

## Murray Zolkower – One Of Our Own Turns 100

Murray turned 100 on February 6<sup>th</sup> of this year. About 2 months prior, his daughter Francine, decided to try and get 100 birthday cards sent to her so she could surprise him on his birthday. Through the efforts of JWV National and the Department of Florida, with the assistance of many Department and Post members, as well as some outside organizations, Murray received over 500 cards plus letters from former President George W. Bush, Sen. Marco Rubio, Congressman Gus Bilirakis and two former U.S. Surgeon Generals.

Murray also received a plaque and a statue of a wounded soldier being taken care of by a combat medic from the Army Museum in Texas.

Murray's favorite place to eat is Mission BBQ. On February 4<sup>th</sup>, Mission BBQ hosted a small surprise luncheon in honor of one of their favorite customers. It was attended by his daughter, 2 of her friends, and 3 members of JWV. There was also a surprise drop in by 2 Active-Duty Army recruiters who brought a bag full of goodies for Murray. Murray was also presented with the JWV Centenarian Certificate by Department of Florida Larry Jasper, assisted by Jack Rudowsky and Jim Marenus from Post 373 in Tampa.



At Mission BBQ in Tampa, Murray Zolkower shows off the Centenarian Certificate from the JWV presented by the Department of Florida Commander Larry Jasper along with Jim Marenus and Jack Rudowsky of Post 373 in Tampa, FL.

On the 6<sup>th</sup>, his actual birthday, there was a surprise “drive by” parade in front of his home in Dunedin, FL, organized by the Suncoast Region Veterans Village USA. The parade included restored military vehicles, including a fully restored 1942 Army jeep, and a group of military veterans on motorcycles. There were also additional vintage Army jeeps, a vehicle from Mission Barbecue, and other cars and trucks displaying congratulatory signs and American flags. The Dunedin Fire Department, the Pinellas County Sheriff’s Office, Honor Flight of West Central Florida, and a retired Air Force Colonel who serves as an aide to

Congressman Bilirakis also participated in the parade.



Col. Jerry Custin (aide to Congressman Gus Bilirakis), Murray Zolkower, Francine Wolf (Murray’s Daughter), in the driver’s seat, and 2 friends.

Murray has been a member of the JWV since 1946 when he returned home from World War II and is still co-commander of JWV Post 409, and one of the longest serving volunteers at Bay Pines VA Hospital in St. Petersburg.

Murray was completely surprised that so many people came out and sent things to him to honor his milestone. He said it was the “greatest moment of my life”.

But his life was not always so great.

While attending Columbia College of Pharmacy in New York in 1938 a recruiter for the New York National Guard came on campus. He promised \$15 a month for attending 2 times a month. That was a lot of money at the time, so Murray signed up. One year later, in 1939, he was surprised when he was activated for one year and had to disrupt his studies. He spent the year at Camp Dix (now Fort Dix) in New Jersey. After being released he returned to Columbia only to have his studies again disrupted in 1943 when he was once again called to active duty.

The Army had no need for a Pharmacist, so they sent him to Colorado to train as a Dental Tech. He was later sent to Texas to train as a medic. He then found himself on the Queen Elizabeth with about 10,000 others headed for Scotland. From there he went by train to Bath, England.

Murray found himself on Omaha Beach 6 weeks after D-Day. He said the beach was all cleaned up and very busy with supplies and personnel coming in. He was sent to the area near St. Lo, France, assigned to the 7<sup>th</sup> Convalescent Hospital, where they used large tents to treat troops who were capable of returning to duty.

In August 1944 he was in Paris assigned a clearing company of the 45<sup>th</sup> Division as a Dental Tech., where he was evaluating wounded who had facial injuries. Murray said he never saw so much blood.

Murray then moved to Etampes, France, where the Division set up in a captured German Hospital. He said it was very clean, 5 stories high, and had 375 beds. The Army decided they did not need a Dental Tech. there so he became a medic assigned to the 92<sup>nd</sup> Mechanized Cav., 14<sup>th</sup> Division, in a half-track with 6 riflemen and a gunner on a .50 cal. and they were sent out to look for trouble close to the front.

Murray then got assigned to the 120<sup>th</sup> Med. Bn., 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and because of his training as a Dental Tech., he became a Maxillofacial Tech, assisting doctors with serious facial wounds. Murray said, unfortunately, most of the patients bled out.

His unit fought their way through Nuremburg and Munich where they were billeted in a former SS barracks which he described as “beautiful”. Through all this Murray never carried a weapon.

Finally, on April 29, 1945, his unit was ordered to liberate Dachau. Murray said they all knew what was there and he did not want to go. He did not want to see fellow Jews dead and dying. But he was not given the choice. There were 125 riflemen and 3 medics. His element followed the railroad tracks to the camp and encountered opposition from the Nazis. A 30-minute battle ensued, ending when a half-track with a .50 cal. machine gun arrived and killed the guards. They found boxcars loaded with dead bodies and inside the camp what they expected – dead and dying all over. Murray said, “it was the worst thing I ever saw in my life”. He also said the street leading to the front gate was lined with nice homes like suburban Long Island, right up to the gate, so there was no way the civilians did not know what was going on in the camp.

The soldiers were ordered not to give the prisoners food as it could kill a starving person. Most of the living asked for cigarettes but Murray did not smoke and had none to offer.

The war ended 9 days later, and Murray was excited to go home. Then he was told he was to remain as part of the “Army of Occupation”. He was sent to Gars, Germany to set up a clinic to treat farmers who sustained injuries. He would ask everyone who came in if he was a Nazi and of course all denied it. Murray was bitter about having to treat the now former enemy and only gave out aspirin, no matter what their problem was. Fortunately 2 months later he received orders to proceed to Cherbourg, France for a ship home. It took 10 days to get to New York and he was elated, only to learn he had to go to Texas for 2 months before finally being discharged.

Murray’s girlfriend, Lillian, wrote him every other day while he was away. When he finally got home, he married her in 1946 and completed his schooling, at last becoming a Pharmacist in 1948. Murray worked as such for the next 36 years before retiring. But he could not rest and got a part time job as a Pharmacist, totaling over 70 years in a career he still loves, still working at 100 years old, part-time for CVS.

In 1971 Murray moved to Florida. His son is also a Pharmacist in Nashville, TN., and unfortunately his beloved wife Lillian passed away in 2014.

Murray has a brother who also served in WWII and received a battle-field promotion to Warrant Officer. Their paths managed to connect a couple of times in Europe.

The 45<sup>th</sup> Division suffered 21,000 casualties: about 3,500 KIA and about 17,500 WIA.

His daughter, Francine, said “the celebrations were fabulous – everyone kept calling him a hero”.