

FROM WAR TO WHEELS: A Tale of Heroism, Gratitude, and Humanity

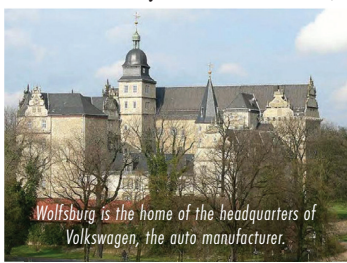
BY SON VU | PHOTOS PROVIDED BY CLAIRE RATFIELD

When Mesa Verde resident Claire Ratfield first learned about the lawsuit filed by a body shop in Van Nuys against the legal owner of a 1977 Mercedes Benz 300D, she was *actually thrilled* about being served. This classic car held a value beyond mere monetary worth for her. It was a cherished part of her family's history—a symbol of an impactful act of kindness that had touched generations since World War II.



The story began when Claire's son had an accident while driving the car. Terry Ratfield, Claire's husband, took it to a recommended classic car body shop in Van Nuys. However, after Terry's passing, Claire put aside locating the exact body shop, and the car was stored for seven years, leading to the lawsuit to recover costs. When Claire shared the remarkable history behind the car, the shop owners dropped the lawsuit.

The extraordinary tale began in World War II when Claire's father, Captain Thomas A. Ryan, stumbled upon a castle in the woods near Wolfsburg, Germany. The castle held priceless works of art by Van Gogh and Rembrandt, and sheltered high-ranking German officers and their



32 children. While the adults were placed under house arrest, the children were allowed to play freely, and the artwork was safeguarded. A month later, Captain Ryan returned to his post 300 miles south in Munich. Soon after, the German families and children were moved to another castle to the east, in an area which would later become Soviet-occupied East Germany after the Potsdam Conference in July 1945.

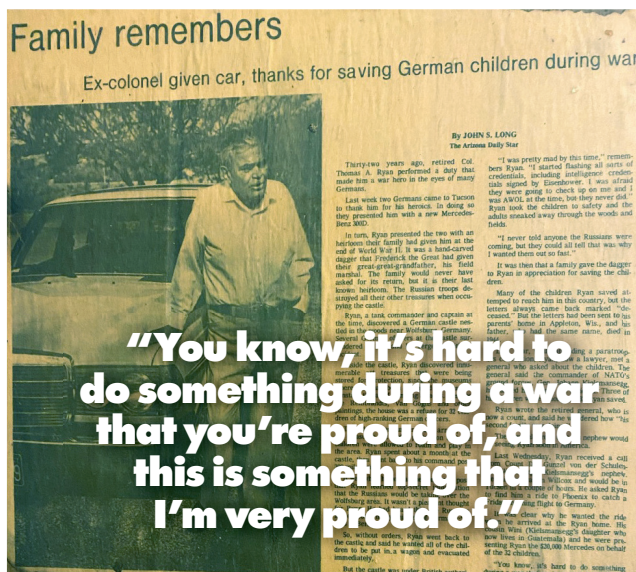
A few months later in Munich, Captain Ryan received top-secret intelligence revealing that the Soviets were planning to take retribution on the German nobility for their role in the Battle of Stalingrad by killing their children. Captain Ryan, acting without official orders – technically, going AWOL – courageously traveled to the eastern castle, at the time controlled by British authorities, to warn them the children needed to be evacuated immediately for their own safety.

The British initially refused Ryan's plea. Undeterred, Ryan utilized his intelligence credentials, signed by General Eisenhower, and convinced them of his credibility. The Brits relented and Ryan ensured the children were safely evacuated. As the children were removed to safety, one child's grateful family presented Captain Ryan with a dagger as a token of gratitude.

Unbeknownst to Captain Ryan, General Johann von Kielsmansegg, a high-ranking German officer and a Count, had been hiding in the bushes nearby, training his rifle on Ryan, suspicious of his intentions.

Upon his return to the United States, many of the children Ryan saved tried to contact him, but their letters were returned, marked "deceased." They had been posting their letters to Ryan's father in Appleton, Wisconsin, who had passed in 1944. However, fate would reunite Ryan with those he had rescued. In 1977, while attending a paratrooper convention, Colonel Thomas A. Ryan unexpectedly encountered a general who was aware of his heroic act in Germany.

Through this chance meeting, Ryan was able to contact the retired General "Count" Johann von Kielsmansegg. The Count informed Ryan that his nephew – also a Count, Dr. Gunzel Graf Von der Schulenberg – would be in Tucson, Ryan's area, and requested assistance in finding a ride to Phoenix. Little did Ryan know that the nephew's visit was on behalf of the 32 children Ryan had saved. In a heartwarming turn of events, the nephew presented Ryan with a brand-new Mercedes Benz 300D as a gesture of gratitude. A man with utmost integrity, Ryan reciprocated the gesture by returning the dagger—a cherished family heirloom—to its rightful owners. The dagger was one of the last remaining relics of that family's history, surviving the ravages of war.



Ryan was quoted by the Arizona Daily Star, saying, "You know, it's hard to do something during a war that you're proud of, and this is something that I'm very proud of." Claire Ratfield, now in possession of the car and deeply moved by her father's acts of heroism and humanity, cherishes the memories associated with it more than ever.

In a world often overshadowed by conflict and strife, the story of Thomas A. Ryan and his selfless actions serves as a poignant reminder of the power of kindness, compassion, and generosity. It teaches us that even amidst the darkest times, acts of heroism can emerge, leaving a lasting impact on the lives of others.

General Johann von Kielsmansegg was arrested by the Gestapo for being a co-conspirator of the 20 July plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler but was released for a lack of evidence.