

Missouri State Society Daughters of the American Revolution

Proudly Honors

Patriot of the Month

December 2023



Norman Joe Spears

United States Army/Air Force

Sponsored by:
Ozark Spring Chapter, NSDAR

Norman Joe Spears, the only child of Wayne and Bertie Spears, was born on November 23, 1924, in West Plains, Missouri. He graduated from West Plains High School in 1941, receiving the Best Citizen Award.



After high school, Joe started working at Howell-Oregon Electric Cooperative, fully expecting his draft papers to arrive soon, but they never did. He had been told (by his boss) that he could obtain a Class II deferment because of the importance of his job, but he neither wanted that nor applied for it. After continuing to wait for his papers to arrive for some time, he made inquiry and found out that his boss had arranged a Class II deferment for him without his knowledge, and Joe entered the service by “volunteering for induction.”

On August 18, 1943, he was inducted into the U. S. Army Air Force (which later became the U. S. Air Force) at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. He did his training at Amarillo, Texas; Tempe, Arizona; Las Vegas, Nevada and Avon, Florida. He received his wings in July 1944 and went overseas in January 1945.

He was with the Italy 15th Air Force, Foggia, Italy. His responsibility was that of a B-17 waist gunner. The B-17 was a fast and high-flying plane for a bomber of its era. Joe said the plane would fly so high that the temperature could reach -40 degrees Fahrenheit. If you did not wear silk gloves and you touched something at that temperature, your skin would stick to it. Joe’s primary duty was defending the aircraft against the enemy with a .50 caliber machine gun. He was on 20 “successful missions” (i.e., missions during which a bomb was dropped—if a bomb was not dropped, it did not count).

On one mission, an enemy anti-aircraft bomb went completely through one of the wings, and six of his plane’s 500-lb bombs didn’t respond to controls and release. So, Joe and another airman had to take their shoes off (the space was so small to get into otherwise) and go into the bomb bay to manually release the bombs.

According to Joe, you got your experience from learning as you went. Joe said that other airmen didn’t give out much advice, and they weren’t very friendly until you had been on two or three successful missions—they didn’t want to get too attached to you in case you didn’t make it back alive. Joe said that on about his third or fourth mission a man on the ground crew asked him to leave his wallet with him. When Joe asked him why, the man told him, “I’ll make sure your cash gets home to your family, and I will go through it and make sure

everything is appropriate – take out what might be embarrassing and make sure everything else gets back to family if anything happens.” After that, Joe left it with him every time.

There were 12 million soldiers serving at that time. They were paid in cash, because there was no way to cash a check, and also it was simply too hard to keep up with the paperwork. Also, it should be noted that these men were not interested in receiving awards—they just wanted to make it home safely.

Joe was awarded the Air Medal with two Oak Leaf Clusters, the Good Conduct Medal, five Medals showing different places where he had served in Europe, and the ETO (Eastern Theater Offensive) Ribbon.

For his meritorious service, Norman J. Spears, Staff Sergeant 419th Bombardment Squadron 301st Bombardment Group, received an Honorable Discharge on November 1, 1945, at Santa Ana, California.

Joe has always been proud of his service. He returned to his hometown of West Plains, Missouri, where he and his wife Gwendolyn had one daughter and one son who both became attorneys. They have twin granddaughters and are very proud of them. Joe has also been a very successful businessman, having owned several businesses.

On a side note—one more thing that Joe shared was that while he was serving on a Boeing B-17, there were five women (whom Joe knew) from West Plains who had gone to Wichita, Kansas, to work at Boeing factory, and they were helping build B-17 bombers.