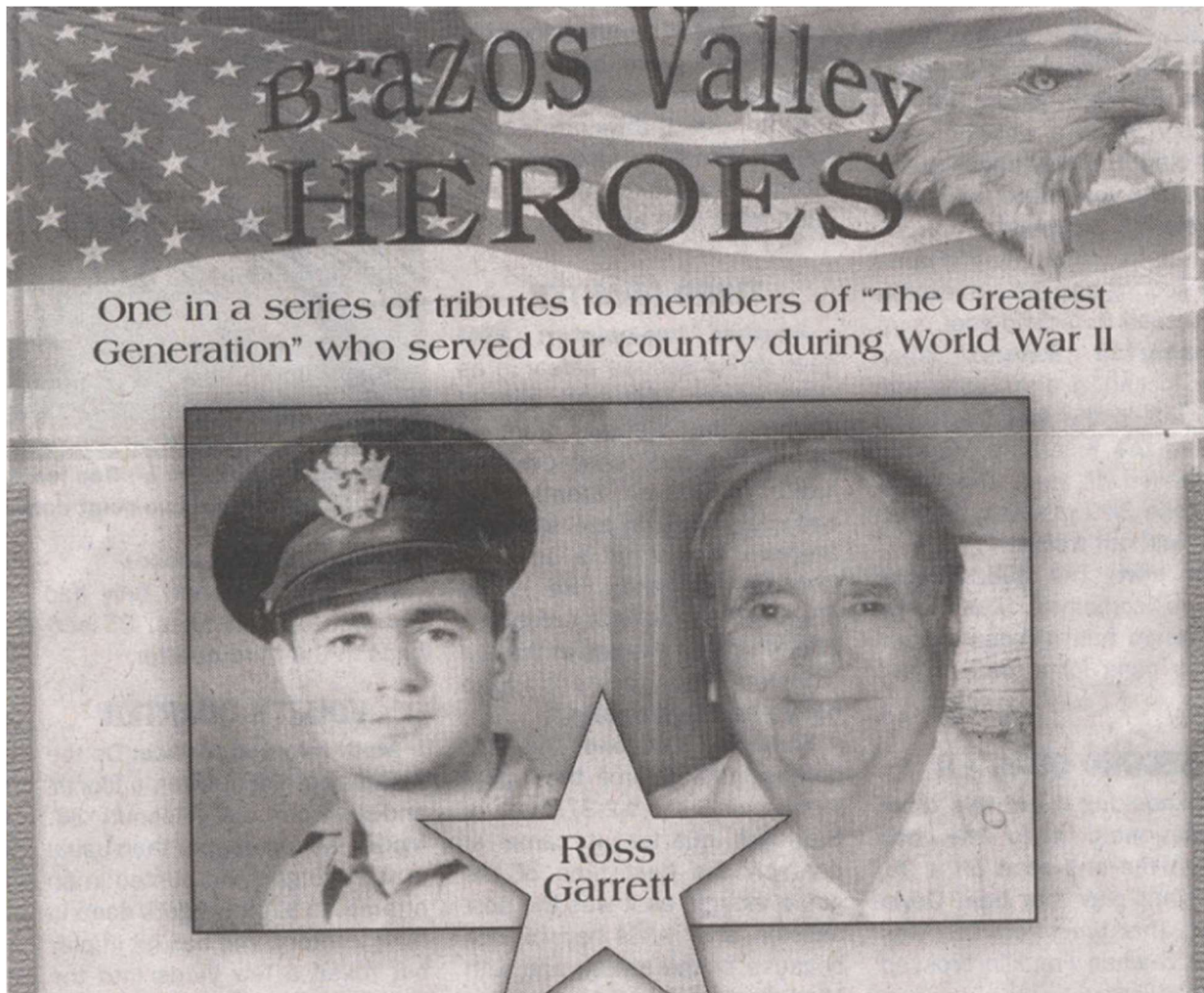




One in a series of tributes to members of "The Greatest Generation" who served our country during World War II

**Oct 15, 2006, By Bill Youngkin, part one of two  
Special to The Eagle**

A lot of veterans from World War 11 have their souvenirs from the war. Many have their military awards and ribbons in shadow boxes their families provided for them. Ross Garrett of Madisonville has a shadow box that, includes his Purple Heart medal, but he also has another one that contains only an old worn Bible opened to the 23rd Psalm.

