

# Now & Then in Ripon ... *Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society*

## Most decorated officer of 82nd Airborne Division is an RC grad

By Johnathan Derrick

James Megellas (1917-2020) was a World War II veteran who was born in Fond du Lac and graduated from Ripon College. He participated in the college's Reserve Officers' Training Corps, entering the U.S. Army as a second lieutenant. The Dec. 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, which brought the United States into World War II, occurred half-way through his senior year at the college.

Megellas served honorably for 20 years (1942-1962), achieving the rank of lieutenant colonel. He primarily served with the 82nd Airborne Division and is widely considered to be its most decorated officer, being awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, Silver Star (with single bronze oak leaf cluster), Bronze Star Medal (with single bronze oak leaf cluster and "V" device), and a Purple Heart (with single bronze oak leaf cluster).

The Ripon College graduate also served two tours in Vietnam and was awarded the Vietnam Service Medal (with 2 bronze stars) and the Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal (with 1960- device).

Megellas was involved in the Battle of the Bulge, a German offensive campaign on the Western Front, where he and his men advanced into the German occupied town of Herresbach, Belgium. They sprung a surprise attack on roughly 200 German soldiers advancing out

of the town. The attack was devastating as they killed and captured many of the German soldiers with the remainder of them fleeing.

During the attack, a German Mark V tank took focus on Megellas and his men. It was then that he threw a grenade at the tank, disabling it. He then ran towards the tank and climbed atop it, throwing another grenade inside the tank killing its crew. His unit successfully seized the town and not one of his men were killed.

For this, he was awarded the Silver Star, though the incident regarding the tank was not cited.

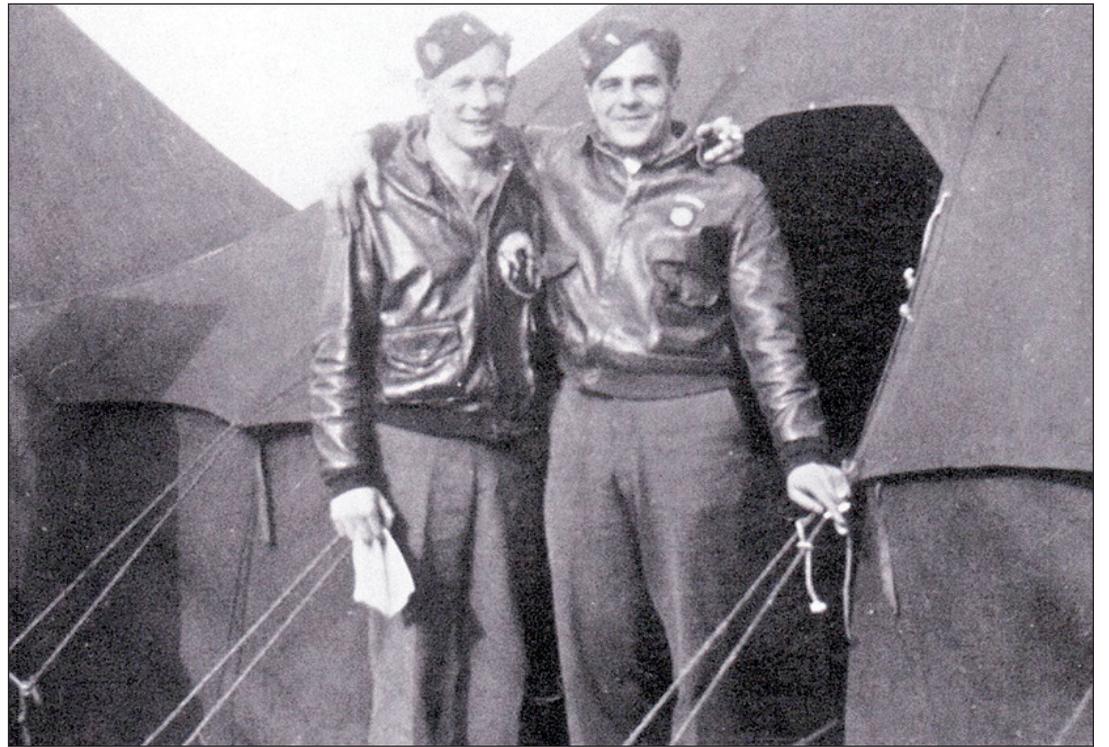
Later in 2013, Wisconsin Congressman Rep. Tom Petri introduced H.R.2082 in the U.S. House of Representatives to request that the president upgrade James' Silver Star to a Medal of Honor for his actions Jan. 28, 1945, during the Battle of the Bulge. It appears that the upgrade was never made, but the recognition of his actions in any capacity is worth noting.

