Jack was riding on a country road to a football game with friends when news broke of the Pearl Harbor attack. His life's path would lead him straight into the war's Pacific theater.

As a Navy sailor, Jack served aboard the USS Kitkun Bay, an aircraft carrier that withstood Japan's torpedoes and kamikaze attacks, and participated in the Battle of Leyte Gulf — WWII's largest naval battle.

Taking orders and taking responsibility defined Jack's life with the ship's crew of almost 900. "The biggest thing you learned is how to get along with all kinds of people." When the war was finally over, Jack recalled sailors gleefully toasting in celebration with 180-proof grain alcohol that had been used onboard as torpedo fuel.

Long after the war and after building and selling a food brokerage business, Jack dedicated himself to fundraising for an organization that takes WWII veterans to visit locations where they served. "Two guys found remnants of the fox holes they dug 70 years ago," he recalled about visiting Belgium.

A powerful camaraderie grows among these travelers, Jack explained: "They get together at night and they get to talking. A lot of the guys have never told anybody what happened to them. They start to open up [with each other], and it's like lifting a burden."

Throughout high school, Jim couldn't wait to join the war effort. But his father, a WWI veteran, urged him not to rush into it. Finally, 19-year-old Jim arrived in Europe in October 1944, ready to drive Sherman tanks into combat across France and Germany.

Within days, he faced the brutal realities of war: his battalion commander gruesomely killed by German anti-tank artillery and the officer who took his place, captured. Sometimes the enemy was frustratingly out of reach: Jim once failed to bring down a low-flying German plane outside Munich despite shooting tracer bullets into the engine. Jim would always "wonder which one of Hitler's henchmen managed to get away."

Sometimes the enemy was too close: Once Jim crawled with crew mates through machine gun fire to escape their damaged tank. "Then all of a sudden I had a pair of black boots in front of my nose," he recalled. Captured and imprisoned by the Nazis, he was soon freed by advancing U.S. forces.

Jim's tank was the first to plough through the fence of Dachau concentration camp during its 1945 liberation. But in recounting his war experiences, he always focused on the war as a powerful collective effort: "I was such a small pebble in a large stream of thousands and thousands of men who went to fight this war."

By the time 19-year-old George arrived on Bastogne's battlefields, life in his small, coal-mining hometown seemed a world away. He'd already survived the Utah Beach landing, midair aircraft malfunctions over The Netherlands, flooded fox holes, booby traps, enemy fire—shrapnel from German artillery lodged in his shoulder would remain for the rest of his life — and the devastating losses of comrades.

Fighting in the Ardennes brought the war's horrors and sacrifices into even greater focus for George, as in the aftermath of a near-fatal bomb explosion: "I found two of my fellow soldiers lying on top of me. Before I could pull myself free, blood from their wounds was running down my face. As far as I could tell, I was saved by their deaths."

George's combat leadership earned him quick promotion and several medals, including a Purple Heart, though he discovered that processing his war experience was a different sort of battle. "It took me a long time to get my brain straightened out, but our generation is, of course, different. I believe we were so thankful for having survived. We accepted the horrors of war differently than later generations. But you never forget. It's a hard drive that can't be erased."

Vince's first combat experience was on the brutal frontlines of the Battle of the Bulge. While the 19-year-old could not provide the makeshift aid stations with what they desperately needed — supplies and medical staff — he knew he could bring comfort to the wounded and despondent.

Comrades never forgot Vince's vibrant, larger-than-life personality or his tireless efforts to lift their spirits even when it involved risking his own safety. In a story now legendary in the Ardennes and beyond, Vince made a solo mission through war-ravaged Bastogne in search of drinks for wounded comrades. He returned to camp with beer, as much as could fill his helmet—the same one he wore in his foxhole.

After the war and decades as a history teacher, Vince finally returned to Bastogne at age 85 to rediscover the place where he'd learned a hard lesson: "Freedom isn't free. Someone will always have to pay a price."

