STATE LEGISLATURES | JULY/AUGUST 2013

Six Who Served

These World War II veterans, with their unique experiences and wisdom, epitomize public service.

BY MARK WOLF

As World War II raged in Europe and the Pacific, six young American men did what millions of others did. They joined up to serve their country. They didn’t know each other then—and they don’t now. But a bond of patriotic service connects them more than 60 years later. Now in their 80s and 90s, they are part of the Greatest Generation, and each brings his unique experiences to the job of state legislator.

Three are Republicans, three are Democrats. Their service to the nation reflects the diverse experiences of their fellow veterans: some were in combat, some in support, some joined near the war’s end, but each was affected by his service in some way.

Like these six, millions of soldiers, sailors and fliers returned home from World War II to spark a robust economic rebirth, populate the nation with little baby boomers, and assume leadership roles from the White House to the school board. Seven became presidents, and countless more became state legislators.

Today, these six remain on active lawmaker duty.

Mark Wolf is a publications editor for NCSL. Contributors include Alice Wheet, an NCSL policy associate, who learned of these six men from Jackie Wright, majority secretary of the Idaho House of Representatives. Wright surveyed the 50 states to find these veterans.

GEORGIA REPRESENTATIVE JOHN YATES (R) was first elected to the Georgia House of Representatives in 1988. He is chairman of the Veterans and Defense Committee and serves on the Appropriations, Motor Vehicles, and Legislative and Congressional Reapportionment committees.

John Yates grew up one of seven children on a farm in Griffin, Ga., and knew early that he wanted more than the low wages earned in the local cotton mill. So he left home at 18 for California where he was living with his pregnant wife when the war broke out. He tested into field artillery officer candidate school and found his high school education pitted against college degrees.

“It was the toughest three months of my life. We studied all the time. They didn’t give you enough to eat or time to eat it. They were trying to break you. The washout rate was about 80 percent,” says Yates, now 91. He was commissioned as an officer, trained as a liaison pilot by crop dusters and sent to Europe to join the 127th Field Artillery, or as he points out, “President Truman’s old outfit.” He flew more than 200 low-altitude missions in a Piper Cub, directing artillery fire while avoiding both German Messerschmitt aircraft fighters as well as snipers on the ground.

“I was flying in front of guns along the front lines. To keep the Germans from shooting you down you had to keep them guessing. You’d fly at 3,000 feet, then 2,500 feet. If you did that, you wouldn’t get shot. The Piper Cub was the perfect plane if you had superiority. I could look out the plane and see the bombs flying over me,” says Yates, who saw extensive action during the Battle of the Bulge.

Yates’ final mission was flying along the Rhine River north of Cologne. A message from the ground inquired if the bridge across the Rhine was still intact. “I said ‘Yes,’ then ‘No.’ The Germans blew it up while I was watching.”

He was a captain with six Air Medals and four Battle Stars by the time he left the service. Three of his four brothers also served in the war. Two were captured, and one was hospitalized, but they all returned safely. Following his discharge, Yates earned a degree from Georgia State University and worked as a manager for Ford Motor Company for 35 years before retiring and becoming the first Republican from Spalding County ever elected to the Georgia General Assembly, which he calls the “hardest job for the lowest pay I’ve ever had.”
A broken leg suffered in high school short-circuited Frank Henderson’s service in World War II.

He enlisted in the Illinois National Guard in 1940, when he was 18. When war broke out in December 1941, he was called to active duty with a rifle company in the Army’s 33rd Division. But while he was standing in line to get shots a doctor noticed something different about him and asked, “What’s wrong with your leg?” It had healed from a bad break at a bit of an odd angle, resulting in his honorable discharge. He returned to civilian life, studied forestry at the University of Idaho and survived a 10-day “tryout” at the Chicago Herald American Examiner newspaper to hook on as a general assignment reporter and photographer.

He spent most of his career as an advertising and marketing executive in the pharmaceutical industry before moving to Post Falls, Idaho, where he owned and published the Post Falls Tribune. He served as the town’s mayor, then county commissioner, and was elected to House District 3 in 2004.

Henderson and 11 other veterans founded American Legion Post 143 in Post Falls in 1976.

“Because we had a good commander, the membership built up to the largest post in Idaho with over 600 members,” says Henderson who, at 91, is the only survivor among the founders.

Henderson sponsored a bill, enacted in 2006, that provides for full college benefits for the surviving spouse of a serviceman or woman killed during his/her time in the military. “It pays for a four-year degree including subsistence,” says Henderson.

He believes many Americans don’t appreciate the danger today’s soldiers face. “In World War II the enemy was in front of us. Now the hot fire could come from any direction. I don’t think the general public understands that it’s a war. It’s just as obscene, as brutal and as merciless as it was in World War II. That’s obviously a little frustrating.”

Then in 1945, after graduating from high school, he was called to active duty just as the war was winding down.

Since the flight schools were shutting down, Colgan was assigned to aircraft maintenance. “Once I got involved, I found it held a great interest for me. To take an airplane that had problems and get in there and fix it was a big deal,” he says. After his training he was assigned to the Army Air Corps Euro Air Transport Service in Naples, Italy.

“I saw the aftermath of the war, a country blown to pieces,” he says. “You could hardly find a building in Naples that didn’t have damage. There were orphaned kids with missing limbs. To be a witness to that…You saw the horrors of war even though you weren’t directly involved in it,” he says.

Following his discharge, the GI Bill helped him get his engine mechanic’s license and embark on a career that took him from being a commercial pilot to founding Colgan Air Inc., which he started with one airplane and $1,500 in the bank. He eventually sold it for $20 million.


