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Russell Dunham, awarded Medal of Honor for bravery, dies

BY Leah Thorsen

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Russell Dunham, a World War II veteran who won the Medal of Honor, died of heart failure in his home in Godfrey on Monday (April 6, 2009). He was 89.

Mr. Dunham won the nation's highest military honor for his bravery during a battle near Kayserberg, France, on Jan. 8, 1945.

Tech. Sgt. Dunham wore a robe made of a mattress cover and carried 12 carbine magazines and a dozen hand grenades during his attack up a snow-covered hill while under fire, the Army says on its Medal of Honor website. Although he was shot in the back, he was able to fire 175 rounds of carbine ammunition and throw 11 grenades. He killed nine German soldiers, wounded seven and captured two more, the Army said.

"Dunham, despite a painful wound, spearheaded a spectacular and successful diversionary attack," the Army said.

In a 1999 interview, Mr. Dunham told the Post-Dispatch he wasn't aware of being in great danger at the time, or in other battles. "Once you get into battle, you forget your fears," Mr. Dunham said.

A member of the 30th Infantry, 3rd Infantry Division, Mr. Dunham fought in North Africa, Sicily, Italy and France, earning a Silver Star, a Bronze Star and almost every other combat medal available.

After he recovered from his injuries at Kayserberg, he returned to the line. On Jan. 22, 1945, he and most of his unit were captured. But only a day or two later, Mr. Dunham used a hidden handgun to kill a guard and escape. He walked three days in temperatures sometimes below zero to get back to U.S. lines.

Mr. Dunham was born in East Carondelet in 1920 and spent his youth around Fosterburg in Madison County. When he was about 16, he went to live with his

older brother Ralph in St. Louis for several years. They sold soup, hot tamales and other items on the streets.

After his military service, Mr. Dunham went on to work as a benefits counselor with the VA in St. Louis for about 30 years. He got veterans signed up for benefits before they arrived home, said his stepdaughter, Annette Wilson of Godfrey.

Mr. Dunham attended many veterans' conventions and traveled to Denver in September with his granddaughter for his final gathering, Wilson said.

Mr. Dunham moved to Godfrey about three weeks ago and was in the process of selling his farm in Jerseyville, she said.

Visitation will be from 5 to 8 p.m. Thursday and from 9:30 to 11 a.m. Friday at Gent's Funeral Home in Alton. A funeral service that will be officiated by a VFW chaplain will be held there at 11 a.m. Friday.

Mr. Dunham will be buried at Valhalla Memorial Park in Godfrey.

In addition to his stepdaughter and granddaughter, among the survivors are a daughter, Mary Neal of Cobden, Ill., a stepson, David Bazzell of Louisiana; three brothers; three sisters; and several other grandchildren. He was preceded in death by his wife, Wilda Long-Bazzell.

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