Yet he also shared the upbeat outlook that sustained him and his comrades through war: "No matter how tough things get, there's always something to look forward to. In a terrible situation, there's always some way to find the bright side, to bring out the best in everything."

Always a risk-taker with a taste for adventure, Tom volunteered for the Army's brand-new paratrooper division just after high school. He found jumping from a plane exhilarating: "When you first get out of the plane, that prop blast is a little intense, but once you get past that it was wonderful."

On D-Day, the 22-year-old landed in Normandy — surviving the jump with a bullet-riddled parachute — and spent months in fierce fighting across France and The Netherlands. During a much-needed rest period, the Battle of the Bulge broke out and his unit rushed to the Ardennes.

Though wounded twice by German fire in Bastogne, he survived and went on to help capture Hitler's Eagle's Nest in Berchtesgaden, Germany, before returning home to begin a decades-long career as a history teacher.

Tom fittingly celebrated his 100th birthday with a tandem jump over his hometown from a restored Douglas C-53 that took part in the Allied invasion of Normandy. The event held another special meaning for the veteran: "My hope is the next generations will always remember the men who came and fought for them, many sacrificing their lives to liberate the world. May we never forget them."

John was a laborer in a cabinet factory with an eighth-grade education when he was drafted into the Army, transferred to a Maryland boot camp, and deployed to England.

There he worked in a massive warehouse managing parts for trucks, tanks, and other vehicles engaged in the war effort a position that soon led to work behind the wheel.

Delivering munitions and fuel meant risky journeys to the frontlines. A wrong turn could prove fatal, and not only due to roving German patrols. One night in Belgium, John accidentally drove through a minefield but survived. "I think I was the luckiest man in the whole Army," he liked to say after the war.

Though John's work did not involve combat, he could not escape its horrors. When his unit landed on Omaha Beach to supply the 29th Infantry Division on the Normandy campaign, he saw Allied casualties — mostly paratroopers — everywhere he looked. "You had to drive off the road to keep from hitting the dead."

John credited his nature for surviving trauma from the war. "I'm not an emotional guy," he said at age 95, while expressing gratitude for returning home safely to raise a family. "I've lived a full life."

When Richard left behind his Kansas farm in 1943 to join the Army, the 18-year-old could not have imagined his first taste of WWII combat: riding a 12-person glider pulled by a C-140 across the English Channel, then parachuting into The Netherlands through enemy fire.

Richard learned quickly that single-minded focus on his job was a survival skill. For 33 days, his unit fought fiercely to defend a strategic bridge during Operation Market Garden and lost nine men.

At night, he helped with the risky work of laying telephone lines along the frontlines so units could communicate during battle. "It was just what I did," he explained at age 74. "There was no time for overcoming fear."

Combat in the Ardennes tested Richard and his comrades to an unforgettable degree. "Our strategy was simply to keep the Germans from coming through," Richard said decades later, recalling the suffering of enduring constant below-freezing temperatures while sleeping without tents, sometimes while standing, in a forest sprayed by hot shrapnel from German artillery.

After the war, Richard returned safely to Kansas and to life as a wheat farmer without regrets: "I think someone had to stop the tyranny and we were called."

Howard was building fighter plane fuselages at a California plant when he heard about the Pearl Harbor attack. He planned to join the Army's airborne division as soon as possible, but due to color-blindness he trained as an Army engineer instead.

When replacements were called up after heavy U.S. casualties in the Normandy campaign, Howard finally became a paratrooper, joining the elite unit nicknamed the "Screaming Eagles." The brutal training regime did not deter him: "I wanted to be a paratrooper so badly, by the time I got in the plane, I wanted to go."

Howard remembered arriving in Bastogne at dawn with excitement. It was his first combat experience and "people were cheering and clapping as we marched through." But the memories of days crouched in a foxhole with a machine gun in blinding fog and snow, the air crackling and flashing with gunfire, were chaotic and terrifying. "I seldom saw someone to aim at. It was mass confusion."

