WWII memoir to benefit military families

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Clackamas Community College and the Glenmoore retirement community will host a book signing and reception for World War II veteran Robert “Smokey” Vrilakas from 2 to 4 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 28. Vrilakas, a Glenmoore resident and WWII P-38 fighter pilot, will sign copies of his book, “Look, Mom — I Can Fly,” at 12154 S.E. 114th Court in Happy Valley. Proceeds from book sales will benefit the Military Families Scholarship Endowment at CCC.

In 2012, the Clackamas Review wrote that Vrilakas’ memoir “poignantly tackles the tragedy of war in a reflective style that the Greatest Generation typically eschews.”

Six months prior to the Pearl Harbor attack, Vrilakas himself was drafted at 22 years old, forever transforming the Northern Californian farm boy whose sole experience with aviation had been a Ford Trimotor passenger plane droning in the distance.

Of the 80 people who volunteered to fly the top warplane, the P-38, only 65 made it on the elite squadron. Of those 65, about half survived to the end of the war.

Of the four people in the "Fearsome Foursome," only one, Dick Lee, came back with Vrilakas. The "Fearsome Foursome" was known for fearless defense of bombers on the 94th Fighter Squadron, represented by the iconic "Hat in the Ring" insignia.

"Look, Mom — I Can Fly" follows Vrilakas from his small town in northern California, where he was in awe of airplanes flying overhead, to his own flight training and 51 combat missions against the German Luftwaffe and Italian Air Force in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations in WWII. He spent 32 years in the armed forces, retiring as a command pilot with more than 9,000 hours of flying time and multiple decorations for his service.

Vrilakas retired in 1973 and opened a specialized machine shop in Portland, which his sons took over in 1980.


The MFSE provides funding for tuition at Clackamas Community College. The scholarship endowment supports veterans of all eras,
their spouses and dependent children of active-duty personnel, reserves, Oregon National Guard, and survivors of those servicemen and women who have died since 2003.

Copies of Vrilakas’ book are $20 and may be purchased at the event or at give.clackamas.edu/LookMomICanFly. For additional information, call the CCC Foundation at 503-594-3129.