

Archer T. Gammon 1918-1945

“A hero: a man of distinguished valor or performance, admired for his noble qualities”... such is the definition ascribed by *Webster's Dictionary*, and such is a man like the late Archer T. Gammon. He was born on September 11, 1918 on a farm near Chatham, Virginia in Pittsylvania County, and was one of fifteen children born to Walter and Cordie Gammon.

As remembered by his brother Calvin, Archer was just a quiet country boy; if there was a job to be done, he did it. His main interests growing up, as his brother recalls, were girls and cars. He is remembered as showing no particular qualities that would allude to the heroism that he exhibited in World War II.

Archer Gammon attended school in Gretna and Chatham, and came to Danville in 1941, going to work at Dan River Mills. In March of the next year he was drafted into the Armed Services in Roanoke. Following his training in Arkansas and California, he was sent in July, 1944, to France, via Glasgow, Scotland, and was made a Staff Sergeant five months later. It should be recalled that Archer Gammon was only one of five members of his family who served during World War II. His brothers Robert, Walter, and Jim were in the Army, Navy, and Coast Guard respectively. His sister, Mildred, was a member of the Waves.

From France, Archer Gammon was involved with the Belgium campaign. It was there that his heroism was manifested. On January 11, 1945, during the Battle of the Bulge, he led a platoon of Company A, Ninth Armored Infantry Battalion, Sixth Armored Division, through hip-deep snow up two hundred yards of open hillside. When his unit was pinned down by German gunfire from the strategic woodland, which was its objective, he advanced alone and disrupted the enemy's resistance. Single-handedly, with rifles and grenades, he silenced two machine guns, killed nine Germans, and forced a Tiger Royal tank and supporting infantry into retreat. Having cleared the woods, he was struck within a twenty-five-yard range by a direct hit from the armored vehicle's eighty-eight-millimeter gun and was killed instantly. His relentless and daring attack, in complete disregard for all thoughts of personal safety, enabled his platoon to continue its advance.

Word of his death reached his parents' home at 120 Broad Street via a telegram from the Adjunct General in Washington. But that was not to be the end of Archer Gammon. In the ensuing months, several awards were given to him posthumously. The Belgium government awarded him the Croix de Chavalier de L'Ordre de Leopold II, Aves Palme, and the Croix de Guerre 1940. In the United States he received the Bronze Star. Then, on October 25, 1945, he became one of eleven Virginians in World War II, and the only Danvillian in history to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest honor the United States can bestow. The presentation was made to his mother at the Danville City Armory.

In the years that followed Archer Gammon's death, his memory and service were recalled by the military. There are Gammon Barricks at Fort Eustis, Virginia, and Gammon Fields at both Fort McPhearson, Alabama, and Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Also, the Disabled American Veterans, Chapter Number 19, in Danville was named after him, and on February 2, 1948, at the San Francisco Port of Embarktion, an Army

transportation ship was christened the “Gammon” in his honor. The “Gammon” served the United States until 1973 when it was decommissioned. As his brother Calvin recalled, the ship’s crew once rescued a Vietnamese fisherman who had been stranded in the water for over eight hours. When the seaman was put ashore, the crew had collected about \$250 in food and clothing for the man. “This,” said his brother, “represents to me the kind of thing Archer would have done.”

In 1946, prior to the Congressional Medal of Honor ceremonies, a Danville paper offered an editorial on Archer Gammon entitled, “The High Badge of Courage.” It closed with - “but we shall know, when the citation is read, what he did, and if his birthday was a family celebration, his death day becomes a day on which this community can pause to sense its obligation to Archer Gammon and to the others from the home bailiwick who went forward to the great adventure and did not come back. Sunday, March 3, will be a day when Danville can come together in quiet reverence to contemplate how grasping is the hand of war and how ruthlessly it beckons lives never destined to be spent on fields of blood.”

Perhaps Archer Gammon’s mother described her son more succinctly. She said her son was a “quiet youth who spoke little of his service or the things he might have done.” Yet, with no fanfare, no roll of drums, Archer T. Gammon became a very uncommon man to whom the free world owes a debt of gratitude.