Howard said his comrades never doubted the Allies would prevail. When Bastogne's weather cleared, American bombers swooped in to fire on the enemy. "The time at the front was not a bad time for me. I'm proud of the guys I fought with."

As an Army-trained medic assigned to a Georgia hospital, John said he could have "sat out the war stateside." But it was 1943 and that's not what he wanted to do: "I feel that even at that young age, I owed the country something. We can all be patriots if we really want to be."

John signed up for grueling paratrooper training and parachuted into The Netherlands in Operation Market Garden. Upon landing, he treated his first of many wartime injuries: setting a fellow paratrooper's broken femur.

But it was combat in the Ardennes that tested John the most: "Everything about the Bulge was worse, including the weather." As a valuable medic, John traveled at the rear of his unit, yet he still faced sniper fire, mortar attacks, and serious injuries while caring for the wounded — once after soldiers ventured into a minefield. John even narrowly escaped capture while helping his company guard 80 German prisoners when a German patrol ambushed them, capturing several comrades.

While John returned home to a new career working on radar systems, the war continued to define his life. He traveled frequently to Europe to mark WWII anniversaries and once said, "If I had to do it over again, I'd do the same thing."

George had never left his Kentucky hometown before traveling to Europe and the Normandy beaches at age 19. "Like the very ship I sailed on, I seemed calm and steady on the surface but had propellers of nervous excitement violently churning below," the highly decorated veteran recalled.

Yet George discovered a sense of belonging in Gouvy, Belgium, where he guarded a food ration depot and handled general police duties. There he lodged with the Lallemand family, who welcomed him like "a long-lost American family member," said George, recalling shared meals — sometimes of wild boar — and the brick his hosts warmed for his cold bed. "The best times were the accidental moments when they forgot we were strangers."

As the Battle of the Bulge broke out, George received orders: Destroy the rations, which would be useful to the advancing Germans, and head to Bastogne. There he directed armored vehicles, scouted for enemy paratroopers disguised as American soldiers, and managed essential traffic through the besieged town while under enemy fire and in blizzard conditions — a feat which earned him a Bronze Star.

George visited the Lallemand family once more before heading home at war's end: "I truly was lucky to find a peaceful refuge during these violent times in Europe."

When 18-year-old Hugh was drafted, his parents were alarmed. But he was excited: "I didn't want to stay on the farm all of my life. I wanted to go to the Army."

Hugh's ambition and steady nerves led to paratrooper training and to vivid war stories he avidly shared.

Hugh once saw a plane in his formation shot down. By counting parachutes, he knew all the paratroopers — but not the pilot — had escaped the burning plane. Hugh recalled a ritual shared by his squad before missions: "We told each other good-bye and we hoped we'd see each other again someday."

Hugh also faced the risks of ground combat. During surgery for shrapnel lodged in his thigh bone, shells blasted the field tent, killing an attending nurse. Once an enemy bullet sunk the rowboat carrying Hugh and his comrades across a dangerous river. Dragged down by 50-lb packs, several men drowned. Hugh narrowly survived.

Once recovered, Hugh was among the first to enter combat in the Ardennes. Frigid and wet conditions tortured the soldiers, and Hugh was eventually evacuated for frostbite.

After the war's hardships, Hugh still didn't regret being drafted: "If I could serve my country over again, I would."

Charles volunteered for the Army in June 1944, determined to become a paratrooper. But the 18-year-old's dream was quickly dashed by the sergeant who was signing him up: "He looked at me with a funny look on his face and said, 'We don't train Negro paratroopers.'" Segregation in the Armed Services would not end until 1948. Charles recalled thinking with shock: "But I'm going to give up my life for you."