"It was the Bible we used when we buried our fellow POWs in a Japanese POW prison at Rangoon, Burma. It Originally belonged to a Brit, but it was handed down from him to others until I ended up with it. I have it because I conducted the last burial detail before we were

liberated. I've kept it opened to the 23rd Psalm because that is the passage I used on that detail."

Ross Garret is now 87 years young and still going strong. Strong is something he had to be to survive as a Japanese POW. Garrett was born in Nacogdoches, Texas, and raised in the Oak Flat Community in Rusk County.

"When I was about six or seven my father died and I ended up living with the Chapman family. Mr. Chapman was a blacksmith and I helped him in the shop after he took me in. I remember as a teenager a Japanese man coming by the blacksmith shop offering to buy all of our scrap metal, but Mr. Chapman wouldn't sell to him. I don't think he had a premonition about the war, but I'm glad to know that the shells used to shoot my plane down didn't come from our scrap yard."

Garrett graduated from the Nacogdoches school in 1937 and then attended Stephen F. Austin State College as he could afford to go to school. In 1941, with two years of college under his belt, he joined the Army Air Corps after Pearl Harbor.

"I married my wife, Thelma, on December 14, 1941, and headed off to the Army. I attended Des and became a bombardier on a B-24 crew. In December 1942, I left the U. S. and my wife, who was now pregnant with our first child. We flew to India to carry out bombing runs on the Japanese installations on the Burma peninsula, That area of operations was called the China-Surma-India theatre, We flew the southern route across North Africa until we landed at Karachi, India, where we celebrated Christmas, I still have the program and menu from that Christmas meal."

"When we arrived at our base near Calcutta they found out that I hadn't been inoculated for yellow fever. , was removed from the crew that I flew over with and was assigned to the 7th Bombardment Group and became part of a B-24 group known as Kavanagh's Crew, There were nine of us, and it was the best group of individuals anyone could ever hope to serve with. First Lt. Kavanagh was the pilot, 2nd Lt. Cotton was the copilot and 2nd Lt. Moxley was our navigator, the best navigator I have ever known."

"We were on our 17th mission, bombing the Japanese docks at Rangoon on May 1, 1943, when the ack-ack knocked out our number three engine. As a result we had to fall out of formation, and the Jap Zeros came after us like sharks to blood in the water. When the number three

engine went out it took out the electricity to our tail gunner turret, making it inoperable. The Jap Zeros were chewing up our section, It was shot full of holes.”

“We tried to hide in the clouds and did so for a while, but soon realized we weren't going to be able to made it back. Our tail gunner was dead and when I pulled the waist gunner out, he was full of shrapnel and would die shortly. We knew if we landed in the jungle, we probably wouldn't survive the crash, so Moxley, our navigator, located the last rice paddies we could land in before the jungle, One of the waist gunners opted to parachute out instead of trying to survive the crash landing.”

"Kavanagh and Cotton managed to land in a rice paddy without any fatalities. Our engineer Bodell's arm was about shot off, We bandaged it as best we could and applied a tourniquet. We left him there because there was no way he could travel. Hopefully they would put him in a hospital so that he could survive. He would not have survived traveling with us while trying to avoid the Japanese, With the help of some locals, we made it to the beach where the tsunami occurred a couple of years ago. We were hopeful we would get noticed and picked up by our guys.”

"We were digging a hole near the beach to get some water when we were approached by some civilians. When Kavanagh looked up from his digging, he was shot in the shoulder, The 'civilians' were Japanese soldiers in civilian clothes, They took us to Rangoon Prison, the old British prison at Rangoon, Burma. On the way we picked up Bodell from a hospital. Of the nine members of our crew who left on that mission that day, only three of us would survive the next two years.”