The Navy told Fred Risser that he and fellow Navy enlees could finish high school before they were sworn in, but a group of them were pulled out of school with a month to go. “The teachers gave us the grades we had at the moment,” he says. “We missed the graduation experience.”

Risser was sworn into the Navy a few days before his 18th birthday and a few days before the Germans surrendered. Just before he finished boot camp, the Japanese surrendered. “I tell people the Germans and the Japanese saw me coming,” says the 86-year-old.

Trained as a medic, he spent time in Newport, R.I., then in Panama before he returned to the United States. He, too, used the GI Bill to earn both his undergraduate and law degrees from the University of Oregon. He practiced law with his father before entering public service.

His time in the Navy broadened his world view.

“I certainly became an internationalist,” says Risser. “I realized this is a single world, that we’re all intertwined and you can’t be isolated from the rest of the world.”
The United States, he believes, is much more removed from the military experience than it was when he was growing up in Madison.

“The culture was entirely different then. People were subject to the draft, there was rationing. Everyone was involved in the war and doing something. Now you find a lot of people who aren’t affected by the war, who don’t know anyone who is in the service.

“We’ve never seen a national effort as complete or as absolute as during World War II. You never threw away an automobile tire because we didn’t have access to rubber. You couldn’t buy new cars because the auto manufactures were into making tanks. That generation during the war, from the oldest to the youngest, was participating in one goal: to win the war.”

NEW MEXICO SENATOR JOHN PINTO (D) has served in the Legislature since 1977. He is chairman of the Indian and Cultural Affairs Committee and serves on the Education Committee. Before he was elected to the New Mexico Senate, Pinto worked as a schoolteacher and a legislative liaison. He has also worked for the Navajo Nation.

When he was growing up, John Pinto’s teachers didn’t allow him to speak his native language, Navajo, in school.

Flash forward only a few years and the U.S. Army discovered Navajo speakers were not only valuable, but heroic for developing an unbreakable code based on the Navajo language. Several hundred Navajo Code Talkers used the code successfully throughout the Pacific theater.

Pinto was trained as a Code Talker, drilling with backpack radio transmitters to communicate, but the war ended before he was deployed overseas.

Following his discharge, he returned to New Mexico and eventually earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees in education from the University of New Mexico. He was elected to the New Mexico Senate in 1976.

Estimates are that 120,000 to 170,000 people still speak the Navajo language, enough that they were able to watch the 1996 Super Bowl broadcast in Navajo. But it’s getting harder to interest the younger generation.

NEW YORK SENATOR WILLIAM “BILL” LARKIN, JR. (R) worked as an executive assistant in the New York Senate before being elected to the Assembly in 1979 and to the Senate in 1990. He currently is majority whip and serves on several committees. During his first term in the Senate, Larkin chaired the Senate Veterans Committee and sponsored sweeping changes to veterans’ benefits.

The Army thought it was getting an 18-year-old soldier when Bill Larkin was sworn in at Albany, N.Y., Union Station in 1944. That’s what Bill Larkin thought, too. Except he was really only 16, a fact that would not surface until 1965. Larkin had been raised by an aunt and uncle, and his birth date was muddled along the way.

Larkin was shipped to New Guinea, then the Philippines, where he saw combat.

“When you turned around and saw somebody lying there dying in the mud…I lost kids I knew from back home, friends I met at Fort Dix, some I met in New Guinea,” he says. “We were running up hills when we heard President Truman had dropped the bomb [on Hiroshima, Japan, Aug. 6, 1945], and a lot of young fellows kneeled down and said a prayer, ‘Thank God.’ When the second one was dropped on the 9th, we knew the war was over.”

Larkin came home intent on attending college, but with the wave of returning veterans, spots were scarce. He eventually returned to service after lasting only a month working in a brewery. He qualified for Officer Candidate School, and ended up commanding a company that went into combat in Korea in July 1950.
“It was tough, bitter cold. We had the same combat uniforms we used in the Philippines,” he says.

Much tougher than the conditions was his duty to notify the parents of soldiers wounded or killed in combat. “When you write that letter home that says, ‘I regret to inform you that your son was killed today,’ it was the hardest thing I ever had to do,” says Larkin.

He witnessed history up close as a project officer when President John F. Kennedy visited Germany in 1963 and two years later when Martin Luther King, Jr. marched from Selma to Montgomery, Ala., for voting rights.

Lieutenant Colonel Larkin retired after 23 years of active duty and several awards—the Legion of Merit, seven Army Commendation Medals and seven Battle Stars. But he didn’t stop working. Whenever an American affixes a Purple Heart commemorative stamp to a first-class letter, it is in large measure possible because Larkin spearheaded an 11-year effort to first create the stamp and then, in 2011, have it designated as a “Forever” stamp. Larkin was also instrumental in the construction of the National Purple Heart Hall of Honor in New Windsor, N.Y., where he lives.

“It’s to honor the 1.8 million Americans killed or wounded in combat, although my sense is that there are more than that,” says Larkin. “World War II veterans are dying every day. I go to reunions every so often, and I was told that of our battalion in the Philippines, only two of us are alive today. “I’m proud I served and I only regret that some of my dear friends didn’t make it. I never go to bed at night without saying a prayer for them.”

With the military careers of these six Americans long behind them, their commitment to serving their country now plays out in the committee rooms and chambers of state legislatures. But today, their generation’s shadow indeed grows shorter with every dawn. The Veterans Administration estimates 642 World War II veterans die each day.

“I’m proud I served, and I only regret that some of my dear friends didn’t make it.”

—SENATOR BILL LARKIN (R) NEW YORK

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