Charles nevertheless enlisted, joining other Black U.S. soldiers committed to a double victory: freedom in Europe and freedom at home. He proudly served in the Military Police Division, helping to manage the 175,000 enemy prisoners of war interned in the United States. While based at Francis E. Warren Air Force Base, he met Tuskegee Airmen on R&R from Europe, an inspiring experience, but also a bitter reminder of his own military ambitions cut short.

Long after the war, Charles finally traveled to Europe to visit Belgium's WWII sites. "It fulfilled a dream of mine," he said. And in 2019, 75 years after Charles enlisted, an Army paratrooper instructor made Charles an honorary paratrooper. Garrison Command Sgt. Maj. Billy Counts presented the 93-year-old with a set of wings and publicly apologized on behalf of the entire Airborne Division.

Flying model airplanes throughout childhood inspired Harold's dream to join the Army Air Corps. But during aircraft mechanic training, the 19-year-old was drafted into the Army. Soon he was in Europe maintaining instruments that measured the flying altitude of enemy planes. Harold said his ordnance maintenance company could maintain "everything from a pocket watch to the largest tanks."

But arriving on Utah Beach, he discovered they would have to fight and survive just like the infantry. "The Germans had just about every inch of that beach covered in machine gun fire. You could see it bullets hitting all around you in the sand." Even decades later, his voice cracked recalling horrors of that day, of lost comrades and carnage: "We sacrificed everything we had to take that beach."

Harold also survived the Battle of the Bulge. A system of rotating and drying socks helped him avoid the frostbite that plagued so many. Yet the war left invisible scars: "Things like we went through are just things you don't forget. I mean, it's impossible."

Harold arrived home by ship and was "sure happy to see the Statue of Liberty." He rekindled his aviation career, which led to engineering work for Boeing — even for the 1969 Apollo 11 mission — and finally learning to fly solo.

Jack was frustrated when he was drafted in his last semester of law school. Yet looking at age 96, he said he'd had a "charmed life." He survived spinal meningitis one month into training. And he survived the war itself, from the Normandy landing to the Battle of the Bulge.

Experience in college working as a night telephone operator got Jack assigned to the Signal Corps. Maintaining the communication headquarters for advancing U.S. forces was crucial work. Jack soon discovered how difficult that was in Aachen, Germany and other locations damaged by heavy bombing.

Jack's work was often so close to the frontlines, he felt "raised off the ground when the bombs fell." He was handed grenades to throw in combat around Spa, Belgium. In a convoy to Liège, he narrowly survived the V-1 flying bomb that destroyed the truck ahead of him.

After the war, Jack worked on Wall Street, while making time to speak at synagogues, churches, and schools about seeing firsthand the horrors of the Holocaust. Like other Jewish U.S. soldiers, Jack had not listed his faith on official documentation in case of Nazi capture. At the newly liberated Buchenwald concentration camp, Jack saw bodies "piled up like cordwood outside of the crematorium … It was the most powerful part of the war that I witnessed."

A sense of duty was part of Major's life long before the war. At age 13, he quit school to help support his family after his father died. Major and his brother Felton left Alabama to work in California vineyards.

Years later, in 1943, Major answered the call of duty again, this time alongside three other brothers. Earle fought in the Pacific theater; Thomas fought in Europe and survived the Battle of the Bulge; and Jackson was killed by a landmine while serving in Italy.

"Not every soldier in a war fights it with a gun," goes the refrain of a song Major co-wrote at age 105 about his war experience. After landing on Utah Beach in August 1944, Major spent the war in France as a railway mechanic.

He repaired damaged tanks, trucks, and hospital cars to resupply the frontlines. When asked by an Army Air Corps pilot to describe his wartime service, Major said: "I cleaned up the mess you flyboys made."

After the war, Major began a decades-long career at U.S. Steel repairing rail cars, while sharing stories from the war with community groups and schools. France awarded him the Legion of Honor, calling him a "true hero" whose "legacy provides a moral compass for generations to come."