



**W**illiam Joseph "Bill" Steele, 86, passed away peacefully at home Tuesday, July 27<sup>th</sup>. He is survived by his wife, Ruth, with whom he celebrated 67 years of marriage earlier this year. He is also survived by his son, William Edward "Bill" Steele of Livingston; daughter, Lynda Kay Steele, of Bozeman; and extended family, Ashly Jane Holland of Livingston.

Bill was born in Roundup on May 26, 1924, to James Edward and Susan Ann (McCleary) Steele. His sister, Miriam (Polly) Vaterlaus, and brothers, Robert and James Patrick preceded him in death. Surviving is brother, Russell J. (Marian) Steele, of Cocoa, Florida, and numerous cousins, nieces and nephews.

His family moved to Billings in 1933 and Bill graduated high school in 1942. He then worked as an aircraft mechanic at air bases in Great Falls, Montana and Logan, Utah until April 1943 when he enlisted in the U. S. Air Force. After his training was completed, and shortly before he left for overseas duty, he and Ruth Speer (also of Billings) eloped and were married on June 20, 1943.

As a member of the 12<sup>th</sup> Air Force, 57<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing, 486<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron of the 340<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group, Staff Sgt. Steele was an aerial gunner on B-25 Medium Bombers. He was based on Corsica and in Italy, completing 65 combat missions (15 as top turret gunner and 50 as tail gunner) in seven major campaigns over northern Italy, southern France, the Balkans and the Alps. Targets included German marshalling yards, bridges, and military equipment movements, all strongly defended with anti-aircraft guns and heavy flak. He had many stories to tell, including some of his combat experiences flying the Brenner Pass. Among his many awards are eight Air Medals and two Presidential Distinguished Unit Citations. He was discharged from the military in 1945 before his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.

After WWII, Bill and Ruth moved to Bozeman where he attended Montana State College (now MSU) and worked for the Montana Department of Transportation, retiring in 1979 as Regional Superintendent of Buildings and Equipment. He was the proudest father ever of his children Lynda and Bill. He participated in all their activities, from balancing Lynda on her first bike for "miles" until she could ride, to teaching young Bill a work ethic mowing (many) lawns, to helping the Cub Scouts with their cars in the Pinewood Derby, to getting Lynda her first car, to teaching Bill auto mechanics and all about big game hunting, and so much more. Some years later, he and Ruth were chosen to be Ashly's "Gramps" and "Grams", which filled another niche in his life. Bill and Ruth were extremely proud that all three graduated college, Lynda winning a full cost of education national college scholarship and studying for her Doctorate in Statistics, Bill establishing his own real estate business, and Ashly using her musical talents to both compose and perform.

After his retirement, there were other careers on the horizon for Bill. He established a mechanic's auto repair/tune-up shop in his garage. Some 20 years ago, when business became more than a full-time job for a retired fellow, he bought a ranch in the Bull Mountains near Roundup and the original Steele family homesteads. He remodeled a tack house into a total comfort cabin for the family's "get-away". He so enjoyed establishing a safe environment for all the wildlife—including deer, turkeys, rabbits, chipmunks, songbirds and more. With so many animals around, he bought a tractor and farm equipment to plant patches of barley just for them. And, although Bill was an avid hunter, hunting was never allowed on his ranch.

There are many stories to tell of Bill's life—because it was so full, and he enjoyed it completely.

A Celebration of Bill's Life will be held at 2:00 pm Thursday, August 12, 2010 at the First Presbyterian Church in Bozeman. Memorial may be made to Heart of the Valley Animal Shelter, P.O. Box 11390, Bozeman, MT 59719.