joked as the mayor and Stafford's son, Ron, were pinning medal after medal on his coat.

During the ceremony, when Upper Cumberland Child Advocacy Center Director Jennifer Wilkerson sang the National Anthem, Stafford closed his eyes and held his hand over his heart.

Stafford declined offers to speak to the crowd afterward.

Ron expressed his thanks to the mayor and the county executive.

"It's a nice day that I know I'll never forget and he'll never forget."

"This means a lot to me," Stafford said following the ceremony. "They should never wait until you die."

The imminent death of the country's remaining WWII vets was noted Monday by the mayor.

"The day will eventually come when there won't be any World War II vets to honor," Shelton said.

The Daughters of the American Revolution also honored 25 veterans present Monday with certificates of appreciation for their service in front of the county's memorial wall outside the courthouse.

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN: 6 July 2016

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