

Frank Buckles, the last U.S. veteran of World War I, passed away in 2011. His death was described as the “passing of the Great War Generation.” In researching his life, we came to realize that he personified his generation better than most, as he had unique contact with many of the defining moments of the 20th century. Buckles, like many veterans, served our country both as a soldier and also as a civilian. In the spirit of Memorial Day, we’d like to share his story with you.

Buckles was born in early 1901 to Missouri farmers. By the age of sixteen, his family had moved to Oklahoma, and WWI had begun. He was inspired by recruiting posters to join the military, but being only sixteen, he lied about his age so that he would be considered eligible. Now he just had to convince the recruiters. After being rejected by the Marines (too small) and the Navy (flat feet), he was accepted by the Army. Eager to see some action, he was told that driving ambulances would be the quickest way to get to the Western Front. He attended Basic Training at Fort Riley in Kansas and in short order was aboard the RMS Carpathia, the same ship that rescued the survivors of the Titanic, and on his way to Europe.

While he never got closer than within 30 miles of the front lines, he wasn’t spared the horrors of war. With over 2 million U.S. soldiers in combat, and an influenza pandemic, there was an estimated casualty count of 116,516 to deal with. There was rarely a shortage of wounded or ill that needed his attention. At the end of the war, he escorted German soldiers back to Germany. One soldier gave him a belt, with the inscription “GOTT MIT UNS” (God with us), which he kept for the rest of his life. The war was over, but Buckles would have more adventures and more chances to serve his country in the future.

Shortly after the war ended he was in attendance at the dedication of the Liberty Memorial in Kansas City. There he had the unique opportunity to chat with General of the Armies John J. Pershing, the commander of American troops during WWI, whom he described as “the most military figure I’ve ever seen.”

He took a job with the White Star Line, the same cruise line that made the Titanic. This job gave him the opportunity to travel the world. Buckles became fluent in German, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and later learned some Japanese. During his travels, he spent significant time in Germany. He watched the changes the Nazis were making. He witnessed anti-Semitism. He was in attendance during the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, and watched as Jesse Owens won four gold medals, infuriating the Nazis in the process. During one of his visits, he had a chance encounter with Adolf Hitler on the steps of his hotel. Buckles noted his surprise that Hitler was not more heavily guarded.

Next, Buckles began working in the shipping industry, once again spending much of his time overseas. When World War II began, he was working in Manila in the Philippines. He had the option to leave, but decided to remain so that he could use his shipping contacts to help U.S. troops get supplies. In 1942, he was taken prisoner by Japanese soldiers and spent the next three years as a civilian internee; this is where he learned Japanese. Fearing that the Japanese would start massacring their captives, U.S. commanders organized a daring paratrooper assault on the camp to save the prisoners. Before they were rescued, Buckles and the other prisoners were kept in squalid conditions. They were only given a small ration of mush each day. At the time of his rescue in 1945 he weighed less than 100 pounds.

After WWII he moved to San Francisco and married Audrey Mayo in 1946. A few years later they purchased a 330 acre farm in West Virginia, where he lived for the rest of his life. He was still driving his tractor and working his farm at the age of 106 when his daughter and only child, Susannah, moved home to help him. During the last few years of his life, Buckles was identified as the oldest Veteran of WWI. This recognition provided him with some unique opportunities. In 2007, he was invited to lead a Memorial Day parade in Washington D.C. In 2008, President George W. Bush invited him to

the White House. Later that same day he was invited by Defense Secretary Robert Gates to attend the dedication of the Pentagon exhibit honoring WWI veterans. He was also appointed as the honorary chairman of the World War I Memorial Foundation. Buckles appeared before Congress in 2009 on behalf of the foundation, which advocates that they refurbish and rededicate the District of Columbia War Memorial as a National Memorial of WWI. He is the oldest person to have testified before Congress.

Buckles passed away in his home on February 27, 2011. Upon his death President Obama ordered the flags on all government buildings, including embassies and the White House, flown at half-staff. The governors of 16 states followed suit. Buckles is interred in plot 34 of Arlington National Cemetery, near General John J. Pershing.

Buckles' life touched on so many key events of the past century. He met with presidents, dignitaries, and for a brief moment a dictator. He stood where survivors of the Titanic stood. He watched Jesse Owens and other civil rights leaders break down racial barriers. He lived through one of the most impoverished times in our nation's history, as well as its most prosperous. He watched technology change from horse and buggy to cars and planes. He witnessed the greatest technological outpouring in human history. In short, Buckles, as do many of our veterans, personifies his generation's greatest and most trying moments.

On this Memorial Day, we hope we all take a moment to reflect on the legacy and heritage our veterans have given us. Be thankful for their sacrifices, which shaped our world and our nation into what it is today. Our veterans have kept us free and made it possible for us to prosper. Buckles himself said it best. "If your country needs you," he said, "you should be right there. That's the way I felt when I was young, and that's the way I feel today."

Sincerely,

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