

Scenes from Princeton's Past

Lester William "Smokey" Halonen was born on August 13, 1913, in Wing, North Dakota, and died on February 15, 2003, in Cudahy, WI, after a long battle with Alzheimer's. He was the son of William and Ina Halonen. Lester was known as Smokey. He had seventeen siblings.

Smokey's love for planes began when he was sixteen and learned to fly the old WWI Jenny airplanes in South Milwaukee. He enlisted in the Air Corps after he was told that his employer, Nordberg Manufacturing Company in Milwaukee, which manufactured railroad equipment, mining equipment, and diesel engines, would guarantee the job of any returning servicemen. He enlisted in the Air Force in November 1941 and was called up in January 1942. After basic training in St Louis, Missouri, he went to Chanute, Illinois, for training in general aircraft mechanics. His next assignment was at a Seattle, Washington, Boeing plant for more mechanic's training. He then went to Panama City, Florida, to learn applied tactics. In Florida he flew the small O52 observation plane on submarine patrol and towed targets for fighters over the Gulf of Mexico. His next assignment was as a flight engineer in Boise, Idaho, where he helped to train crews for the B-17's. In 1943, he was shipped overseas to Tunis, Africa, and then to Italy where he worked in the Corps of Engineers building an air field for American Bombers. He was a member of the 464th Bombardment Group, 779th Squadron. It was in Italy that he created and implemented a B-24 engine modification plan that resulted in his award of the Bronze Star. Most B-24's require an engine change after 250 hours, and Smokey developed the plan to use deicer hoses on these engines to extend their service. Smokey was discharged in September 1945, after the end of the War with Japan.

He earned \$21.00 a month as a private, when he entered the Air Corps, and \$485.00 a month as a Master Sergeant plus 50% for flight pay, when he left the service. He survived four crashes and having his throat cut on a fence in Italy. After the war Smokey returned to his job at Nordberg Manufacturing Company in Milwaukee.

Besides being a flight crew chief, Smokey was also an accomplished banjo player. He played in bands and orchestras throughout his training and in Italy. His banjo was a Bacon & Day Serenader Silver Bell. There was a soft pedal fixed to the underside that Smokey jiggled his knee while playing to produce a sort of wah wah effect. Smokey had a musical career and once performed on radio with Roy Rogers and the Sons of the Pioneers. He won first prize in a nationwide county music contest. It was a difficult choice in the post-depression economy, but he stayed with his job at Nordberg Manufacturing, he gave his first place prize—a four-year recording contract, to the second place winner, Eddie Peabody.

Maryan Irene *Blazek* Halonen was born on December 15, 1915, in Minnesota, to Charles and Mary Anna Blazek, and she died on November 4, 2001 in Muskego, WI. Smokey and Maryan dated for several years before they married. Maryan's mother was in a wheelchair because of Multiple Sclerosis, and Maryan was needed to take care of her five brothers and her mother, so they waited to marry. Smokey and Maryan were married in November 1943. They were married close to 58 years. They were married before a judge and Maryan wore a blue dress. After they were married Smokey went to Pocatello, Idaho, Maryan went after her Mother died, and they lived off base. When Smokey went overseas, Maryan went back to Milwaukee. She worked a full-time job and several part-time jobs. When Smokey and Maryan lived in Princeton, WI, they lived at 113 N Farmer Street. Smokey and Maryan had two sons, Keith, and Phil. Both Smokey and Maryan are buried in the City of Princeton Cemetery.

The information for this article came from findagrave.com, Ancestry.com, and from the Halonen Family. If anyone has any information or photos of the Halonen Family or anyone else buried in the City of Princeton Cemetery, please contact City Hall at 920-295-6612 or mail to PO Box 53 or bring to City Hall at 531 S Fulton Street or email mneubauer@cityofprincetonwi.com or cnickel@cityofprincetonwi.com. A relative of Michael, Albert, and Rosina Krueger is looking for information about the family. If anyone has information please contact City Hall.

