

WWII gunner has his day

by Keith Darce

SAN DIEGO - World War II veteran Robert B. O'Reilly of El Cajon, Calif., put aside years of guilt and ambivalence Sunday to receive a pair of military medals that he earned while flying more than 50 combat missions in the South Pacific.

The 83-year-old retired security guard and former Chicago police detective accepted the Marine Corps' Distinguished Flying Cross with a gold star and an Air Medal with seven gold stars in a late-morning ceremony at the Flying Leatherneck Aviation Museum at the Miramar Marine Corps Air Station. The gold stars represent multiple awards of the same medal.

MEDALS - World War II veteran Robert B. O'Reilly received the Distinguished Flying Cross and an Air Medal yesterday from Col. Christopher O'Connor, commander at Miramar Marine Corps Air Station, at a ceremony at Miramar's Leatherneck Aviation Museum. Photo by Dan Trevan.

MEDALS - O'Reilly flew more than 50 combat missions as a turret gunner on TBF Avenger torpedo bombers. Robert B. O'Reilly family photo.
The Distinguished Flying Cross, the nation's oldest military aviation award, is given to pilots and crew members who perform voluntary acts of heroism or extraordinary achievement during flight missions.

"Awards from the Marine Corps are earned and never freely given out," said Col. Christopher O'Connor, commanding officer of Miramar. "It's somewhat unfortunate that these weren't presented to you while you were still in service."

O'Reilly was a turret gunner on TBF Avenger torpedo bombers, the same planes that were flown by former President George H.W. Bush. He fired machine guns at enemy planes while the Avenger dropped torpedoes aimed at Japanese submarines and warships. His missions included flights from Iwo Jima, where his plane sometimes faced enemy fire as it took off.

"I really appreciate this," O'Reilly said. "I had mixed emotions previously. Now I understand that I was wrong. Better late than never."

O'Reilly said he thought little about the medals he earned during the years following his discharge in 1945 while he focused on raising a family with his wife, Deleurs, and pursuing a career as a police officer in his hometown of Chicago.

In 1969, a year after the family moved to El Cajon, guilt became a factor when O'Reilly's 19-year-old son, Tim, was killed by rocket fire only five weeks after he arrived in Vietnam as a freshly minted Marine.

"I was a Marine, so he was a Marine," O'Reilly said. "In a way, I blame myself."

He resisted applying for the medals owed to him even as thousands of other aging veterans flooded the armed service branches with similar requests.

"I just didn't feel right because of Tim," O'Reilly said. "He deserved the medals."

But his feelings started changing last year after two of his other sons read about a medal ceremony for a World War II veteran in a local newspaper. Soon the sons and O'Reilly's other three children were pushing him to seek his own medals.

"He didn't feel like he was a hero," son Tom O'Reilly said Sunday. "So we told him it would be good for his grandchildren to know" about his distinguished service.

The family faced another hurdle: documenting O'Reilly's combat missions.

O'Reilly had recorded the details of all of his flights in a logbook that he kept after his discharge, but a thief stole the book along with his flight jacket and other combat mementos from a locker in the basement of his apartment building in Chicago not long after he left the service.

Fortunately, O'Reilly had reconnected with Harry Lanphear, a fellow Marine who flew as a radio gunner on many of O'Reilly's missions. When Lanphear died of cancer in February 2003, his widow gave O'Reilly her husband's log book, which recorded all of the missions the Marines flew together.

In December, O'Reilly flew with the logbook to the Marine Corps base at Quantico, Va., to apply in person for his medals. He also filed a posthumous medals application for Lanphear.

"It's because of Harry that I was able to do this," O'Reilly said Sunday.

Lanphear was awarded a Distinguish Flying Cross with a gold star and Air Medal with eight gold stars,

which were delivered in late March to his widow in Klamath Falls, Ore.

O'Connor, the Miramar commanding officer, pinned the medals on the lapel of O'Reilly's navy blue, double-breasted sport coat while they stood in front of the nose of a TBF Avenger that is part of an outdoor aircraft display behind the Leatherneck Aviation Museum. Sitting just a few feet away in the front row at the ceremony were several of O'Reilly's seven grandchildren. "I did this for them." O'Reilly said. "I thought they would be proud to know that their grandfather got some medals."

WWII gunner has his day by Keith Darce