

# He led from the front

Decorated WWII veteran James ‘Maggie’ Megellas’ advice served him and others well, even during today’s pandemic



Nearly 75 years after World War II ended, James “Maggie” Megellas was still the most decorated officer of the 82nd Airborne. Here, he was photographed in his home in Colleyville in 2018. (2018 File photo/Nathan Hunsinger)



**Megellas' WWII medals** included the Distinguished Service Cross, two Silver Stars, two Purple Hearts, Presidential Citation with Cluster, Master Parachutist badge, the Belgian Fourragère and the Dutch Orange Lanyard. (2018 File photo/Nathan Hunsinger)

Just days before he died at 103, World War II veteran James “Maggie” Megellas last month advised his family to follow government directives and stay patient during this pandemic. He dedicated himself to leading from the front and inspired thousands of people the world over to serve a cause greater than ourselves.

Nearly 75 years after World War II ended, Megellas was still the most decorated officer of the 82nd Airborne. His awards include the Distinguished Service Cross, two Silver Stars, two Purple Hearts, Presidential Citation with Cluster, Master Parachutist badge, the Belgian Fourragère and the Dutch Orange Lanyard.

Megellas served with H Company, 3rd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, as a platoon leader, all the way from Africa to Berlin, and while still a first lieutenant, he was named company commander.

He fought in the Italian mountains near the Anzio beachhead, he jumped into Holland as part of Operation Market Garden, and crossed the Waal River under heavy German fire in broad daylight. During the Battle of the Bulge, he single-handedly destroyed a tank, a German Mark V Panzer, armed only with his Thompson submachine gun and two Gammon grenades, and led his platoon to liberate the town of Herresbach, Belgium, the last stop before the Siegfried Line, without a single loss of an American life. Megellas was also a liberator, and finished World War II in the occupation of Berlin.

But his devotion to our nation, and the cause of freedom in this world, only began in World War II. Megellas was just getting started.

He continued his service to our nation with the U.S. Agency for International Development for 32 years, holding assignments in Yemen, Panama, South Vietnam and Colombia, and, in 1975, was responsible for aiding South Vietnamese refugees arriving at Camp Pendleton in San Diego.

During his two-year assignment with USAID in Vietnam, Megellas held the equivalent rank of two-star general, leading 4,000 soldiers and civilians from Vietnam and other nations in civil military relations. For this mission, he received the National Chieu Hoi Medal and the Psychological Warfare Medal from the South Vietnamese government.

After he retired from official government service, his service to his country continued. In his 80s, Megellas invested five years to research and write his autobiography, *All the Way to Berlin: A Paratrooper at War in Europe*, published in 2003 by Random House.

In 2006, at the age of 89, Megellas visited the modern-day version of his World War II outfit, the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, then serving in Afghanistan along the Pakistani border — fitted in full body armor for patrol. Megellas returned to Afghanistan on two other occasions, at Christmas in 2007 and in September of 2008, to meet with soldiers and encourage the efforts of U.S. military personnel.

In 2008, Megellas was invited by the German government back to the town of Ludwigslust, where he was honored for liberating the Wöbbelin concentration camp. In 2010, Megellas received the Daughters of the American Revolution Medal of Honor.

Megellas and his World War II service are subjects of a 2013 World War II Foundation documentary film titled *Maggie's War: A True Story of Courage, Leadership and Valor in World War II*, airing on PBS stations throughout the country.

In 2014, Megellas returned to the Netherlands at the invitation of the Dutch government for the 70th commemoration of Operation Market Garden and crossed the Waal River once again in a rubber boat, as he was portrayed in the film *A Bridge Too Far*. Megellas was deeply honored to receive the American Veterans Center 2014 Audie Murphy Award. In 2016, AHEPA held a bipartisan Capitol Hill reception for Megellas, and in his hometown of Fond du Lac, Wis., the post office was renamed in his honor by an act of Congress.

In 2017, he attended the Stauffenberg Commemoration at the invitation of the German government, where he met the grandchildren of the men sent to assassinate Adolf Hitler.

In his memoir, Megellas wrote about entering the Wöbbelin concentration 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 is survived by his wife, two sons and five grandchildren, and thousands who wish to come together to honor his memory once the pandemic has passed.

When asked how he lived so long, he often answered that he had not yet finished his mission. Megellas also said that what meant more to him than any accolade was bringing people together. He has now passed his mission on to us. May we always remember James “Maggie” Megellas, who showed us who we are, what we believe in, and what we stand for as Americans, together.

*Meredith Walker is the global economist for XPRIZE and a member of the board of councilors for EastWest Institute in Dallas. As a friend of the Megellas family, she serves as the America’s Future Series Megellas Award Trustee and worked with legislators to gain the Congressional Medal of Honor for Megellas. She wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.*