



## **Serving Their Country**

### **Five Eagle Scouts Who Served During World War II**

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Sixteen million Americans served in the armed forces during World War II, helping to rescue civilization from the twin threats of Nazi Germany and imperial Japan. Among them, of course, were countless Eagle Scouts, from buck privates to brigadier generals to every rank in between. Many of these men waded ashore on D-Day, endured the Bataan Death March and island-hopped across the Pacific. Others worked behind the lines, organizing armies, delivering supplies and providing essential medical and moral support to the men in combat.

Some Eagle Scouts achieved fame, including Brigadier General Robert Lee Scott, Jr., of the Flying Tigers and Medal of Honor recipient Colonel Mitchell Paige, but most didn't. Instead, they returned to joyful reunions or long months of recuperation or workaday lives or (for many African Americans) the racial prejudice they thought they'd escaped.

Seventy years after VJ Day formally ended hostilities, more than 850,000 World War II veterans still live among us—but we are rapidly losing them. Nearly 500 die each day, according to The National WWII Museum, taking with them stories of the triumph, tragedy and tedium that have marked every war.

To honor the contribution of those Eagle Scouts who traded their Scout uniforms for fatigues, dress whites, or flight suits, *Eagles' Call* talked with a few men from the Greatest Generation.

**Jim Harrell and Fred Norman**

## Elkin, North Carolina

Nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Elkin, N.C., is the sort of town Andy Griffith memorialized in his iconic 1960s TV series. Among its 4,000 citizens live two nonagenarians who epitomize the service of Eagle Scouts during World War II and beyond.

Fred Norman and Dr. Jim Harrell were actually born in the same room about a year apart—Harrell’s family briefly rented a house from Norman’s family—and they’ve remained close ever since. They went through Scouting together (although in separate troops), played high-school football together, took family vacations together and served their hometown together over the course of seven decades.

In fact, their service during World War II probably constitutes the longest period that they were away from each other and from their hometown. That service also illustrates the range of jobs it takes to win a war. Norman served as a gunner on a tank from just after D-Day through the end of the war; Harrell worked stateside as a dentist.

## From the Pacific to the Fatherland

Norman enlisted in the U.S. Army right out of Elkin High School and ended up at Camp Cooke, Calif., in February 1943. Every other week, his unit rotated to the Pacific coast, about five miles away, to sleep in tents and guard against a potential Japanese invasion. It was there he first realized how handy his Scouting background would be. “Some of those guys, a lot of them from up North, didn’t even know how to pitch a tent,” he says. “They had a tent-pitching contest, and I won that.”

In February 1944, Norman went overseas with the 6th Armored Division of Gen. George Patton’s Third Army. The Super Sixth didn’t participate in the D-Day invasion, but it came ashore a month later and fought its way across France and Germany. “We fought from July until May the 8th and were never relieved—didn’t sleep in the building that whole time, not a single building,” he says. “You started digging those foxholes through six inches of snow. You had to get the snow off, and then the ground was frozen about four inches, and you had to get that out and then dig you a hole you could get in and sleep in.”

While Norman’s tent-pitching skills didn’t come in handy during those months, his cooking skills did. “We had K-rations and C-rations. If I could come up with some potatoes from some of those farms out there, why I’d open some of those cans and cook me some potatoes in with it,” he says. “I’d feed everybody on the tank.”

Once, however, Norman and his comrades did much better than souped-up C-rations. On the way to the pivotal Battle of the Bulge, Patton provided a traditional Christmas dinner to his troops; Norman remembers it as “the finest turkey dinner you could ever imagine.” But what he recalls even better is the card he received as he entered the banquet hall. On one side was a Christmas greeting from Patton; on the other, a prayer for clear skies. (The prayer was evidently answered since the skies cleared on December 23, allowing the Allies to relieve the beleaguered 101st Airborne

Division, which was trapped in Bastogne.) Norman carried the card through the rest of the war and still has it today. “I wouldn’t take anything for that,” he says.

Besides serving as a gunner, Norman spent some time as a forward observer. Once, an American P-47 fighter crashed nearby, just after its pilot bailed out. Norman decided to rescue the pilot and began running toward his position, only stopping when he realized the pilot had a gun pointed at him. “Anytime that gun went one way, I went the other,” he says. “I kept hollering, ‘American, American!’”

Norman finally reached the pilot without getting shot and brought him safely back to a farmhouse where his comrades were holed up. Being an Eagle Scout, he administered first aid until medics arrived.

On the final day of the war in Europe, Norman fired the last of 6,000 rounds from his tank’s 105mm gun. He was about seven miles from Berlin and 800 miles from where his European adventure began. “They told us we were going to fire two more rounds on a bridge, and that would be all we would fire,” he says. “I’ve got that last shell I fired out of the 6,000. I’m looking at it right now.”

