

Flying Cross finds target

Quiet Rogers war hero honored — 54 years later

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ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Fifty-four years ago Friday, John D. Roberts was manning the top turret gun on a B-24 bomber when Japanese ground fire from Iwo Jima injured him and damaged the aircraft.

"We went on and completed our mission," the 75-year-old veteran from Rogers said Friday. "We were bombing airfields, refueling tanks and things like that. We had two holes in the airplane. I was shot in the mouth, but we did complete the mission."

Nine of the 10 crew members on that mission were honored for their actions that day — Jan. 29, 1945 — with the Air Force's Distinguished Flying Cross for completing the mission in a damaged aircraft with an injured crew member.

But somehow Roberts, the only crew member injured, never got his medal.

"I guess I just fell through the cracks," Roberts said. "I got separated from my crew because I was hospitalized for my injuries. I stayed in the hospital for three months before I rejoined my unit."

That oversight was remedied Friday when Col. Paul Fletcher, commander of the 314th Airlift Wing, awarded Roberts his medal during a brief ceremony at the base.

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Force," Fletcher said. "What a great hero he is. ... I stand in his shadow."

When Fletcher pinned on the medal, which has a gold star hanging from a red, white and blue ribbon, all Roberts could say is, "I appreciate it."

It was fellow crew member Neal Siebenbruner of Mankato, Minn., who discovered that Roberts had never received his medal.

"I thought it was wrong that he never got this medal," said Siebenbruner, who also attended the ceremony. "He deserved it."

Roberts said he remembered the day when he was shot.

"It was my 22nd mission, and it was a typical day," he said. "We got up early, loaded our equipment and flew the six hours it took to get from Guam to Iwo Jima."

"We were going to make our bombing run and get out the best way we could. But somehow the Japanese found us on their radar and started shooting at us with anti-aircraft guns."

Roberts said a piece of shrapnel

from the anti-aircraft guns struck him in the mouth.

"It knocked out a few teeth, lacerated my tongue," he said. "I wasn't in very good shape."

He saved the piece of shrapnel, which is about the size of his thumb, Roberts said.

"It's at home. I just kept it. Back then the Japanese were buying all the steel they could. It was probably a piece of steel from my father's old Model T," he said.

Also attending the ceremony was Roberts' brother, Robin Roberts, 72, who was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y., in 1976 after pitching for 18 years, mostly for the Philadelphia Phillies.

"This was a wonderful thing to be a part of," he said of his brother's ceremony. "John never talked about the service much."

As youngsters, the two often wrestled.

"He won all the fights. He's tough," Robin Roberts said. "I think he could win today."

Also at the ceremony was Roberts' sister, Joan Stone of Springfield, Ill.

"I think it's really wonderful," she said. "I don't think it's registered with John yet just how much this means. I only wish our parents were alive to see this."

But John Roberts said he was satisfied to finally receive the medal.

"I really think it was nice of them to get it for me," he said, with a shy smile. "It is really wonderful."



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/KAREN VANDONGE

John D. Roberts of Rogers (right) is congratulated Friday by Neil Siebenbruner, a former B-24 crew member, after Roberts received the Air Force's Distinguished Flying Cross in a cere-

mony at Little Rock Air Force Base. Siebenbruner recently discovered that an oversight had prevented Roberts from receiving the award along with the rest of his crew in 1945.