

REQUEST FOR BOARD ACTION

HENDERSON COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

MEETING DATE: Thursday, December 15, 2005

SUBJECT: Veterans Memorial at Memorial Stadium

ATTACHMENTS: Personal Story in Memoriam for Historic Memorial Stadium Restoration Committee

SUMMARY OF REQUEST:

At the December 5, 2005 regular meeting, the Board of Commissioners directed staff to work with the County's Veterans Services Office to identify a veteran for recognition within the redesigned Memorial Plaza located at Memorial Stadium in Asheville. Pursuant to that direction, staff has drafted the attached 'personal story' honoring the heroism of Lieutenant William Heaton during World War II. Once approved, the story will be sent to Dr. Carl Mumpower, Chair of the Memorial Stadium Restoration Committee, for inclusion as Henderson County's memorial at the Historic Memorial Stadium. In submitting this veteran's personal story, Henderson County also recognizes the sacrifices of many other men and women from our County and region who gave their lives in military service.

BOARD ACTION REQUESTED:

Staff recommends that the Board of Commissioners approve Lieutenant Heaton's personal story as Henderson County's veteran of recognition to be memorialized at the Historic Memorial Stadium.

Henderson County Memorial: William McNeal Heaton Personal Story for the Memorial Stadium Restoration Committee

By the age of twenty-four, William McNeal Heaton had been awarded a Presidential Unit Citation, the Purple Heart, the Air Medal with three oak clusters, and the Distinguished Flying Cross. That same year, on September 24, 1944, First Lieutenant Heaton was killed over Altenkirchen, Germany while defending our country.

Mac, as he was known, was born in Hendersonville on April 15, 1920, the youngest child of William and Hattie Neal Heaton. He attended Balfour Elementary School, graduated from Hendersonville High School, and went on to work at Ecusta in Pisgah Forest. He married Drama Gibbs. Then, at the age of twenty-two, Mac entered the military.

He became a P-47 Thunderbolt pilot and became part of the famous “Zemke’s Wolfpack,” of the 61st Fighter Squadron, 56th Fighter Group, 8th Air Force based in Boxted, England. The 56th was the first Fighter Group to fly the P-47 and was the only Group to fly it throughout the war. America’s top scoring fighter unit of all time, the 56th Fighter Group boasted some of the highest scoring aces in USAF history. Lt. Heaton’s squadron commander was Colonel Francis Gabreski, the top American ace in the European theater. Gabreski credited Lt. Heaton with saving his life during an encounter with German ME 109’s.

Mac flew in support of the Normandy invasion in June of 1944, and completed more than seventy combat missions before he was killed in action that September. He was laid to rest in the Netherlands, and his grave is located in Plot B, Row 4 in the Netherlands American Cemetery in Margraten, the only American burial ground in the Netherlands. It is one of 8,301 American gravesites in the cemetery.

Lt. Heaton is listed on the Battleship North Carolina’s Roll of Honor as one of the more than 10,000 North Carolinians from all branches of the Armed Forces who died in service to their Country during World War II. The Battleship, located in Wilmington, is the State of North Carolina’s official World War II memorial.

The Distinguished Flying Cross is awarded to those who distinguish themselves in combat by heroism or extraordinary achievement while participating in an aerial flight. The Air Medal is awarded to those who distinguish themselves by meritorious achievement while participating in aerial flight. The Purple Heart is awarded to those who have been wounded or killed while serving in, or with, the U.S. military. The Presidential Unit Citation is awarded to units of the Armed Forces for extraordinary heroism in action against an armed enemy. The unit must display such gallantry, determination, and *esprit de corps* in accomplishing its mission under extremely difficult and hazardous conditions so as to set it apart and above other units participating in the same campaign. Lt. Heaton proved himself worthy of each of these prestigious awards, Henderson County is proud of him, and all of the native sons and daughters who gave their lives to insure the freedom of our great country.