That July, Norman stood at attention beside his tank as motorcades carried Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and U.S. President Harry Truman to the Potsdam Conference, where Germany’s punishment was discussed. “I may be the only son of a gun that saw Marshall Stalin, Winston Churchill and Harry Truman,” he says.

He also toured Buchenwald, the notorious concentration camp where more than 56,000 people were killed. His guide, who had survived two years in the camp, translated a sign that read, “Right or Wrong, All for the Fatherland.” “Then he said, ‘I saw an awful lot of wrong, but I never saw any right,’” Norman recalls.

For his service, Norman received two Bronze Stars and lost the hearing in his left ear. (“I’ve got a solid roar as I speak to you that never goes away,” he says.) He left the Army on Nov. 4, 1945 and returned home to Elkin.

## **Service on the Home Front**

About the time Norman was heading west to Europe, Jim Harrell was heading south to the Marine Corps Recruit Depot at Parris Island, S.C. He wasn’t a Marine recruit, however; instead, he was a newly minted dentist and a member of the United States Navy Dental Corps.

The son of a dentist, Harrell earned a doctorate in dentistry from the Medical College of Virginia in 1944 and promptly joined the Dental Corps, serving until 1946. He returned to Elkin to start his own dental practice—where he still works four days a week—then returned to the Dental Corps during the Korean War, this time serving at Olathe Naval Air Station, Kansas.

Asked about his service during either war, he quickly points out that the glory belongs to men like Norman. “I don’t have any real story other than I just served my country,” he says. It might be more accurate, however, to say that his real story began after he hung up his uniform for the last time.

From the 1950s into the early 1970s, Harrell served three terms as a Elkin city commissioner and three terms as mayor. As mayor, he led the development of a new water plant, a new sewer plant, a new fire station, a new airport, a new regional library, a new hospital and two new bridges. “I just happened to come in after the war when the city really needed stuff,” he says.

He’s been there when other groups needed “stuff” as well. He has raised more than \$17 million for the University of North Carolina, \$4 million for the Medical College of Virginia School of Dentistry and another \$4 million for the University of Alabama School of Dentistry. In the heart of the recent financial downturn, he raised \$5 million for a new wing at Hugh Chatham Memorial Hospital. Then, when two donors he’d lined up for a new helicopter pad fell through, he gave the money himself—and had it named in honor of Fred Norman.

“He’s probably the most successful fundraiser I’ve ever known,” says retired businessman Fred Eidson. He recalls what a dentist friend told him: “I can be working, and the lady will come in and say Jim Harrell’s on the phone. I’ll say, ‘Oh my, I know he’s wanting help on something, and I can’t say no to him.’”

Harrell has also been a leader in the United Methodist Church, serving twice as the top layperson in the Western North Carolina Council. And he has served as president of three of the four major dental societies—and as vice-president of the fourth. Larry Irwin, a neighbor for three decades knows just how busy Harrell has been. “For the first 20 years, and I’m not exaggerating, he was gone more weekends than he was home because he was on various trips doing things either for the dental society or the Carolina alumni or the church.”

### **Service Behind the Scenes**

Norman’s service has been less visible—but no less consistent—over the decades. With Harrell, he has served on the Hugh Chatham Memorial Hospital Foundation and on the committee that selects representatives for UNC’s prestigious Morehead Scholarship. “When some of those guys came in and they’d say, ‘I’m an Eagle Scout,’ that had a lot of effect on me and Doc Jimmy Harrell,” he says.

At age 91, Norman continues to put others ahead of himself, according to his neighbor, Carol Jernigan. She tries to look after him—picking up his newspaper and taking him meals—but he always manages to outdo her. For example, when she and her husband go to their beach house, Norman insists she call him on the way home. “When I get to a certain exit on the interstate, which is about 15 minutes away, he’ll go to a restaurant and bring supper for my husband and me,” she says. “Everybody needs a Fred Norman in their life.”

Harrell is much the same, according to Rev. Fred Jordan, who served as his pastor in the 1990s and is still one of his patients. “If somebody has a dental emergency on a Sunday afternoon, he will meet them at his office when nobody else can be bothered to go in,” he says.

“The commitment that he has to service to his church and to his community and to those in need embodies what I think of as an Eagle Scout—always doing his best at whatever he set his mind to,” Jordan says.

Eidson says that Norman also embodies what the Eagle Scout badge represents. “He is a great example of how the product ought to turn out.”

## **Other World War II Eagle Scouts**

### **George Maher**

#### **Redwood City, California**

George Maher served as a fire control officer on the USS Prichett, a destroyer in the Pacific. After fire control school, he arrived on board in the fall of 1944 and served through the end of the war. During his service, he saw action in the Philippines, Saipan, Iwo Jima, Okinawa and the South China Sea. “The ship itself earned eight battle stars for the various affairs it was in,” he says. “I myself got five stars on my Pacific Service Medal.”

