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WWII veteran is thankful and humbled



Byrd Griffin relaxes in the living room of his home in Chiefland on Tuesday morning (July 11).

Story and Photos

By Jeff M. Hardison © July 12, 2017 at 3:37 p.m.

CHIEFLAND -- The last surviving charter member of Chiefland Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Post 5625 shared some of his time Tuesday morning (July 11) when requested to do so by *HardisonInk.com*.

Ivy Byrd Griffin, 92, said he is thankful to God for being blessed with good health. He feels humbled to be able to ride a bicycle and to play golf.

He is best known by his middle name rather than his first name. Byrd Griffin joins Jim Smith as being two of the last active charter members of the Chiefland Golf and Country Club too.

Griffin says he has enjoyed many games of golf with Smith over the past many years.

Griffin was one of about 15 boys who joined the United States Army Air Corps before graduating Chiefland High School during World War II, he said.

He and Bob Horn were seniors at CHS in October of 1942 when they joined, he said. His brother Jack Griffin and the man who was the manager of the Rural Electrification Administration office in Chiefland were a couple of other Chiefland area men who joined the Army at the same time, Byrd Griffin said.

The recruiter promised all of the high school boys who joined from CHS that they would remain stationed at Panama City, where they would work on airplane engines for the duration of the war. They would also earn their high school diplomas via enlisting in the military.

That is not exactly how things turned out.

Instead, Byrd Griffin ended up being stationed in England and he became a gunner

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positioned in the top turret of a bomber that flew over Europe during WWII. He fired a .50 caliber mounted machine gun at enemy fighter planes attacking the bomber he served on as a staff sergeant.

The turret was above the top part of the B-24 and he was behind a Plexiglas globe. Griffin would occasionally need to ask the radio operator, who was position in the aircraft below him, to share his oxygen by passing the mask up.

Griffin couldn't wear his parachute, because there was not room in the area where he needed to be able to shoot, but it was within reach if he ever needed to grab it. He never needed to use the parachute.

Griffin said there is no part of war that is good; however, in the instance where it was needed to overcome tyranny from Nazi Germany's Adolph Hitler, it was necessary.

After taking the oath as a soldier at Camp Blanding to serve in the United States Army Air Corps, Griffin was sent to Panama City. Then he went to a base in North Carolina where he worked from midnight until 6 a.m. to learn how to be an airplane mechanic.

His class time might seem unusual, however there were round-the clock classes, he said, as the United States put everything into high gear for WWII. After those six months of airplane mechanic school, he was sent to an Army Air Corps base in Fort Myers, where he learned to be a gunner for six weeks.

Next, he was sent out west. He became part of a crew that was to man a B-24. They practiced bombing for several months.

It was at a base in West Palm Beach where he opened his then secret orders with his colleagues, and he learned they were to join the 8th Air Force in England.



In this photo from Griffin's active duty days in WWII, the following men on the crew are seen (standing) pilot Nelson Stewart, co-pilot Bert Betts, navigator Kenneth Enockson, bombardier Harold Fray, (kneeling) James Mitchell, Thomas 'Bark' Brown, Jon Baker, Elam Behrens, Byrd Griffin and George Smith.

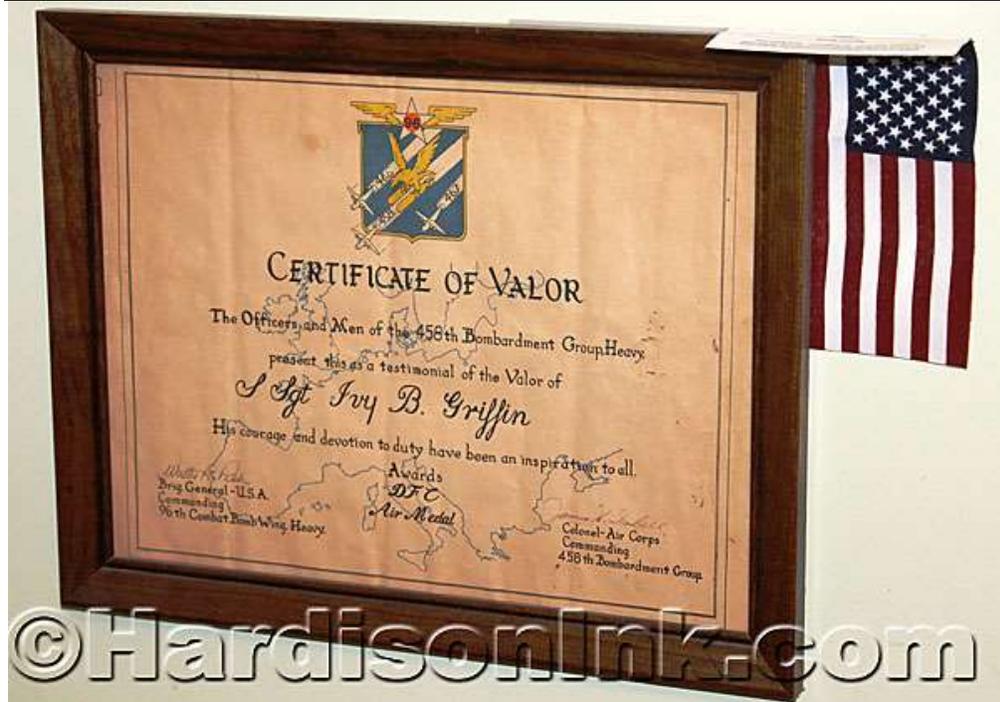
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This painting of the B-24 named 'Gator' is an artist's representation. Actually, when flak was exploding around the bombers and they were dropping bombs, no German fighter pilots would be attempting to shoot at the bombers, Griffin said.



