

Hope04

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February 4th, 2020

Silver-Star veteran and award-winning whittler dies at 99

Raymond Lee Hope, an award-winning whittler of woodland creatures who stormed the beaches of France on D-Day, died on Feb. 3 in DeKalb, Illinois. He was 99.

He died at the DeKalb Hospital Center of natural causes, said his brother, Earl Hope.

Earl Hope said that his brother enlisted in the military in 1941 after the attack on Pearl Harbor, leaving behind the family farm on which he and his brother worked. Ray Hope spent three years in the military before his first battle on D-Day in June of 1944, said Earl Hope.

In World War II, Ray Hope saved lives by risking his own. Earl Hope said that his brother ascended a cliff along the beaches of Normandy on D-Day and dropped grenades into a cement alcove housing German soldiers, killing those inside and protecting the lives of his fellow troops. Ray Hope earned a Silver Star Medal for his time in combat, his brother said.

Earl Hope said that one of Ray Hope's only outlets to escape the chaos of war for a short while traveled with him from the United States to Europe: the art of whittling.

According to his brother, Ray Hope began whittling in high school after his father banned him and his brother from playing mumblety-peg, a knife-throwing game. The knife Ray Hope used in the game became his whittling knife, said his brother.

Ray Hope's passion for sculpting small woodland creatures such as squirrels and chipmunks made them come alive. Earl Hope said that the creatures were meticulously crafted, and it felt "like you could pet the thing."

"The creature was already in [the block of wood]," said Earl Hope, quoting his brother. "His job was to whittle away anything that wasn't the creature itself."

Ray Hope's whittling projects eventually garnered the attention of the Smithsonian Museum of Folk Art in Washington D.C., Earl Hope said. Ray Hope won a gold medal from the museum on the 4th of July, 1990, and 12 of his critters were placed on display, according to his brother.

Ray Hope went into the car parts business in 1947 after marrying his wife, Mary Alice Willett, in 1946. Earl Hope said that his brother and Mary Alice were best friends, and they had a daughter together, Raycene, named after her father.

Ray Hope passed his whittling knife down to his daughter, which became her favorite possession, said Earl Hope.

Ray Hope's final, unfinished squirrel carving will be placed in the casket with him, said his brother.

Raymond Lee Hope was the son of Virgil W. and Flossie Dissart Hope. In addition to his wife Mary Alice Willett, his brother Earl Hope, and his daughter Raycene Bach, he is survived by his granddaughters Jacqueline and Jennifer Bach.

Visitation will be between 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. next Monday at Restwell Funeral Service at the corner of 10th and Walnut in DeKalb. The funeral will be held next Tuesday at 2 p.m. at Faith Baptist Church followed by burial services at Memorial Park Cemetery.