

Legacy of the Last Doughboy



Cpl. Frank Buckles shortly after arriving in Winchester, England, on his way to France in 1917.

Photo courtesy U.S. Army



Frank Buckles at 106 years old, wearing his French military decoration, the *Légion d'honneur*, for an interview with the U.S. Library of Congress in 2007.

Photo courtesy U.S. Library of Congress

CPL. FRANK W. BUCKLES

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Army News Service / Staff Report

America's last known World War I veteran, Cpl. Frank W. Buckles, died at his home in Charles Town, W. Va., on Feb. 27, just weeks after his 110th birthday.

Buckles was the last living American Doughboy to have served in France during World War I — and the last of some 4.7 million U.S. troops who signed up to fight the Kaiser. Though theories abound of the coinage of the term “doughboy,” the word became the popular nickname for U.S. infantry Soldiers who were deployed to France during the war.

Buckles later spent three years as a Japanese prisoner of war during World War II. He was captured in the Pacific while serving as a U.S. contractor. He had been a longtime advocate for the creation of a WWI memorial, and the subject of a documentary scheduled for release this year.

President Barack Obama ordered all U.S. flags on official buildings be lowered to half-staff on the day of Buckles' funeral.

“Michelle and I were inspired by the service and life story of former Army Cpl. Frank W. Buckles,” Obama said, adding praise

for his military service and his work as honorary chairman of the World War I Memorial Foundation. “We join [his daughter] Susannah [Buckles Flanagan] and all those who knew and loved her father in celebrating a remarkable life that reminds us of the true meaning of patriotism.”

RARING TO GO

Buckles' military story began in the early 1900s when he was just a teenager.

He had been rejected by the Marines because he was too small, and by the Navy because he had flat feet.

Looking to the Army, the 16-year-old Buckles had to lie about his age to enlist. However, for most of his life, Buckles insisted that “lie” was too strong a word for what he said in order to be allowed into the Army: He told a recruiter in Oklahoma the only record of his birth was in the family Bible.

“The Army sergeant was dubious about my age,” Buckles said in a 1988 interview. “He called the captain in, and the captain asked me some questions. I explained that at the time I was born, there were no public records. The only records were in the family

Bible. But I wouldn't expect to bring the family Bible down to the recruiting station."

He enlisted on Aug. 14, 1917, after the United States had declared war on Germany.

He joined the 1st Fort Riley Casual Detachment and sailed for Europe on the HMS *Carpathia*, a ship that had rescued the survivors of the *Titanic* in 1912.

EAGER FOR ACTION

An old sergeant had told Buckles that the fastest way to get to the action in France was to join the ambulance corps, as ambulance drivers were desperately needed at the front. To Buckles' dismay, his unit was rerouted, and he found himself in Winchester, England, driving officers on a motorcycle with a sidecar.

After pestering everyone he could and unsuccessfully scheming to simply fall in line and board a troop ship across the channel, Buckles eventually made it to France, but never near the trenches.

As an ambulance driver, he saw plenty of casualties. He never saw any combat. "Didn't I make every effort?" he once joked. He did get to see Paris, however.

"We went out to the Eiffel Tower," Buckles said, "and of course, you couldn't get into the Louvre [Museum] in those days. You could get into the Notre Dame cathedral, and I saw Paris before we went to Bordeaux."

UNFORGETTABLE 'BLACK JACK'

After the war, Buckles helped escort hundreds of German prisoners of war home before returning to Oklahoma and meeting Gen. John "Black Jack" Pershing, commander of U.S. forces during World War I. Buckles said the meeting was one of the highlights of his life.

"After I'd given the general a snappy salute and passed on," Buckles said, Pershing asked him to come back.

"He knew about the four gold bars on my sleeve, which indicated I'd been in Europe two years," Buckles said, adding that he probably also recognized his Missouri ac-

cent. Buckles was born on a farm in Harrison County, Mo., and Pershing was born in Linn County, just 43 miles away.

WRONG PLACE, WRONG TIME

Following his enlisted military service, Buckles worked in the shipping industry and had taken a contract job in Manila when Japan invaded the Philippines in 1941. That year, he was captured by the Japanese and spent more than three years in prison camps, where he nearly starved as he ate small, mush-like meals from a tin cup the size of a coffee mug.

Buckles said he lost more than 50 pounds in the prison camp. He kept the tin cup as a remembrance of his struggle.

WWI MEMORIAL

Three years ago, Buckles was at the Pentagon to help Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and then-Secretary of the Army Pete Geren unveil a new portrait exhibit by photographer David DeJonge that featured nine World War I veterans. DeJonge had set out to help America remember the war by documenting remaining World War I veterans.

"For those of us here today, we will forever put the face of Cpl. Buckles on the Great War," Geren said.

Wearing the *Légion d'honneur* he was awarded by French President Jacques Chirac, Buckles simply thanked the room on behalf of his fellow World War I veterans. He received a standing ovation.

"I was never actually looking for adventure," Buckles once said. "It just came to me."

In 2009, Buckles testified at a Senate hearing urging the establishment of a national World War I memorial on The Mall in Washington.

"I think it's an excellent idea," Buckles said about the possibility. "There should be no question about it."

A documentary by 1914 Films, *Pershing's Last Patriot: The Frank Woodruff Buckles Story*, is slated for release this year, according to the film's website. The year 2014 will mark the centennial of World War I.



Photo courtesy Department of Defense
Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, left, talks with Frank W. Buckles during the unveiling of portraits of World War I veterans at the Pentagon on March 6, 2008.

THE LAST DOUGHBOY

For more on **Frank W. Buckles**, visit:

Frank W. Buckles:
America's Last Survivor
of the First World War

<http://www.frankbuckles.org/>

U.S. Library of Congress
Veteran's History Project

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp-stories/loc.natlib.afc2001001.01070/>

*Pershing's Last Patriot:
The Story of Frank Woodruff Buckles,
America's Last Veteran of World War I*
by 1914 Films

<http://pershinglastpatriot.com/>