

AIRMAN AWARD

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only hours before that he would be receiving the Distinguished Flying Cross. "I really didn't think I'd get it, not this late. It's 60-some years."

From August 1944 to March 1945, for half a year, Costage flew on 35 missions over occupied Europe in a B-24 Liberator, dropping bombs on oil refineries, rail yards and other targets.

A historical account at the U.S. Air Force Web site, about one bomber group that flew in World War II, makes it clear every day could be a crew member's last.

"A combination of extreme cold, fluctuating air pressure, constant noise and vibration, 10-hour missions and stress caused by the fear of being shot down by fighters or flak exhausted the crews, and, as a result, most of them literally slept when not flying," Tech. Sgt. Pat McKenna writes in his account, "The Mighty Eighth."

A standard tour was 25 combat missions, but most didn't make it halfway. The number was raised to 30 and then 35 missions as Allied leaders deemed the air safer, a progression made famous in Joseph Heller's 1961 anti-war classic, "Catch-22."

The son of Greek immigrants, Costage is a retired Detroit firefighter and also



News Channel 8 photo by TODD DAVIS

George Costage never thought he would get the Distinguished Flying Cross he earned serving in Europe during World War II.

served as a Safety Harbor city commissioner from 1986 to 1992.

With help from the office of U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis, R-Palm Harbor, Costage was able to have his service record corrected to reflect his achievements in aerial combat during World War II.

The Distinguished Flying Cross goes to bomber crews who flew at least 25 missions, said Frank Chicollo, who

chairs Bilirakis' veterans' advisory committee.

Bilirakis said Costage mentioned during a discussion a few months ago that he never received the Distinguished Flying Cross.

"He said, 'I earned it, but I never received it,'" recalled Bilirakis, who has known Costage for about 25 years. "He didn't push for it, but I said he deserved it. He's a true hero."

A speechless Costage re-

ceived the medal during a short ceremony before 50 people at Briar Creek Mobile Home Park, where he and his wife of 52 years, Nancy, have lived since 1977.

"I was very grateful to the French underground," Nancy Costage said, "because if it wasn't for them getting him out, I wouldn't have a husband."

Costage, who was a staff sergeant with the U.S. Army Air Forces, still has the pocket calendar in which he wrote each combat mission flown by his 458th Bombardment Group, based in Norwich, England.

At the end of the list, Costage wrote "Finito" and the number of combat hours he logged — 229.

"To say I wasn't scared I'd be lying," said Costage, who was injured by flak on some of his raids. "At first, I wasn't afraid because I was too dumb."

He considers himself fortunate that he never saw people killed on his missions. "We were flying, so all we saw was destruction from up there."

Lucky, maybe, he said, but no hero.

"The heroes are the kids that are buried," said Costage, who also served in the Korean War as a medical officer. "They're the heroes. We were the lucky ones. We lived through it and got to come home."

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