

WWII vet wounded at Battle of the Bulge



Gordon Jackson/The Brunswick News

World War II veteran Lee Buchanan, 93, can still wear his old uniform. He received a Purple Heart Medal for injuries sustained in a bombing attack in Belgium.

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By GORDON JACKSON The Brunswick News

Today's veteran: Lee Buchanan, 93

Born: Zeigler, Ill.

Residence: Kingsland, Ga.

Service: National Guard, Army, Army Air Corps 10 years

Highest rank: Staff sergeant

Duties: Locomotive fireman, cook, entertainer, infantry

Duty stations: England, Scotland, France, Belgium, Yugoslavia, Luxembourg, Fort Sill, OK, Fort Hood, TX, Fort Lewis, WA.

Recognitions: Purple Heart; European African Middle Eastern Theater Service Medal (with four bronze battle stars); American Campaign Medal; Good Conduct Medal; World War II Army of Occupation Medal; World War II Victory Medal; Yugoslav Medal; member of Royal British Legion Scotland

His story: Lee Buchanan had just completed a tour of duty in the Illinois National Guard, where he was trained as a machine gunner, when Pearl Harbor was attacked.

He wasn't enthusiastic about the prospect of being recalled because he had just married, but there was no doubt on his part that he'd do his duty.

He was recalled to active duty in the Army in September 1942, and was sent to England, and later Scotland, to prepare for the eventual invasion of France.

Instead of a machine gun, Buchanan was handed a rifle and kitchen utensils after he filled in for some cooks and did too good of a job preparing meals.

"We didn't cook 24 hours a day. That was a sideline," he said.

He arrived in France four or five days after the Normandy Invasion as a detached enlisted man's liaison, meaning his duties would be assigned wherever the Army needed him. He was assigned to a unit that supplied fuel to vehicles moving inland.

"We moved inland right away because we were targets," he said.

The Battle of the Bulge was especially difficult because of the weather.

"It was cold, freezing cold and I've been cold ever since," he said. "Your hands got so cold, you could hardly pull a trigger."

He was inside a Catholic school in Belgium when the building was destroyed by a bomb. He was pinned under a heavy steel window frame and his arms, face and skull were riddled with shrapnel and glass. The nuns at the school tended his wounds while he was still pinned.

"I could hear the crunch when they pulled the glass out of my skull," he said.

He was hospitalized three months in France and later Wales recovering from his injuries, which included a loss of hearing and vision. He never fully regained his hearing, he said.

One of his most vivid memories is the V-2 rockets, nicknamed buzz bombs, that flew overhead. By the time he heard them coming, Buchanan said he knew there was no time to do anything but count the seconds.

"If you could count to three, you were still alive," he said. "It happened about every day. They were bombing every place."

He was in France when the German army surrendered, but he said there was little celebration.

"People were worn out by then," he said.

He was still in France, expecting to be sent to the Pacific theater for the invasion of Japan when the war ended.

Despite the rigors of war, Buchanan said he always expected to return home.

"There was never a doubt I'd return. I'm too mean for that," he said. "There's two things you can't kill — a cockroach and a Scotsman."

He had two brothers who served in the Pacific who also returned home after the war.

“I couldn’t understand why everyone didn’t go in the service,” he said.

After he returned home, Buchanan did a variety of things, including being a country music artist and physician. Despite the scars he still carries from his war wounds and a broken hip he suffered two years ago, Buchanan said he is a very fit 93-year-old veteran.

“I feel pretty good,” he said. “Take a look at me.”

Our Veterans runs Tuesdays. Contact Gordon Jackson at gjackson@thebrunswicknews.com, on Facebook or at 464-7655 to suggest a veteran for a column.

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