

Ray Kay Mower

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April 7, 2005 - [Battle of the Bulge vet to get new medals - Original awards were lost in 1957 in a garage fire.](#)

A freak garage fire stole Ray Kay Mower's military memories nearly 50 years ago.

Gone were the pictures he snapped during World War II. Gone were the old uniforms he wore while serving in both the Army and the Air Force. But toughest of all, gone were the medals he earned during about six years of service. Now, thanks to the Utah National Guard, he's getting them back.

"I'm finally gonna have 'em," Mower, 79, said with a smile. "It sure means a lot to me. You know, I'm getting pretty old. This kinda puts the finishing touches on my military experience."

And it was an experience to remember, he said. From fighting on the front lines of the Battle of the Bulge to driving tanker trucks full of fuel for B-26 bombers to feeding hungry soldiers in the mess hall, Mower just about experienced it all.

A fire in 1957 at his Holladay home in an unattached garage burned up every old picture and medal Mower owned from the war.

"That was a lot of memories," Mower said.

Memories like that of the Battle of the Bulge, where 19,000 Americans lost their lives. It was Dec. 16, 1944 and bitter cold with the snow at least 6 inches deep. Mower was asleep in a bunker when enemy fire tattered the landscape.

"All hell broke loose," Mower said. "I wondered if the world was coming to an end."

Mower was a gunner with the Army's [106th Infantry Division](#) in charge of mortar fire. The Utah soldier was in the thick of the famous battle and came within inches of death multiple times.

Mower's days on the front line abruptly ended on Christmas Day 1944. Machine-gun bullets came close to Mower's body, but it was an artillery blast that catapulted him into the air and slammed him into the ground.

"I was picked up and just thrown and violently shook," Mower said. "My whole body was shaking, then I hit the ground."

Mower pulled himself back up and escaped without any shrapnel wounds or lost limbs. The blast did, however, cause Mower to bleed internally and vomit blood.

Mower received a Bronze Star for "firing my mortar under extremely dangerous position" during that battle. He was launching mortar beneath an overhanging log that was so close "every time I fired, there was smoke."

After weeks of rehabilitation at a handful of different European hospitals, Mower was

transferred to the Air Force, where he drove fuel tankers that supplied B-26 bombers in France.

Once the war ended, Mower took a job as a kitchen worker in Germany. While on the job, Mower traded his cigarette rations to an elderly German man in exchange for German lessons. Mower learned the language so fast he was promoted from private first class to sergeant.

"I was just a 20-year-old kid in charge of everything," Mower said.

Years later, Mower had all but given up the effort to get a new set of medals. He thought all was lost after the fire decades ago.

Mower asked the local Division of Veterans Affairs for help in getting his old medals replaced but never got any answers. It took just one phone call to the Utah National Guard before Mower finally got the answer he wanted.

"They've got 'em," Mower said.

Maj. Gen. Brian L. Tarbet, the Guard's adjutant general, will present Mower with a new set of medals in a ceremony next week.

Among them will be a badge Mower received during training for firing with expert precision with an M-1 rifle. "Only two in my company did it — me and my lieutenant," he said.

Mower is a "great guy" who deserves to be honored once again, said 2nd Lt. Wayne L. Lee of the Utah National Guard.

"He served in the Battle of the Bulge — there (are) not too many of those guys around anymore," Lee said. "We thought it would be nice to help him out and get his medals back.

"More than anything, he's a veteran, and we wanted to do something for our veterans." ([Leigh Dethman](#), Salt Lake City Deseret News - Salt Lake City, UT, USA)



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