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World War II veteran gets his Bronze Star and other medals 67 years after his discharge

by Diedra Rodriguez • July 6, 2012 • 2 min read • [original](#)

PALM HARBOR — U.S. Army Cpl. Robert Smiddy was discharged in 1946.

Friday, he finally got the medals he earned for his service — 67 years after he was discharged. Among those medals was a Bronze Star, awarded for heroic or meritorious achievement not involving aerial flight.

Smiddy, 89, received the medals in a surprise ceremony arranged by his children and U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis, R-Palm Harbor.

"If I had known this was happening, I would've worn a suit and tie," Smiddy said as he posed for pictures with his wife, Blanche, 87, their three children — Tom, Bob and Carol — and the congressman.

Smiddy said he recalled seeing on his discharge papers after the war that he had earned the Bronze Star, but "I thought it was a mistake," so he ignored it.

"I thought it was for people who did something heroic and unusual," he said.

But Gen. George C. Marshall, the Army chief of staff during World War II, awarded the Bronze Star for those in non-aerial combat and whose ranks suffered heavy casualties. That included Smiddy, whose unit, the 97th Infantry Division, took part in heavy fighting and, according to the Army's website, suffered 1,318 casualties.

"I feel unworthy," Smiddy said after receiving the Bronze Star and five other service medals Friday.

His wife replied, "He's quite a humble man."

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A year ago doctors diagnosed Smiddy with Stage 4 bladder cancer. As he began to make end-of-life plans, he knew he wanted to be buried in the Florida National Cemetery in Bushnell. But he needed the discharge papers he had lost years ago.

His three children, who all live in Palm Harbor, requested the papers in May. When they received the documents soon after, Smiddy's son Tom, 48, raised an eyebrow at the list of six medals his father should have received.

He began scheming with his brother and sister to figure out how to present the medals to their father. They contacted Bilirakis, who is vice chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee.

Bilirakis has presented medals to many local veterans in the past few years and was going to be in his district this week. The next time he would be in Palm Harbor would be August. No one wanted to wait another month.

Smiddy was led to believe he would be meeting a caseworker Friday at Bilirakis' office to review his discharge papers. The Smiddy children didn't tell their dad or their mom about the real reason for the visit.

His family trickled into the office on Friday afternoon and confessed. Soon after, Bilirakis walked in with a display of six medals: the Bronze Star, Good Conduct Medal, American Campaign Medal, Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal, European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal, World War II Victory Medal as well as a Combat Infantry Badge.

Smiddy saw heavy fighting during the war, and said he had two weapons to defend himself as German bullets flew: his gun and prayer.

He said he promised God he would serve him, and he did. After the war he became a minister, serving churches in various states for 50 years.

In December, the Smiddys will celebrate their 70th wedding anniversary. They were married two months before he enlisted.

Their three children lived in Palm Harbor before their parents did. The Smiddys moved here from Virginia after their first grandchild was born in 2002.

Bilirakis said that of all the veterans he has presented medals to, 67 years was the longest time he can remember a veteran having to wait.

It was also the first time he surprised one.

"He's a very special individual," Bilirakis said. "He did a lot of work. He deserves it."

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