

25 Years Of Memories – Palmer Veterans Appreciation Award Part 1 & 2

By: Palmer Town Historian, David Patton

For the past quarter century it has been my privilege to personally present a plaque of appreciation to a special breed of Palmer citizen, those who deserve to be honored and recognized above all others, our military veterans.

It all began in 1986. Ronald Reagan was president and patriotism was in style again after the turmoil of the Vietnam War and the release of Americans held in the Iranian Hostage Crisis.

A song called “God Bless the USA” hadn’t been out long and became so popular then and later that it threatened to replace the “Star Spangled Banner.”

James “Burr” Rogers was interested in military history and found a shoulder patch of the U.S. Army unit Mr. Malcolm Rankin served with in World War I and had it mounted on a plaque. Since I was the town historian, he wanted me to present it to Mr. Rankin on Veterans Day.

Mr. Rankin was a faithful member of the Gruetli- Laager Senior Citizens Center and after the invocation by Rev. Cecil Walker, a veteran himself, we made the presentation before a room full of seniors who knew what was and hard times were all about. I remember the late Leon Cannon being there that day.

Just a few years before, Joe Gillespie, ace reporter for the Grundy County Herald, had written an award winning story about Mr. Rankin and Henry Roberts who served in the Navy during the war. Mr. Rankin was a messenger traveling by foot among the muddy trenches of Europe and had received a medal for his heroics from the king of Italy.

The presentation was such an enjoyable affair for me that I was determined to do it every year and coined the name we all now recognize, “Palmer Veterans Appreciation Award.”

Our 1987 recipient Obid Marion “Soap” McMabb saw all of World War II, being sent to U.S. Army Basic Training just a few weeks before Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on

December 7, 1941, and coming home in December 1945, three months after the war ended.

“When we heard about Pearl Harbor, I saw grown men sit on their bunks and cry,” Soap said. “After that, basic training speeded up, and they had to cram everything quickly because the war had started. As our train pulled out after basic, some of the men opened the windows and cursed the drill sergeants who were standing along the tracks watching us leave.”

As the war raged on, Soap spent time in Hawaii where he saw the famous baseball player Joe DiMaggio and got a visit from Berton Cagle of Palmer. Then it was on to a little-known volcanic island not far from Japan. They called Iwo Jima the “sizzling pork chop,” Soap remembered. “Our army radar unit later followed the Marines and the sand was so warm a blanket on it felt like an electric blanket and you could dig a hole in it and heat your canned rations.”

Soap stayed on Iwo Jima until Japan surrendered six months later and remembered climbing up the side of the ship on a rope ladder as they left the island. “When Hiroshima was bombed the Jap radio announcers went crazy. They thought it was a poison gas attack,” he said. “Then we heard on the radio it was an atomic bomb and someone said, ‘What the h-- - is an atomic bomb?’ That’s how secret America’s secret weapon of World War II was.”

“They Chose the Navy” the article in the Chattanooga newspaper said as it continued with a photo of the new recruits and “The first five men to be accepted for enlistment” in the Navy since war came to the United States were told about their favorite branch of service this morning by recruiter W.M. Ramsey, Jr.

They were Rufus Kilgroe, Jr, 18, and Douglas Ray Brown 17, of Palmer; William Lawrence McBee 17, of Sewanee; Charles Stanfield 17, of Apison, TN; and ex-Navy man Thomas Kelly Goodier 23, of Jasper, TN.

When Junior and Doug heard Pearl Harbor had been bombed, they joined the next day, December 8, 1941. Junior and Doug (nephew of Harvey Brown) are both deceased.

Look for Part II of this story in an upcoming edition of the Grundy County Herald.

25 Years of Memories – Palmer Veterans Appreciation Award – Part 2

By: Palmer Town

Historian David Patton

One of the things I'm most proud of in presenting this award is the fact that all 25 men served overseas. This is not to demean the important service of state side veterans, but I think we'll all agree that going "across the waters" to face the unknown in a strange land adds an extra element of danger and suspense to military service.

Our World War II veterans were fascinating to talk with.

Wet Duck Dishroon was captured by the Germans and finished out the war as a POW while Buddy Nolan raced across Europe with General Patton's Third Army, came home, went right back to work and was proud of the fact he didn't draw a dime of "rocking chair" (unemployment) money.

