

‘A Priceless Gift’

VFW assists in the return of a WWII pilot’s ring to his family

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A WWII fighter pilot’s family has seen their father’s journey come full circle, with an assist from VFW.

VFW Commander-in-Chief Brian Duffy presented Jules Hymel’s children with their father’s ring in a December ceremony at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans. Post 8862 in Vicenza, Italy, and Post 3750 in Luling, La., were involved in aligning the events that led up to the transfer of the ring.



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LeDaine Hymel and Nelwyn Hymel Lorio, Jules Hymel's children, attend a ceremony in December 2016 at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans. VFW National Commander Brian Duffy presented Jules' class ring back to the Hymel family. Jules lost the ring in Italy before becoming a prisoner of war during World War II. The Girardi family, of Italy, held onto the ring for 73 years with the intent of returning it to Jules' family.

Hymel, a second lieutenant with the 95th Fighter Squadron, lost the ring in Italy before becoming a prisoner of war during World War II.

Hymel was a life member of Luling, La., Post 3750, which hosted a reception following the ring presentation. Bobby Lovergne, commander of Post 3750, said his involvement with the story began with Nelwyn Hymel Lorio, Jules' daughter. She called the Post's senior vice commander, and at that point, Lovergne contacted Duffy.

Lovergne has known the Hymel family since 1995, as LeDaine Hymel, Jules' son, is his neighbor. Lovergne said the ring presentation was a "great tribute," including the return of a "piece of history" to Jules' children.

"It brings some type of closure for them that now they've got something from their dad's military career that they didn't know about," said Lovergne, who served 20 years in the Air Force and with the 23rd Technical Fighter Wing during the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

Mike Tougaw, a member of Post 8862 who helped with the ring transfer, said VFW's involvement in the story was "huge" and without it, the ring probably "would have stayed" in Italy.

"It could've easily gotten melted down and sold," Tougaw said.

A Christmas mission

Jules, of Luling, La., was on a flying mission with the 95th, 96th and 97th Squadrons on Christmas Day 1943 to escort B-24 bombers of the 98th and 376th Bomb Groups.

“Six of them were in that flight of P-38s,” Duffy said. “All the bombers returned to base safely because of the heroic acts of the P-38 pilots who were protecting these bombers. Sadly, three of the aircraft went down. Two of the others were killed in action, and Lt. Hymel survived because he left his aircraft.”

Duffy said that after bailing from the aircraft, the second lieutenant noticed his plane’s tail was damaged. As Jules “descended down from his crippled P-38,” Duffy said, his parachute “became entangled in a grove of chestnut trees.”

Three men from the Girardi family — the father, older brother and a 10-year-old — rescued Jules.

“[They] brought him inside, provided comfort, changed him out of the telling clothing — the flight suit — that would quickly reveal his identity to the Germans of the area, put him into civilian clothes [and] rendered aid,” Duffy said.

When the Girardi family realized they could not treat all of Jules’ injuries at their farm house in the mountains of Italy, they took him to a nearby infirmary. Eventually, Jules’ identity was discovered, according to Duffy.

“The Germans took him off, and he spent two years as a prisoner of war,” Duffy said.

After returning stateside, Duffy said, Jules did as many other World War II heroes have done — “meld back into the country that they loved.” But his class ring was left behind. It either slipped off Hymel’s finger or was intentionally given to the Girardi family for safekeeping —which is true remains unclear.

“The father [of the Girardi family] instructed that this ring would somehow have to make its way back to the airman,” Duffy said.

The youngest child in the Girardi family, the 10-year-old who aided in Hymel’s rescue, has been the keeper of the ring. Now 84, Egidio Girardi kept his father’s promise.

Members of Post 8862 and Karin Martinez, of the U.S. Army Garrison Italy Public Affairs Office, approached Girardi's farm in September 2016.

"Mr. Girardi's first question to them was, 'Are you here for the ring?'" Duffy said.

Return of the ring

Tougaw said his friend Luca Moro made him aware of the story. And a research group headed by Alessandro Maroso in Marostica, Italy, nearly 20 miles north of Vicenza, located Girardi and learned of his desire to return the ring.

Tougaw, who served from 1981 to 1985 as a Marine with H Btry., 3rd Bn., 10th Marine Regt., 2nd Marine Div., twice in Beirut and later served in the Army, said he made contact with the Hymel family through former Sgt. Maj. Charles Brown in Louisiana, but the family was "unbelieving."

Undeterred, Tougaw said he told his Post members about the story, after which they formed a committee, headed by Tougaw and Ron Reynolds, a trustee for Post 8862.

Duffy's involvement with the ring's return began in October 2016 during a visit to Vicenza, Italy. Once Post 8862 members discovered Duffy would be in Italy, they decided he would be the one to return the ring to the Hymel family.

Tougaw said what piqued his personal interest in the story was his understanding of how important "personal effects of former military members" are to families.

"This was just a story too good to be true," Tougaw said. "What's the possibility through fight, famine and everything else over — what, 73 years? — that the ring would get back to

its owner?”

In addition to forming the committee, Tougaw said Post 8862 provided funds to create the box that held the ring and plaques for the presentation ceremonies.

Girardi had the ring in his wife’s purse the night it was to be transferred to Duffy in Italy, according to Tougaw.

“The box [we had made for the ring] was made out of chestnut trees because this family used to sell chestnuts back in the day,” Tougaw said. “The property was surrounded by chestnut trees. The significance was to have the box made by a carpenter.”

Coming full circle

On Oct. 14, the ring was transferred to Duffy for the December presentation in New Orleans.

“As a former UPS pilot, I can tell you, 27 years flying for UPS, I don’t think that I’ve had a more satisfying delivery of a package than the one I’m about to make today,” Duffy said during the presentation. “I’m so proud to know that Lt. Hymel also is a charter life member of Luling Post 3750.”

Because the moment was so emotional, Dr. Kent Hymel, Jules’ nephew, read a statement from Jules’ daughter, Nelwyn, who also attended the ceremony.

Nelwyn wrote that she is appreciative and joyful that the honor took place “in the Christmas season, dad’s favorite time of year.”

“The only thing I regret is that my father is not here to accept this ring in person,” Nelwyn stated. “He would have been so grateful and honored to join us today. One thing I’m certain

of, my father is smiling down from heaven watching this ceremony.”

Nelwyn also wrote that she intends to visit the Girardi family on her next European trip.

“The least I can do is to meet and thank them personally for initiating the return of the ring,” Nelwyn said. “A deep heartfelt thanks to VFW, local, state, national, international for the extensive efforts to return dad’s aviation ring to my brother. [It’s a] priceless gift that will be cherished for the rest of our lives.”

Jules’ accolades outside of his military service include: president of Luling Trading Company, West St. Charles (La.) Volunteer Fire Department fire chief and school bus driver. He also was a member of the Smithsonian Association, Louisiana Emergency Preparedness and the American Legion, among others.

VFW’s involvement, according to Lovergne, shows the organization is “here to help veterans no matter what it’s about.”

“We’re a big family and this just showed that no matter if they’re still alive or not, we’re still going to do what’s right,” Lovergne said.

Tougaw said he intended to visit Girardi to show him “the end statement” of the transfer.

“The mission is complete for me when I’m able to go back and do closure on the loop, go back to him and say, ‘This is everything we’ve done,’ ” Tougaw said.

This article is featured in the March 2017 issue of [VFW magazine](#) and was written by [Kari Williams](#), senior writer, VFW magazine. Photo by Kari Williams.