

World War II pilot's compass, medal for valor now on display

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On the final Saturday of each month, the Laurel Leader-Call, in conjunction with the Veterans Memorial Museum on Hillcrest Drive will feature some of the unique items that are on display.

The museum on Hillcrest Drive is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Admission is free, but donations are welcome. The phone number is 601-428-4008.

It is well-known locally that the first person from Jones County to be killed in action in World War II was Alex Box.

The athlete and first lieutenant for whom the baseball stadium at Louisiana State University is named was killed in February 1943 in Tunisia during Operation Torch.

He and three of his men were killed instantly when a mine blew up. In 1942, he had earned the U.S. Army's Distinguished Service Cross, the second-highest decoration for valor awarded in the Army.

A photo of Box in his Army uniform and his LSU football uniform are on display, but volunteers will be quick to tell the story of Box, which inevitably will lead to the name Edwin J. Bounds.

Bounds, a pilot from Moselle, was on a mission training Canadian Spitfire aircraft pilots on Dec. 9, 1941. It was two days after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor and one day after the United States declared war on Japan.

During training, Bounds — whose wife Opal Kennett and her brother Ben Kennett were both Gardiner High graduates — died in an air crash. He was awarded the Canadian equivalent of the Distinguished Service Cross — the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Recently, Bounds' grand-nephew donated the compass from Bounds' Spitfire and the medal he received. The two are on display now at the museum.

An interesting side note: once every 10 years, the Royal Canadian Air Force will send a squad to Jones County, where they will inspect and clean Bounds' grave, which is in Hickory Grove Cemetery.

Opal Kennett was a nurse during the war and Ben was an aircraft mechanic.

When visitors enter the museum and round the front desk, one wall is taken up almost completely by a big wooden board that contained 925 names.

During the war, school Superintendent R.H. Watkins displayed the board for every member of the military who had gone to the Laurel high school. He also lined the hallways at what is now the school district administration building with photos of everyone from the school who was off to war.

Over the years and with a change of schools to what is now Laurel High, the photos were lost to history until a couple of years ago when they were discovered in the back of the library at the current high school, said Jimmy Bass, local historian who is instrumental in the museum's existence.

Those photos have been displayed in the past, but the board — including the names of 21 who were killed — is still prominently displayed.