Earl Creighton was an MP in Europe and played cards with the famous "Hangman" of World War II, Sgt. John Woods, who executed many of the Nazi war criminals. Asked about Woods' demeanor, Earl said, "He didn't have much to say." Earl also remembered an American soldier who was hanged for killing his sergeant for snoring in the barracks. Earl joined the U.S. Air Force after the war and made it a career.

Gene Brooks was in the Pacific with the Navy and after the war spent a hitch in the Air Force.

James L. "Jim" King (son-in-law of Malcolm Rankin) served on the great battleship U.S.S. Pennsylvania where he and his shipmates survived a Japanese kamakazi attack while James Shrum was also a Navy man in the Pacific as his brother John Shrum was on duty with the Army in Europe.

J.C. "Tom" Scissom was with the Army in the Pacific where an explosion left him with a severe hearing loss, but he came home, raised, and supported a family.

Dan Coffelt, who passed away recently, and his brother Leck served in the Pacific with the Army and were kept together all during their service time due to having a rare blood type.

Staff Sergeant Jack Partin led his men back to safety after being stranded behind German lines during a battle without food or weapons. Jack recalled being hid in a haystack and hearing the "thumpthump-thump" of boots in the snow and thinking, "If that's the German infantry and they find us, they'll kill us for sure." Jack's feet were frozen during the ordeal and after reaching American lines, part of

the treatment was hanging his feet out the barracks window so they wouldn't thaw out too fast.

Bill Partin and his brothers T.G. and Barney Jr. all served in the Army. Bill was in Europe and Junior was killed on the island of New Guinea in the Pacific less than a year before Japan surrendered.

Glenn Nunley served as an infantry soldier in Korea in what has been called "the forgotten war" while Charles Edgar Sanders and Herschel Finch, Jr. were on duty with the Navy. Junior made it a career and once cooked a steak in Spain for John Wayne when the actor was there making the movie "Circus World."

The "Cold War" between the United States and Soviet Union was a dangerous time in the 1950's as both were armed with nuclear weapons, and nerves were raw with many fearing any incident could trigger World War III.

Bobby Stinnett was in the Navy and today has severe hearing loss probably because of his duty in the ship's engine room. He recalled seeing the Arabs with their long knives working the docks of the Middle East and was in the area when the Suez Canal Crisis happened.

Billy Carl Guffey served with the Army in West Germany where our troops were stationed to prevent an invasion from East German and Soviet Union forces. Today, due to American diligence back then, Germany is a united and free nation.

The Vietnam era, much like Iraq and Afghanistan today, seemed endless, but Teeter Morrison served faithfully on an Army helicopter and later with the 212th Engineer Co. during Operation Desert Storm.

Dennis A. Sweeton was among the first Grundy Countians to serve in Vietnam and recalled hearing about President Kennedy's assassination on the radio while there as a soldier in 1963.

Tom Burnette was with the Army in Vietnam and now serves as a deacon at his church where he makes patriotic talks each Memorial and Veterans Day.

Larry Henry served during the Vietnam era on Guam and the Indian Ocean Island of Diego Garcia. While overseas, he got to meet and have his photo taken with the legendary Bob Hope.

Sean Lewis joined the Army, became airborne qualified, and served in Desert Storm. He was the first teacher to receive the award and today is the highly regarded eighth grade teacher at Palmer Elementary School.

In the early years, Ashby Printing and Trophies furnished the plaque and our sponsor in recent years has been Citizens Tri-County Bank. We deeply appreciate their loyalty and support.

The late Bob Hope's theme song was "Thanks for the Memories" and looking back over these 25 years has been a trip down memory lane for me.

To my knowledge, when we started this award and for many years after, it was the only annual award that honored our veterans. It had been my dream to, one day, see someone from every community in Grundy County honored annually, and I have lived to see that happen due to Mr. Y.B Ashby's work. Another goal was to present the Palmer Veterans Appreciation Award for 25 years, and I was humbled to reach that goal this year. I've been truly blessed.

A most sincere thanks to Janelle Taylor, President of the Grundy County Historical Society, for her assistance on this story.