He was selected by the commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, Maj. Gen. James Gavin, as representative for the 82nd Airborne Division to receive the Netherlands' "Orange Lanyard of the Military Order of William," the country's highest honor for the unit's actions during Operation Market Garden.

Operation Market Garden was the invasion of the German-occupied Netherlands, which is considered a failed operation as



James Megellas



LT. RICHARD "RIVERS" LaRiviere, left, and Lt. James "Maggie" Megellas stand together in Leicester, England.

*The Market Garden Committee Foundation photo*

it did not achieve its primary objective of securing a route into Germany via capturing bridges across the Rhine at Arnhem. The "Orange Lanyard of the Military Order of William" was awarded on Oct. 8, 1945.

Nearing the end of World War II, on May 2, 1945, Megellas and his platoon liberated Wöbbelin Concentration Camp. Megellas was later quoted saying the following in relation to the liberation of the concentration camp: "I was not prepared mentally to deal with the horror of the camp. ... It was not until our men witnessed this that we fully realized what we had been fighting for. The destruction of the monstrosity the Nazis had created was the cause greater than ourselves that we had often alluded to, but never fully understood. It was a defining moment in our lives: who we were, what we believed in and what we stood for."

Megellas even has a character based on him in the film "A Bridge Too Far" (1977), where he was portrayed in a minor role by actor John Ratzenberger. The film is based on the events of Operation Market Garden, though his role is fictionalized as the character based on him dies in the events of the film.

On May 2, 1962, Megellas married his wife, Carole Margaret Laehn of Fond du Lac. Laehn was Miss Ripon of 1960 and a runner-up for Miss Wisconsin the same year. She passed away Oct. 29, 2022 at the age of 83.

Before and after retiring from the Army, Megellas served with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), during which time he did two



Back Row, left to right—Col. R. J. Potts, R. Jackson, E. Zippel, R. Wilson, R. Strickler, K. Peters, K. Miller, J. Mitchell, F. Jess, J. Megellas, V. Salter, T. Brahe, H. Knop, L. Krause  
Front Row, left to right—J. Lapotka, R. Peters, K. Kuehn, W. Fleck, E. Buckley, C. Anderson, K. Gierhahn, D. Anderson, E. Kate, S. Ardzijewski, F. Blanas, C. Gatzke, R. Davis, C. Lynch, C. Diekow

**JAMES MEGELLAS, FIFTH** from right in back row, gathers with his fellow ROTC cadets at Ripon College in this photo that ran in the 1942 *Crimson* yearbook.

tours in Vietnam.

After returning to his hometown of Fond du Lac, he served as president of the city council. In 1956, Megellas ran for the Wisconsin State Assembly, and then for Congress in 1958 and 1960, respectively. During that time, he met John F. Kennedy, who was campaigning for president. They became close friends and because of this friendship, Megellas later was appointed USAID Mission Director to Yemen and then Panama. He also served as USAID Mission Director in Columbia in 1975.

While overseas, Megellas and his wife welcomed their sons, James and Stephen, into the world.

After returning to the United States and retiring from the state department in 1979, he took up a position teaching Economics and International Affairs at the Florida Institute of Technology, which he did for nine years. He later moved to Colleyville, Texas in 2003 to be closer with his two sons after retirement.

He passed away April 2, 2020

in Texas at the age of 103 and is buried at the Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Va.

Megellas lived a full, happy and dutiful life. He served his country honorably and achieved some of the highest possible honors. Well after exiting service, he remained a beacon in the military community. Today, he remains as the most decorated officer of the 82nd Airborne Division.

*The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.*

*For more information, visit [www.riponhistory.org](http://www.riponhistory.org), [facebook.com/riponhistoricalsociety](https://www.facebook.com/riponhistoricalsociety) or [instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/](https://www.instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/).*

*Editors note: This is the first of three Now & Then in Ripon articles written by Ripon College students interning last semester with the Ripon Historical Society. Derrick is a Ripon College graduate and a U.S. Army recruit.*



**JAMES MEGELLAS, RIGHT**, stands with John Ratzenberger, who portrayed him in the 1977 film "A Bridge Too Far." Megellas also published a book in 2003 titled "All the Way to Berlin," which was his personal memoir from World War II.

*K. Novak photo, via Wikimedia Commons*