

WWII pilot presented Distinguished Flying Cross after 68 years

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U.S. Air Force Maj. Gen. John F. Nichols, Texas adjutant general and commander, Texas Military Forces discusses the 28th mission of Thomas P. Faulkner, a former pilot and 1st. Lt. of the U.S. Army Air Forces' 15th Air Force, in Italy during WWII where he earned his Distinguished Flying Cross in 1945. Faulkner is officially receiving his DFC 68 years after the fact at the 136th Airlift Wing, Naval Air Station Fort Worth Joint Reserve Base, Texas, Sept. 19, 2013. (Air National Guard photo by Senior Master Sgt. Elizabeth Gilbert/released)



NAVAL AIR STATION FORT WORTH JOINT RESERVE BASE, Texas (Sept. 19, 2013) -- A World War II veteran was presented the Distinguished Flying Cross during a ceremony here at the 136th Airlift Wing, Texas Air National Guard, Sept. 19, 2013.

Thomas P. Faulkner of Dallas was presented the award for his actions while serving as a first lieutenant and bomber pilot with the U.S. Army Air Forces' 15th Air Force, in Italy. Faulkner, 88, earned the award when he was 19, but he was never presented the medal or told of his receiving the award.

"The Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) was authorized by an Act of Congress, July 2, 1926, and amended by Executive Order 778-6, on Jan. 8, 1938," said Lt. Col. James Castleman, the wing's executive officer. "It was first awarded to Capt. Charles A. Lindbergh, U.S. Army (Air) Corps Reserve, for his solo flight of 3,600 miles across the Atlantic in 1927."

Additionally, the DFC is awarded to service members who distinguish themselves in combat for "heroism or extraordinary achievement while participating in an aerial flight," Castleman said.

A graduate of Highland Park High School in Dallas, Faulkner joined the armed forces while he was a student at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas - days after his 18th birthday and became one of the youngest pilots in the military.

During the war, Faulkner was stationed at San Giovanni Airfield, near Cerignola, Italy. On Feb. 27, 1945, during a mission over Augsburg, Germany, then-1st Lt. Faulkner piloted a B-24 Liberator aircraft, which became crippled due to engine failure and enemy fire, according to Air Force documents.

He was forced to separate from his formation. Recounting the mission - his 28th of the war - Faulkner said, "shortly after sustaining damage to the aircraft from flak, the aircraft descended at 500 feet per minute. We were losing altitude. Two of our four engines were (already) not working."

"I didn't think I could make it over the Alps to return back to our base in Italy," he said. "(But) I wanted to make it to friendly territory."

Under normal circumstances, Faulkner should have been able to pilot the B-24 to France, friendly territory by that point of the war. However, on this mission, he was flying without a navigator, who was pulled from the flight at the last minute, and with a newly assigned co-pilot.

They completed their bombing run before having to land the damaged aircraft.

Serving as navigator was a bombardier with minimal navigation skills. During the return flight, the aircraft's location was miscalculated and they were forced to land in Switzerland, a neutral country.

Maintenance records from the period indicate that Faulkner's aircraft sustained damage to a wing and the flaps. Two engines were nearly out of oil and another was frozen. It was an amazing feat that he was able to safely land the aircraft at all.

"You got all your folks home safe," said Maj. Gen. John F. Nichols, the adjutant general of Texas and commanding general of the Texas Military Forces, who presented the award to Faulkner, on behalf of the secretary of the Air Force.

"I put myself in his shoes a bit," said Nichols, who's also a command Air Force pilot. "You weren't going to clear the Swiss Alps. You could have been one of those others we couldn't find and wondered where you were."

"Thank you for your service," Nichols said. "I'm glad you got to find out about it."

During World War II, the Geneva Convention (1929) in effect required aircraft and aircrews landing in neutral territory to be permanently withdrawn from the war. Faulkner and his crew were interned for seven days by the

Swiss army. Afterward, they were released as part of a prisoner exchange and were flown back to Italy, before returning to the United States.

While he was credited with saving the lives of his crew, Faulkner said he spent the next six decades doubting his decision, thinking he let down his squadron. He suffered from stress-induced insomnia and throat ailments, which required four surgeries.

"When I left, all four propellers were turning," he said. "But one engine was totally dead - the prop was wind-milling. The other engine had no supercharger, so the propeller was not pulling any power."

He did not learn until recently, when flight logs were discovered, that he did make the right calls during that 28th mission.

"There were records showing my plane (with) both engines were out," Faulkner said. "There were records showing (that) my squadron saw my distress, I was dropping at 500 feet per minute."

Unbeknownst to Faulkner, one month after his return to the United States, he was awarded the DFC. But he was never presented it nor did his military discharge paperwork reflect the award.

"Not only had they not condemned me, that had given me a DFC," Faulkner said. "That's brought complete relief."

After the war, Faulkner graduated from Southern Methodist University in Dallas, with a degree in business administration, and then had a career in the insurance industry and is now an author. He's been married to his wife for 65 years and they raised two children.

Faulkner and his family finally learned of the award this year.

"This thing had been discovered by Dan Matthews," Faulkner said. "I didn't know him - I didn't shake his hand until this morning. He has done all of this for me, since last March."

Matthews, of Minneapolis, is a retired airline executive and a research hobbyist focused on World War II aviation records. He said his hobby initially grew out of an interest in his father and uncle's service in the war and led to in-depth study in processes and records administration.

"I was able to learn how the Army and Army Air Forces were organized, what forms and documents were used, how they were prepared, what level organization gave approvals, awards and decorations, campaigns and how and where the records ended up getting filed," Matthews said.

For about six months, Faulkner corresponded with Matthews about his war experience, but they never met in person. Beginning as a simple search for flight records, the research led to the discovery of the award.

"I have met a lot of World War II veterans in my research over the years," Matthews said, "and from a research standpoint, I could relate to who he was, where he was, the unit he was with and his flying of a B-24."

"Although I don't do this for a living, and really never anticipated spending much time on it, one thing led to the next and my curiosity and desire to find answers to help Mr. Faulkner somewhat drove the process," he said.

It turned out that Faulkner was actually awarded the DFC on Apr. 20, 1945. But with the war in Europe ending shortly thereafter, the record did not make its way into Faulkner's file before his honorable discharge.

"It sat dormant for 68 years in the file," Matthews said. "One thing is for sure though, he now knows that the 15th Air Force knew then, in 1945, that he did it right on his 28th mission. There is no more reason for doubt, worry or fear of him not having done the right thing in landing that plane in Switzerland."

Faulkner was in good spirits and was jovial in receiving the award.

"I don't think that I'm the bravest pilot to receive the DFC," Faulkner said, "but I bet that I'm the oldest pilot."

"I'm so impressed," Faulkner said of the ceremony. "It's unbelievable. We certainly never expected anything like this at all. I love everything about the Air Force."

While it took more than six decades to be recognized and to have his anxieties eased about his wartime service, Faulkner remained positive throughout the day's events. He even passed on some wisdom to the younger generations.

"Never be discouraged and never give up," Faulkner said. "I had given up on myself, until this revelation came up."