

WWII veteran receives Quilt of Valor

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Nettie Wilson, left, and Sarah Lanier presented the Quilt of Valor to World War II veteran Leon Gatlin at St. George's Court.

RAY LIGHTNER/DAILY NEWS

In honor of his World War II military service, William "Leon" Gatlin was presented a Quilt of Valor from the Victory Quilt Guild of Jackson on Wednesday at St. George's Court.

ONLY IN
SPALDING

Sarah Lanier, "a good friend of Leon," said the presen-

tation was for his dedicated service in the U.S. Army. Gatlin served as an Army scout with the 745th — part of four tank companies in France and Belgium. He was captured on Sept. 11, 1944 in a German machine gun attack where he was wounded and three of his fellow soldiers were killed.

Gatlin, a Griffin native,

said "I grew up in the 1930s, a few blocks away from here. I grew up with quilts," he said, remembering the quilting frame hanging from the ceiling at his grandmother's house.

Griffin was a small town, he said, "and if not for the war, we would not have left."

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QUILT

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Gatlin comes from a long family line of military volunteers serving in every U.S. war since the American Revolution. His brothers and cousins also served in World War II.

"My brother was captured in Heidelberg, my youngest brother served in North Africa, a cousin was on the USS Alabama and another who delivered the Marines to Iwo Jima," he said.

After being captured, Gatlin said, he was hospitalized for about a month then was moved to a prison camp near the Czechoslovakian border.

"It was not like in the movies," he said. The camp was in a converted opera house in the town of Madigan.

"They took all the seats out and put army cots in. I slept on the stage," he said. "There were 500 of us in there — half of them Britishers. I played bridge with a guy from Cape Town, South Africa."

That soldier asked about Gatlin's leg, made him a brace so Gatlin could walk again, and get rid of the crutches, he said.

"When I went in I weighed 160 pounds and on release, I was only 104 pounds," he said. "I learned about malnutrition. It took a number of years to get over it."

He was in the prison camp until May of 1945, "when we were liberated by the 12th Armored Division".

The guards had left them a week before that.

"I don't think they wanted to be there when we were liberated," he said.

The memories, he said, bring him both sadness and joy.

"In reflecting so often after this, I had to come to grips with the fact that three guys were killed at my feet and I was spared," he said. "I always remember them on Sept. 11."

"I am so happy I made it back, so happy for my time at St. George's, and for this wonderful group of ladies, this so warms my heart," he said.

Nettie Wilson spoke about the Quilts of Valor program, saying she was "so pleased to be here to honor one of our World War II veterans."

Quilts of Honor, she said, started in 2003 when Kathryn Robinson's son was deployed to Iraq. She got friends together to make red, white and blue quilts for the soldiers injured in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"We are now covering veterans from World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, Iraq, and Afghanistan

with more than 9,000 volunteers across the country — including four different sew groups that help make quilts for the south side of Atlanta," she said.

She said the quilts are guaranteed for a lifetime, and will be replaced if worn out or damaged. She said another World War II veteran said, "oh Nettie, this will not wear out in my lifetime," but she said, "you never know," noting a busted water heater in home that morning.

"Our quilts have a lot of messages in them. First honoring you for your service. We honor you for leaving all you hold dear and to stand in harm's way in a time of crisis, protecting us from the effects of war," she said. "Next, we know that freedom is not free. The cost of freedom is the dedication of lives of men and women like you, and this quilt is meant to say thank you for your sacrifice."

And finally, Wilson said, "this quilt is meant to offer comfort to you and to remind you that although your family and friends cannot be with you at all times, you are forever in our thoughts and our heart. We want you to use it. It's not for hanging on the wall, or putting in a pillow case. It's only for you."

A Quilt of Valor, Wilson said, is made of three layers and each layer has its own special meaning. The top with its many colors, shapes and fabrics, she said, "we feel, represents the communities across America and the many individuals we are."

The batting, the filler, she said, inside the quilt gives its warmth.

"It represents our hope that this quilt will bring warmth, comfort, peace and healing to the individual who receives it," she said.

The backing, she said, "is the strength that supports the other layers. It represents the strength of the recipient, the support of his or her family, our communities, and our nation. Each stitch that holds the layers together represents love, gratitude, and sometimes the tears of the maker."

She presented the quilt to Gatlin, with a certificate, "with the deepest appreciation for your service to the United States of America."

"You people are so kind, you warmed this old man's heart," Gatlin said.

The quilt was made by the Victory Quilt Guild which meets in Jackson. There also are sit and sews at Scarlet Thread on the fourth Mondays, and Fayette County has one on the second Tuesdays.

For more information, call Nancy Stafford and leave a message at 770-772-7221.