

Final award: Congressman Bill Enyart honors the late Walter Chesney



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MOUNT VERNON — The late Walter Chesney, a Jefferson County native, was honored Wednesday for his role in the liberation of more than 2,100 Allied civilians and prisoners of war during World War II.

Chesney, a sergeant in the 672d Amphibian Tractor Battalion, was posthumously awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for helping liberate the Los Banos Internment Camp at Luzon, Philippine Islands on Feb. 23, 1945.

"The Presidential Unit Citation is awarded to Armed Forces units that display extraordinary acts of

heroism during confrontation with an armed enemy. The entire unit must accomplish its mission under circumstances of extreme difficulty in hazardous conditions. Sgt. Chesney's unit did just that," Congressman Bill Enyart said before presenting Chesney's family with the citation during a ceremony at Mount Vernon Outland Airport.

Chesney was part of the "daring mission" that took place 25 miles behind enemy lines, Enyart said.

"As a veteran myself, I am humbled to present Sgt. Chesney's family with the Presidential Unit Citation, a citation that shows he served in a unit of heroes," Enyart said. "It never ceases to amaze me how the most common ordinary folks took part in some of the most extraordinary courageous actions. Invariably those folks are always humble and modest but they had displayed extraordinary courage, just like Walter Chesney."

Chesney's son, Gary, accepted the citation for his father, who died just before his 71st birthday in 1989. He said while his father seldom spoke of his military service, he gained insight from a letter written by another veteran in his father's unit.

"On most operations, they were asked to step forward if they wanted to go on a mission. This one happened to be different. They told them, 'If you do not want to go on this mission, then step back.' Nobody stepped back. They all chose to go," Chesney said. "If my father was here today, he'd say, 'It was our duty,' as so many veterans do."

The citation was originally awarded to the unit in 2011, but the family only learned about it through the Jefferson County Veterans Hall of Honor, a permanent memorial to area veterans inside Koziara Terminal at the airport.

Chesney wanted his father to be a part of the hall and submitted the necessary paperwork to the all-volunteer staff at the hall.

While doing research on Sgt. Chesney, volunteer Cliff Christensen discovered the citation.

"Every veteran has a story," he said. "This is a way to show respect and thank them for their service."

Almost 500 individually-tailored veteran tributes are in the hall and in an online gallery. Chesney encouraged people to take stories of their veterans to the hall.

"Our family is very proud to be here today but we are very humbled, too," he said in thanking the hall's volunteers for their efforts. "We appreciate all of you who give your time to help honor the veterans."