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**Oct 22, 2006, By Bill Youngkin, part two of two**

### **Special to The Eagle**

The nine members of Ross Garrett's B -24 crew were shot down in Burma on May 1, 1943. Two members of the crew were killed by attacking Japanese Zeros and one parachuted out of the plane before it crash landed. He was captured and subsequently shot by the Japanese. Crew members gave first aid to the engineer, Bedell, who was badly injured and could not travel. He was left with the plane as the remaining five attempted to escape the Japanese.

During their attempt to flee, another crew member was killed by the Japanese and another was wounded when they were captured.

The Japanese took the surviving crew members, including Bodell, to Rangoon, Burma, and placed them in the former British Rangoon Prison. Here's Garrett's account of what happened afterward:

“When we arrived our engineer, Bodell, was badly wounded, and Lt. Kavanagh, our pilot, was also wounded. They were treated for their injuries, but Bodell was left in the infirmary. We had to reuse his old bandage on his arm and you couldn't keep it very clean no matter how hard they tried. As a result, his arm became very infected.”

“After our arrival, the Japanese also indoctrinated us in proper obedience. They placed a table in the prison yard and you were told to bend over and hold onto the table. A Japanese soldier stood about twenty feet away with his rifle pointed at your chest, you were told that if you removed your hands from the table you would be shot. They then proceeded to beat you on your arms, back and elbows with a cane and sometimes a pipe. If you withstood the beating and kept your hands on the table, you lived. If you lifted your hands from the table, you died.”

“One of our Japanese guards was born and raised in Hawaii but left to join up with the Emperor. We called him Tartan. Whenever I went out on a work detail he would make sure he was assigned to us. He called me 'Tex' and he worked me over with the butt of his rifle every chance he got. After we were liberated, I checked on Tarzan with the British, who informed me that the Burmese made sure Tarzan never made it back to Japan or Hawaii.”

“One day shortly after we arrived, I came back from a work detail. The guys told me Bodell was asking for me and to go check on him. When I went in to see him, he raised up and grabbed me, held onto me and cried like a baby. We both knew he was dying. Two days later we buried him. That left four of us still alive.”

“Lt. Kavanagh was a good pilot and a good man and he felt responsible for all of us. He had been wounded but I think he fell so badly about what was happening to all of us that, more than his wound, is what finally killed him. After we buried him, that left Cotton, our copilot, Motley, our navigator, and me.”

During the time of his capture, Garrett's wife, Thelma was told by the War Department only that his plane was missing over Burma.

Thelma remembers that time: "Our daughter Sharon was born on April 26, 1943, five days before Ross was shot down. He never knew our child had been born until after he was liberated. After I was visited by the War Department, I prayed very hard for his safety. One night I had a dream, and in that dream Ross and two other men walked out of the jungle toward me. I knew then he was alive and that we would be together again."

As the days timed into weeks and the weeks into years, Garrett said, more and more men in the camp died.

"It was a lot harder for the bigger guys than the smaller ones. It seemed as if they shrunk faster and lost their strength faster. I remember watching one big Australian fellow who was a boxing champion before the war just die before us daily. I just tried to tough it out. I couldn't do much about my situation, so I just tried to survive, one day at a time."

"The last few months we got different camp commanders and things got a little better, but the problem was lack of food and disease. Just before we were liberated, I conducted the last burial, and that is why I have the burial detail Bible and I have kept it ever since. I'm glad I wasn't used for me."

Ross and the other two members of his crew were liberated on May 1, 1945, exactly two years after being shot down and captured. His weight had slipped from 165 to 110 pounds. He was hospitalized in India and eventually returned to the U.S. On June 9, 1945, he was reunited with his wife, Thelma, and was able to see his daughter, Sharon, for the first time in Nacogdoches.

After being discharged he returned to school at Stephen F. Austin State College, got his degree and taught school. He eventually entered the extension service and in 1953 became the extension agent for Madison County, where he remained until his retirement.

"I guess I'm lucky to be alive. To survive, you had to be strong mentally as well as physically to cope with what happened to us. It was tough, tough, though. Of the crew only Garrett remains today. He has his family; he has his memories and he has the burial detail Bible."

Ross Garrett's name can be found on the Boards Valley Veterans Memorial.