

## Medallion takes on new meaning

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Islip teenager Lauri Beckerman still wears the small silver pendant her grandfather, Gerald Beckerman, gave her on her first birthday in 1994. But her grandfather, a U.S. Army veteran of the Battle of the Bulge, died before he could explain its full significance.

Yesterday, on the eve of the 63rd anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge, historians from Belgium and Long Island told a crowd of about 300 at the American Airpower Museum in Farmingdale that the nickel-sized medallion symbolized the lasting gratitude of Belgians for the American effort to liberate Europe.

It was minted by Franciscan nuns whose convent in the village of Bastogne became an Allied stronghold during the month-and-a-half-long battle, said Henri Mignon, a Bastogne tour guide who flew to New York for yesterday's ceremony.

"I came to express my thanks to the Beckerman family and to Gerald, who I'm sure can hear us from another world," said Mignon, 71, whose memories of



Gerald Beckerman gave a pendant to his granddaughter.

the battle remain vivid six decades later.

Mignon decided to come to New York to meet the Beckermans after being contacted by Guenter Bier, a guide at the museum. Bier, of Hicksville, was interested in learning more about Lauri's pendant after her mother, Barbara Beckerman, showed it to him during a field trip in March. Mignon, who went to school with the nuns, immediately recognized the significance of the pendant, and the two men set about researching its history.

"The more we dug into it, the more interesting it got," Bier said.

Lauri knew little of the pendant, she said, except that a nun "took it off her wrist and gave it to him [Beckerman] as a token of her thanks."



The Beckerman family and Henri Mignon, third from right, toss nuts in the air to commemorate a U.S. general's response to the Germans when asked to surrender during the Battle of the Bulge.

Beckerman received the pendant, featuring a likeness of St. Mary Magdalene, when he was a 21-year-old paratrooper with the 501st regiment of the 101st Airborne Division. His unit had been called on to reinforce Bastogne, which had come under fierce Nazi attack in initial stages of the Battle of the Bulge.

The surprise German offensive, begun on Dec. 16, 1944, pushed 50 miles deep into Belgium, creating a westward "bulge" in Allied defense lines that gave the battle its name.

Had the Nazis taken Bastogne and then achieved Hitler's goal of reaching the strategic port of Antwerp, four Allied armies would have been stranded without supplies, and the outcome of the war could have been different, Mignon said. But Beckerman's division held the village until reinforcements from Gen. George Patton's army arrived.

Beckerman, a Brooklyn native who was awarded the Bronze Star, moved to Islip after the war. He worked for many years as a delivery man

and raised a family of four sons. He died in 1995 at the age of 72.

Jack Agnew, 85, a member of the 101st Airborne whose unit was depicted in the film "The Dirty Dozen," told the crowd yesterday that few Americans remember the heroism of men like Beckerman.

"Guys from Brooklyn, farm hands from Iowa and grocers out in California became seasoned warriors who stood up to Hitler's best and stopped them in their tracks," Agnew said. "But at what a cost."