The City of Princeton Cemetery Walk is August 25, 2018, at 1:30 PM and 4:00 PM. The Band Mother's Cook Book is still available and can be purchased at City Hall in Princeton or at the Berlin Journal Newspapers Office. The re-published Princeton, WI Quas Qui Centennial Books are available and were recently reprinted by the Berlin Journal Newspapers. The Quas Qui Centennial Books can be purchased at City Hall in Princeton or contact Mark Judas or Patty Wianecki at US Bank. The Quas Qui Centennial Book will be the companion Book to the 2023 Quarto Sept Centennial Book that is being compiled and will be printed and available with the History of Princeton from 1973 to 2023. The Quarto Sept Centennial Book will be available later in the year 2022.



Ina Miriam Lehto, mom of Lester (Smokey)



Lester (Smokey)



Maryan Irene Blazek (Wife of Lester)



Smokey and his wife, Maryan, were married during a furough in 1943 and will celebrate fifty one years of marriage this November in Princeton. (Picture submitted to Princeton Times)

(Wedding picture Lester & Maryan)

Local bronze star winner recalls WWII

It had never been done before. He modified an engine with his own creativity, using a deicer to pump excess oil back to the thirty two gallon tank of the Air Force B-24 known as "Shoo-Shoo Baby".

Because the oil was not lost, the engine's life was extended and the plane flew 510 combat hours before she needed an engine change. Normal combat life expectancy for other B-24's was 250 hours.

The talented crew chief who kept his plane flying missions over Italy was M/Sgt. Lester (Smokey) Halonen, out of Milwaukee, now a Princeton resident.

Smokey's love affair with planes began when he was sixteen and he learned to fly the old WWI Jenny airplanes in South Milwaukee.

He enlisted in WWII when he found out that Nordbergs, his employer who made diesel engines and railroad and mining equipment in Milwaukee, would guarantee the job of any returning serviceman.

It was December 6, 1941, and the saying, "We don't know what tomorrow will bring" was very apropos to Smokey's farewell party. The next day was Pearl Harbor.

After basic training in St. Louis, he went to Chanute, Illinois for training in general aircraft mechanics. Next stop was a Boeing plant in Seattle and more mechanic's training before flying to Panama City, Florida to learn applied tactics.

In Florida, he flew the small O52 observation plane, towing targets for fighters over the Gulf of Mexico. It wasn't that uncommon for the O52 to be hit instead of the target. There was a crash, and Smokey cartwheeled into a stump. He was wet with gasoline from the broken tank, but the plane and Smokey never caught fire.

He was offered the job as copilot of a B26 a small bomber with shortened wings but said "no". Thirty B26's had crashed in thirty one days.

He was sent to Boise, Idaho as a flight engineer to train crews for B17's.

In 1943, he was shipped overseas to Tunis, Africa, and then to Italy where he worked in the corps of engineers building an air field for American bombers. This is where he modified the engine of the B24 and was awarded his Bronze Star.

Besides being a crack flight crew chief, Smokey was an accomplished banjo player, strumming in bands and orchestras throughout his training and in Italy. He had a friend, a Frenchman, who admired his Bacon and Day Serenader Silver Bell banjo. Later, Smokey and a crew would take the Frenchman into Russian held territory to repair B24's. It would be the last time they saw each other, but fate still had a part to play in their relationship.

Smokey was shipped, he thought, to Dakar, Africa, but over the Atlantic, they opened their orders and found they were

headed to British Guiana, in northern South America, a stop over point for American planes flying the Atlantic. His equipment, however, including the banjo, was on another plane, which crashed.

The Frenchman, now in San Juan, Puerto Rico, found himself in a warehouse with friends and he saw, amazingly, in a corner, a

Serenader Silver Bell banjo, and he knew it belonged to Smokey.

The services located Smokey, and with two friends, they flew a C47 to Trinidad, where the Frenchman had left the banjo. Smokey says his name was Puro or Gonyo or something similar. He's like to thank him, but can't remember the exact name.

Smokey was discharged in September of 1945, after the end

of the war with Japan.

He earned \$21.00 a month as a private when he entered the air corps (as it was called then) and \$485.00 a month as a Master Sergeant (plus 50% for flight pay) when he left the service.

He had survived four crashes and having his throat cut on a fence in Italy. He won a Bronze Star and he can still play a mean serenade on his beloved banjo.



Smokey Halonen during WWII with the banjo he almost lost in a plane crash.



LESTER "SMOKEY" HALONEN, Princeton, plays his Serenader Silver Bell banjo with the same skill and gusto he had as a Bronze Star recipient in WWII.