He probably got a few gray hairs the day a Japanese fighter plane dropped a torpedo just as the Prichett blew it out of the sky. He and the captain said quiet good-byes to each other as the torpedo streaked toward the ship. “The two of us stood and watched as the torpedo came right at us—and we saw it go under the ship, and we thanked God,” he says. “That was one experience that I have never forgotten and probably never will.”

Another encounter with the captain was far less serious. On watch one night, Maher drank too much coffee and really needed to visit the head, as bathrooms on ships are called. After getting permission from the officer of the deck to go below, he decided to use the captain’s head rather than going down several decks to a head for enlisted men. The next morning, the captain saw him and said, “I understand you had an episode last night.” When Maher confessed, the captain said, “That was using your head.” “No, sir,” Maher replied. “I used your head.”

As a Scout in Queens, N.Y., Maher had learned both Morse and semaphore code, knowledge that came in handy one day when the Prichett’s signalman was below deck. Maher noticed that a nearby ship was flashing the Prichett’s designation, DD 561, and alerted the officer of the deck. He then began decoding the other ship’s message while someone called the signalman. After the signalman arrived, he watched for a few minutes and then said, “Why’d you call me? You’re doing alright.” Eventually, the signalman took over but asked Maher if he wanted to pass the message along to the next ship. “I might have been able to do it, but when you have the experts there, you might as well let the experts do it,” he says.

Although Maher completed his Eagle Scout requirements before joining the Navy, he never had a board of review. It was not until 2012 that Mark Manchester, development director for the Pacific Skyline Council, learned that Maher had never

received his Eagle badge and made arrangements for him to officially be named an Eagle Scout.

A retired electrical engineer, Maher still volunteers at the Pacific Skyline Council's office. He figures he has processed a thousand Eagle Scout applications and sat on a hundred Eagle boards of review.

### **Joe Rosener Newport Beach, California**

Joe Rosener became an Eagle Scout in 1937, the same year he attended the first national Scout jamboree in Washington, D.C. Scouting, he says, "helped convert me from being very introverted to becoming a real part of the organization."

As a junior at Cal Tech, Rosener faced a decision: "Did I want to be an infantryman and sleep on the ground in the mud, or did I want to live like an exotic human being and join the Air Force?" he says. "As a result of that decision, I joined the Air Force and went through the whole flying system to become a pilot."

Rosener trained on B-24s in Riverside, Calif., but transferred to the 820th Bomb Squadron, which flew B-25s, once he arrived in Hawaii. Eventually, he flew both: bombing missions in B-25s and resupply trips in B-24s. "I had the pleasure when I'd come back from a combat mission of flying this cargo B24 to the Philippines from Okinawa to pick up important items like beer and booze, then return to Okinawa to fly more missions," he says.

All told, the first lieutenant flew 13 missions, not including all those supply runs to the Philippines. He was in the air heading toward the Japanese island of Kyushu when the second atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki.

Rosener's Scouting and engineering background paid off during a typhoon—or so he thought. He had his tentmates modified their tent to withstand the force of the typhoon, but there was just one problem. "The center passed overhead and the winds switched, and our tent blew away," he says.

After the war, Rosener completed his degree, got an MBA on the GI Bill and ran several small technology companies. He says the most important things in his life are being an Eagle Scout, graduating from Cal Tech and being a World War II pilot.

### **William Webb Buffalo, New York**

William Webb joined the war in Europe in January 1944. As an African American, however, he wasn't allowed to fight. Instead, he drove a cargo truck as part of the Red Ball Express, the convoy system that kept the Army supplied as it raced across France and Germany.

Before long, Webb jumped at the chance to see action. He volunteered for the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion, better known as the Triple Nickles. Made up of

African Americans, the battalion parachuted into forest fires in the Pacific Northwest. The military connection? Government leaders were worried that Japanese balloon bombs would spark massive fires.

When asked if it takes bravery to parachute into a fire, Webb doesn't hesitate. "You have to be brave to jump out of a plane, period," he says. "I've seen several fellows when they jumped and their chutes didn't open; that's something you'll never forget."

At the end of the war, the Triple Nickles were transferred to Fort Bragg, N.C., where Webb faced the realities of the Jim Crow South. "Down in the Carolinas, you had German prisoners of war. They could go through the front door of a restaurant where Afro-Americans still had to go in the backdoor. And we didn't know if they'd spit in our food or what. That was another war within a war," he says.

Despite this maltreatment, Webb reenlisted not long after the war ended. He served in the 2nd Ranger Company in Korea and in the Green Berets in Vietnam before retiring in 1974 as a sergeant major.

Last year, New York State Senator Timothy M. Kennedy presented Webb with the Liberty Medal. In a speech on the Senate floor, Kennedy said, "Sergeant Major William Webb is justly deserving of praise for the bravery, heroism and true grit he displayed in service to our nation. It is with great respect that we pay tribute today to this remarkable man who so courageously served this state and this nation in defense of freedom and democracy."