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Independence Day: We are all free, thanks to them

Lt. Javan W. Rasnake, Guest columnist Published 7:00 a.m. ET July 2, 2017
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My Uncle Bryan Deel is a great man. Like many great men, he is reserved and quiet.

Born in the mountains of Virginia, he built cars in Detroit when there weren't jobs back home, mined coal for 35 years and raised a family. He's a deacon in the Primitive Baptist Church. He's gentle and kind, and he loves his family, his mountains and God.

But unless you ask, you'll never know that he was also once a soldier.



U.S. Army Pfc. Bryan Deel posing for a photo during active duty from 1950-52. (Photo: Submitted)

In the aftermath of World War II and the run-up to the Korean War, there was a huge need for soldiers in the U.S. Army. Bryan, 89, left his mountain home to answer his country's call and was sent to Germany where he served 18 months between 1950-52 as a private first class, B Battery, 20th Field Artillery, 4th Infantry.



U.S. Army PFC Bryan Deel served with an artillery battalion in Baumholder, Germany, between 1950-52. He was assigned to this 155 mm howitzer crew. (Photo: Submitted)

He doesn't brag about it; he doesn't have a sticker on his car; he just did what he had to do. To this day, if you ask him about it, he'll tell you humorous stories about the passage to Europe on board a passenger ship or about the time a general inspected the ranks and fell in a snow drift.

What you won't hear is a single complaint about the hearing loss from artillery (those were the days before hearing protection).

In the mountains of my Tri-State home - Kentucky, Virginia and Tennessee - respect runs deep for the valorous acts of those who have sacrificed for God and country. Respect for men like Alvin C. York from Pall Mall, Tennessee, is evident in monuments around the region.

Sgt. York received the Medal of Honor for actions in the Argonne Forest of France during World War I. Saving many of his fellow soldiers, he took out a German machine gun nest while not "kill[ing] any more than [he] had to." When he achieved fame, he donated all his extra income to charity. He was a great man.



Lt. Javan Rasnake stands on the pier at Naval Support Activity Bahrain in Manama, Bahrain. (Photo: Submitted)

Vice Admiral William P. Lawrence, a Tennessee native, was a noted naval aviator who was shot down over Vietnam and spent six years being tortured in a North Vietnamese prison camp. While there, he composed by memory what became the Tennessee state poem, "Oh Tennessee, My Tennessee." He went on to many important commands. He was a great man.

The common feature of great men like these - the famous and the unknown - is this: They stepped forward when their nation needed them. During difficult times they put their personal desires aside and did what their country asked - whether that was fighting in the infantry, sailing in a warship, manning artillery in freezing German mountains or flying warplanes. They answered the call to serve their country and their fellow men because that's how they were raised: They didn't see any other way.

I have the good fortune to be a naval officer. Every day, I work with our nation's finest young men and women who have answered the nation's call by enlisting in the military. Every day, I see your sons and daughters hard at work keeping America safe: standing guard, driving ships

and drilling in their units. Frequently, I meet someone who is also from the mountains I call home, which always brings a smile to my face.

On behalf of myself and my fellow mountaineers who've sacrificed in service of their country, I thank everyone back home for your support of your armed forces. Your support on the homefront allows us to do what must be done to protect our country.



Photos of Alvin C. York throughout the years. (Photo: New Sentinel Archives)

Allowing your sons and daughters to choose a military career is crucial - because without their talent and motivation the military can't function. While many of us may pine for the great days and great men of the past, I can tell you - from the tip of the spear here at Naval Support Activity Bahrain - that your young men and women have not forgotten the lessons of those great men and women. They made the hard decision to leave home and serve: They are doing what their country has asked. They are doing what they have to do.

And on this Independence Day, we are all free thanks to them.

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