

Remembering job Uncle Sam gave him

This article was published in the Atlanta Journal / The Atlanta Constitution May 28, 1997.
It appeared in the column entitled *Dave Kindred at Large*.

“Ain’t braggin’,” said the old soldier whose name is Deb Bryant and who lives where he grew up along a country road in western Coweta County.

“But I’m 82 years old and ain’t never asked for a job in my life. I was one of 13 kids. So I left school after the fourth grade to work. Made 9 cents an hour in the yarn mill, 60 hours a week, \$5.40 in all. Roosevelt raised the wage after that and I came to be a bricklayer working on houses, fences, the like.

“Then one day the mailman brought me a letter. Danged if Uncle Sam didn’t offer me a job.”

Laughing, the old soldier stood in a little park by a monument to men and women who also answered Uncle Sam’s letter.



Picture of the past:

Devers E. “Deb” Bryant, in front of Newnan’s memorial to veterans, holds a photograph of his World War II colleagues taken shortly before he was captured by the Germans.

On the last Monday of May, he was one of a hundred people who came to a Memorial Day service in Newnan. They were mostly old men with a hitch in their gitty-ups. They were men who had done hard things in hard places.

“Day after Christmas, ‘42, I reported to the U.S. Army” Deb Bryant said. “Did my basic training at Camp Bowie, Texas. I remember it like it was yesterday. Hot as blazes by the time they finished with us and we rode a train East. They put us on an ocean liner, 16,000 soldiers packed one on top the other. It took 10 days to get to Glasgow, Scotland.

“Early in ‘44, we were in Bristol, England. Word was, there’d be an invasion and we’d be part of it. I was in Company B of the 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion. We used those artillery guns on wheels pulled along by a half-track truck. That gun’d throw a shell 14 miles if we wanted it to. I was the gunner. I shot it.”

In today’s world of commerce and comfort, Memorial Day has come to be a day announcing the start of summer’s fun. But Memorial Day is no more about fun than Christmas is about toys. Memorial Day is about death in war.

It’s about Americans who left home without knowing if they’d come back. It’s about Gettysburg and Verdun, the Ardennes, Pusan and Khe Sanh.

It’s about Deb Bryant, whose given name is Devers E. Bryant, a boy who swam in Wahoo Creek west of Newnan and a man who sailed the English Channel to France.

“We went over on June 8, ‘44, two days after D-Day,” Bryant said. “There were so many boats in the channel that’s all you saw, boats. Closer we got to Omaha Beach, worse it got. Airplanes, guns, bombs, noise, smoke. Everywhere,

bodies in the water. My heart was in my throat the whole while.”

“We rode one of those boats where they let the front end down and you drove out. Only we drove out too early and the water was so deep that our driver had to stand up and the steering wheel was under water.

“The Germans had five years to get ready. Machine guns everywhere. How we got through, I’ll never know. But we kept sending boys ashore. Some’d get mowed down, others’d keep coming.”

From June to December — “six months of killin’ and hell” — Bryant’s company moved through France in pursuit of retreating Germans.

Then, on Dec. 17, 1944, as the Americans camped in the Ardennes forest, the Germans attacked. Hitler's last spasm of aggression was an offensive now known as the Battle of the Bulge.

"Tanks came down on us," Bryant said. "I can still see the German standing in his tank firing a burp gun at me. You can still see where a bullet went through my left hand. Of the 10 men on my gun, five were killed and the rest of us were taken prisoner.

"I've still got my POW ID. It's a piece of metal that can be cut in half. They hung half on your big toe and half on your neck if you died."

"All that winter, they held us in four different POW camps. If you didn't freeze to death, you starved to death. I dropped from 165 pounds to 95. Had pleurisy, pneumonia, what-all.

"Tell you something. Know how men in a bunch, all they talk about is women? Not that winter, not holed up in those mule barns. All we thought about and talked about was something to eat and home.

"We were liberated on April 29, 1945, right before the Germans surrendered. One of our tanks came over the hill, firing away. They killed all the prison guards and we about got killed ourselves during all the shooting. "But it got to where it didn't make no difference if you lived or died. Being liberated didn't faze you, you were so far gone.

By June of 1945, Deb Bryant was home again in Coweta County.

He had finished his job for Uncle Sam. He went back to laying brick.