

WW2 Medals find Rockbridge Home at RHS

-Eric Wilson, Executive Director, Rockbridge Historical Society

WW2 Silver Star and Purple Heart of Rockbridge's Eugene "Gene" Kyle Sweet

The 4th of July ritually summons thoughts of national traditions, and national ideals. This year, the story of one late Rockbridge veteran brings more particular color to the holiday. In light of the WW1 and WW2 Commemorations running from 2016-2020, a recent family gift has preserved for the community preservation a meaningful spur to reflect on the service and sacrifice that sustain the holiday, while stitching together its local, national, and international threads.

In May, the Rockbridge Historical Society received a special bequest of military decorations awarded to lifelong Rockbridge resident, Eugene "Gene" Kyle Sweet. RHS Executive Director Eric Wilson shared some background, as well as the wider context in which other artifacts, papers, and oral histories have been increasingly coming to light, to enrich archives and programs alike: "Last Fall, members of the Sweet family approached us about donating these artifacts from World War 2, taking particular note of our engagement with local and statewide commemorative efforts through the Rockbridge and Virginia WW1 & WW2 Commemoration Commissions. We hope items like these (and other artifacts and memorabilia held by family members in our community) will help RHS and its partners to interpret and exhibit aspects of service that connect local histories to national and global campaigns, conflicts, and careers."



**Steeles Tavern native Eugene "Kyle" Sweet: G.I. Service Photo, 1942
Local Rockbridge Members of the Sweet family,
donate his decorations, records to RHS Archives, 2017**

The oldest son of Andrew and Emma (Rowe) Sweet, Eugene was born in Steeles Tavern in 1918. In 1920, the Sweets and their seven children moved to Walkers Creek. After two years of high school, Gene was employed by a service station, and he would live and work in Rockbridge County for the rest of his life.

On September 2, 1941, two months before Pearl Harbor, Gene enlisted in the U.S. Army. 1942 found him training with the 157th regiment in Texas and New York, before shipping from Hampton Roads to North Africa in the summer of 1943. From there, Sweet and his comrades would help the 45th division spearhead the attack on Europe's southern front, helping to tip the tide of battle against Germany and Italy before the Normandy invasions the following year. He first saw combat during the Allied invasion of Sicily, where he was hit in his right leg by sniper fire. In the Italian Campaign that immediately followed, he suffered a service-ending injury at the Battle of Anzio, when he was struck by machine gun fire up and down his left side Feb. 2, 1944. But three months earlier, Sgt. Sweet (who was classified as both Marksman and Squad Leader) undertook heroic actions that would earn him the Silver Star. His official citation reads:



Staff Sgt. Sweet's Purple Heart, Silver Star, Lexington Dog Tags, Service Decorations, RHS Collections

“[At Anzio] in November 1943, when his squad attacked by strongly defended German positions on a hill, Staff Sergeant Sweet personally destroyed two hostile machine gun nests and inflicted many casualties on the enemy. After successfully taking their objective, S/Sgt. Sweet and his squad were subjected to an intense enemy mortar and artillery barrage which killed one man and wounded every member of the squad with the exception of S/Sgt. Sweet. Despite the heavy hostile fire, he administered first aid to the wounded and assisted in carrying them back to safety, finally leaving him alone in the position. He continued to maintain his position until other squads arrived to support him in defending the area. His courage and concern for the welfare of his men reflect great credit to him and the armed forces.”

Yet even in the same month of that deadly campaign, Gene Sweet kept his thoughts on Rockbridge, and maintained his hometown courtship with Mae Elizabeth Smith. Among the few personal letters folded into his memorial scrapbook is a delicate 1943 V-MAIL card addressed to “Miss Mae Smith, 28 N. Main St., Lexington.” The Army-issue holiday card is more personally inscribed, saying “I’ve asked Santa to bring you my love.” Even more playfully, the card announces “XMAS GREETINGS FROM ITALY” to complement a drawing of Santa, who is pictured as having traded in his sleigh for a Venetian gondola, with the Leaning Tower of Pisa standing tall among his haul of gifts.



**V-Mail sent from Eugene Sweet to future wife, Miss Mae Smith, of Lexington
“I’ve asked Santa to bring you my love” – and The Leaning Tower of Pisa – in his gondola.
Written the very month he was wounded and decorated for heroism, in Italy.**

No less than the respect warranted by Sweet's Silver Star and Purple Heart, this dainty, domestic item holds a special charge for Wilson, in illuminating some of the more distinctively local aspects of such histories: "Across four centuries now, veterans have returned to Rockbridge having fought in the Valley, and throughout Virginia, having served across the nation and deployed throughout the globe. Many others didn't returned, either dying in the cause, or finding new lives elsewhere. But one of the particular charms in looking at this card is knowing that it not only prefaces a happy ending, but one that distinctly turns back to our community."

Upon his return from Europe in April 1944, Sweet was sent to White Sulphur Springs, WV, to recover from his injuries at Ashford Hospital. While still recuperating there, Gene and Mae married on July 1 at the manse of the Bethesda Presbyterian Church in Rockbridge Baths, at the manse of the Bethesda Presbyterian Church in Rockbridge Baths. They would have two children, Betty Jean and Stanley Eugene (both of whom came to Lexington, along with grandson David, to present these family treasures to RHS). Rated 60% disabled as a result of his injuries, he worked his entire life for Gulf Oil driving a delivery truck. Gene passed away in 1996, and is buried at Alone Cemetery near Kerrs Creek.

Beyond its own integrity, Wilson sees additional value in Sweet's story, because of the way in which it may also prompt others to find more audience: "Within a relatively small area, Buena Vista, Lexington, and Rockbridge are fortunate to have so many organizations that are committed to giving witness and giving voice to such stories, especially during the joint commemorations of the two World Wars. The George C. Marshall Museum and 'Legacy Series' programs keep these seminal experiences of the 20th century consistently in light. And the running variety of exhibits, libraries, and speakers at W&L and VMI illuminate some of the unique contributions and impact on their own university communities. The 125th Anniversary of Buena Vista offers timely opportunities for people to share their relevant histories with others, as does an oral history project that the Rockbridge WW1/WW2 Commemoration Committee is working to develop with WW2 Veterans, and local high school students."



Rockbridge Veterans Memorial Plaza, Old Courthouse, Lexington

In emphasizing the lasting rewards of local preservation, Wilson concludes, “For our own part, RHS is fortunate to continue its long institutional service as stewards for collections that bear witness to Rockbridge lives and legacies. The crucial support of the staff and resources of W&L’s Special Collections allow us to keep such materials secure, yet accessible for public research, and opportune programming. Well and beyond these two Wars, the Society depends on personal, familial, and organizational donations of historic papers, photographs and artifacts that support our uniquely local mission.”

In the end, the ability to share those stories results from collaborative, community enterprise, as he emphasizes that “RHS crucially relies on the work of volunteers to archive, organize, and exhibit them. Whether assisting with collections or helping with other areas of outreach, volunteering is a crucial contribution that many residents can readily make to invest in the community they and their families have valued. We’re glad of the timely opportunity to display these items at our Campbell House museum through the summer, a tangible means to honor the ways Gene Sweet served Rockbridge and the nation at large. And we hope that this range of national, state and local WW1 and WW2 anniversaries will move not only family members, but other area residents, to participate in the work of securing those histories for other generations ahead.”



**World War II memorial Plaque, Rockbridge Veterans Memorial Plaza
with quote from VMI/ Rockbridge Gen. George C. Marshall (1950)**