This wooden plaque shows the set of ribbons earned by S/Sgt. Ivy B. Griffin, including the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with three oak clusters.

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This certificate of valor was awarded for courage and devotion of duty. It shows he was given the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal.

United States Army Air Corps Staff Sergeant Ivy Byrd Griffin became the engineer gunner in the top turret in Crew 76, 8th Air Force, 2nd Air Division, 458th Bomb Group, 755th Bomb Squadron, based out of Norwich, England.

Before arriving in Wales, the men flew Brazil and then spent a while in North Africa.

They flew 30 missions in 90 days, bombing German targets.

His first combat mission was on March 8, 1944, although his group flew its first mission on March 6, 1944.

That March 6 flight was the first daylight bombing raid on Berlin. The men who flew that deep into Germany on bombers did not have fighter support after a certain number of miles, because the fighters lacked the fuel storage for that range, he said.

Anti-aircraft fire was heavy as the crews flew deeper into Germany. There were 60 United States and other allied aircraft crews lost the first day on March 6, Griffin said.

During the March 8, 1944 daylight raid, when Griffin was part of the group, there were 623 bombers involved.

During that March 8 bombing raid, 37 United States bombers were lost and 18 fighters were also lost, according to records.

The Luftwaffe lost 42 fighter planes, according to records.

The crew members who Griffin served with named their B-24 "Gator" in honor of their pilot, who was from Miami. The B-24 Gator and all of the other bombers that Griffin's crew flew on eventually were shot down, he said, although never when he was on board.

"My crew made 30 missions and we never had to bailout," Griffin said.

He is thankful to God for having been spared from death during the war. The thought of bailing out at the same time that bombs are dropping from the sky is frightening. Death was always at the doorstep for American soldiers in active combat zones.

There were incendiary bombs, fragmentary bombs, and various other forms of explosive devices dropped on the enemy.

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Griffin was part of the D-Day invasion of Normandy.

On June 6, 1944, the crew of the B-24 named "Gator" completed two missions of bombing runs over Normandy. He said that as they flew toward the coast and he looked through the clouds, he could see hundreds of ships "bumper to bumper."

The crew was told on its June 8, 1944 mission to drop the bombs even deeper into the target area, to avoid hitting the Allied Forces, Griffin said.

Byrd Griffin said he and all of the other member of the American armed forces fought against Adolf Hitler and the other tyrants who wanted to rule the world.

Hitler was making progress in Europe, and the fronts in the Pacific were also points where the United States Army Air Corps had to drop bombs.

Griffin said he is thankful to God that United States President Harry S. Truman, during the final stage of World War II, ordered the United States to drop nuclear weapons on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on Aug. 6 and 9, 1945, respectively.

Those two bombings killed at least 129,000 people, and they remain as the only use of nuclear weapons for warfare in history.

Griffin said he and his colleagues fought in the war to protect American freedom.

Today, all Americans have the right to vote for whomever they want. And today, when a person from one political party or another political party snubs a person for choosing to vote one way or another, Griffin says that is not what freedom is about.

American freedom means a person can belong to any political party, or no political party. They can vote for a candidate in their party or in a different party. People can even choose to not even register to vote.

Hitler was taking over all of Europe, Griffin said, and there needed to be a war to stop the Nazi threat. If America had not entered WWII, then Americans might be speaking German as their primary language now, he said.

Looking back, though, he remembers seeing those green fields and towns he and his fellow soldiers had to fly over as they bombed military and industrial targets. Griffin said that any part of war is bad.

"Here I was," he said, "going to kill a bunch of people. And they would kill me if they were able to. It seems foolish in a way. If the people who sent us to fight had to fight themselves, then maybe there would not be so many wars."

As for the war in the Pacific Theater, Griffin said he is thankful that President Harry S. Truman ordered the United States to drop nuclear weapons on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on Aug. 6 and 9, 1945, respectively.

The result of those two bombs being dropped was victory for the United States and its allies in WWII. Since then, no nuclear weapon has been used in war.

With the advances in rockets and weaponry since the first atomic bombs, Griffin said he understands how saber-rattling could lead to a catastrophic event.

As for the years immediately after WWII, the return to Chiefland was pleasant for the decorated soldier.

Griffin had been awarded the Distinguished Service Medal, which is known as the Distinguished Flying Cross from the United States Army Air Corps.

He also earned the Air Medal with three Oak Leaf Clusters and other honors for his military service during WWII.

Once back in Chiefland, he opened Griffin Department Store in November of 1946. That clothing store was located in the very sturdy building that still stands on the east side of Main Street (U.S. Highway 19) south of Park Avenue, on the other side of the parking lot for the old Drummond Bank outlet.

Griffin worked in his store from November of 1946 until he retired 37 years later in May of 1984.

Now Vickie and Fred's Used Furniture Store occupies most of the space in the building that

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used to house Griffin's Department Store, although the southern portion of the structure includes a dentist's office.

Dr. Robert Mount, another dentist in downtown Chiefland, has his office on West Park Avenue. Dr. Mount's advertisement is on the HOME PAGE at <http://hardisonink.com/index.php#dentist>.

One of the biggest changes in the business arena of Chiefland, Griffin said, was when Walmart opened in 1995. Many smaller store merchants were sorry to see that happen, he said.

Walmart was able to offer consumers prices that were lower than what the small store owners could offer. As a result, a number of local business interests closed.

Griffin and his wife Evelyn have two daughters. Those daughters are Carol, who married Will Irby, and Rhonda, who married Phil Horn.

Byrd Griffin's wife Evelyn is in a healthcare facility now due to her suffering from dementia, Griffin said. He said she is receiving good care there.

As for him, Griffin is thankful and humbled to have been blessed by God with good health. He is a member of the congregation at First Baptist Church of Chiefland.