

Littleton Independent

Sixty-eight years ago next week, Joseph "Falcon" Falconetti landed a plane for the first and last time.

Considering he wasn't a pilot, the plane was under intense enemy fire and missing half its engines, and four other crew members were seriously wounded, it was nothing short of a miracle.

"I buckled the nose, but everybody was OK," said Falconetti, who lives in Littleton.

During World War II, Staff Sgt. Falconetti was a member of the 720th Bomb Squadron, 450th Bomb Group. On July 15, 1944, their mission was to destroy a heavily defended oil installation in Romania that was supplying German forces.

Their B-24 Liberator took severe fire, and both pilots were incapacitated. Falconetti had taken the controls to relieve the pilot many times, but he'd never landed the plane.

When he and his crewmates returned safely to base, Falconetti's commander said he was getting a medal and a ride home.

"By their outstanding courage, tenacity and devotion to duty, as evidence throughout their brilliant combat careers, these men have reflected great credit upon themselves and the Armed Forces of the United States of America," reads the citation granting Falconetti his Distinguished Flying Cross.

But something went awry, and the medal never happened – until July 6, nearly 68 years later.

Falconetti's three children, a grandson and a great-grandson joined him in U.S. Rep. Mike Coffman's office to see him finally awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, given to veterans who "distinguish themselves by acts of heroism or extraordinary achievement while participating in an aerial flight," according to the proclamation.

"You're a member of the greatest generation, and you really deserve this," said Coffman, a former Marine himself. "You deserve all of our respect. ... It's never too late to honor them."

"I just wish some of the crew was here, because they deserve this more than I do," said Falconetti. "They taught me to fly."

He's been hesitant to talk about his service in the past, not wanting his children to hear about some of the atrocities he witnessed, especially the ones that give him nightmares.

"People don't do that to people," he said.

He worries about what the young people coming home from today's wars will go through.

"What we have to do for them is teach them how to live back here with people at home," he said. "We teach them how to go out and kill, but we don't teach them to live. ... They're not given a chance to become human again."

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[Littleton Independent](#)

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