

## **Munford Veteran Served his Country at 16**

*By Sherri Onorati, Special to The Leader*

At an age when most young men today are dreaming about their first car, Bob Ellis was shipped off to fight a war in a cold and foreign, barren land, much different than the one he grew up in, in Missouri.

Born on January 20, 1932, Bob Ellis joined the U.S. Army in March of 1948 at the tender age of 16. Both Bob and his younger sister were raised by their grandparents, John and Maud Foster, who Ellis says did the best they could with nothing.

“My grandparents raised me from day one until they died,” said Ellis. “We lived in Galt, Missouri, basically, a retirement place for farmers. The only money my grandfather had coming in was a check from serving in the Spanish American War, which, was something like \$17 or \$18.”

Ellis was very proud of his grandparents for taking on the responsibility of raising him and his younger sister, but life was hard and the family had very little. So, when he was 16, he talked his grandfather into allowing him to join the Army.

“Bless their hearts, they did everything for us and they did the best they could,” remembered Ellis. “But I couldn’t even go to high school because we couldn’t afford the books, so I talked him into letting me go into the service, but my granddaddy didn’t think they’d take me because I didn’t look like I was 17 and I only weighed 113 pounds.”

But he got lucky and in 1948, Ellis joined the United States Army at age 16 after convincing the recruiter he was 17. After he completed basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky, Ellis returned home for a quick visit. He stopped by the local school to see his grandmother, when an encounter with a stranger drove home just really how young he was.

“Grandma was working at the school as a cook’s helper and I went up to surprise her in uniform,” he said. “This old lady stopped and asked me what troop I was in. I said what, and she said you’re in the Boy Scouts aren’t you,” still a little miffed at the misidentification after 60 years.

He was stationed at Schofield Barracks on Oahu, Hawaii, when he was sent to Korea with the 5<sup>th</sup> Regimental Combat Team (RCT) on Aug. 1, 1950, where he quickly learned how different Korea was from both Missouri and Hawaii. Ellis’ combat unit, 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 5<sup>th</sup> RCT, apart of Task Force Kean, was considered one of the finest of the Korean War. After being in-country for just about a week, Ellis, along with his fellow soldiers, was sent to the front-lines for the Pusan Perimeter battles, considered some of the hardest fighting of the war. One day, during a rare break from fighting, he tried to let his company commander know he didn’t deserve to be there.

“I was in a foxhole and the company commander came by and I said, sir, can I talk to you for a moment,” he remembered, grinning. “He stopped and said sure Ellis, what do you need? I said I do not deserve to be here because I fraudulently enlisted. He said, I’ll tell you what, if you don’t tell nobody, I won’t either!”

During his time in Korea, Ellis was constant on the line and slept outside for more than six months in sub-zero temperatures, an extremely dangerous environment for the young soldier. But although the conditions were rough, he didn’t give up and insisted on doing his share.

“I saw quite a bit of combat, and our ages weren’t never discussed. I did everything the 200-pound man did and I didn’t drop out of nothing. I was bound and determine to do everything they did and I did,” insisted Ellis. “And it was cold too. In the six months I was there, I stepped inside a house for about 30 minutes to warm up. Other than that, I slept outside and it was normally 40 below!”

Private Ellis was seriously wounded in combat on Dec. 13, 1950 and was evacuated to Japan a couple of days later. He was awarded the Purple Heart for his injuries and over the next couple of years, spent time at various hospitals before being discharged in 1952, at the age of 20.

Back in the U.S., he married the love of his life, Fay Cole, in 1962 and had five children, Glenn, Robby, Bobby, Phyllis and Darlene. The family moved to Tipton County in 1969, where Ellis enjoyed a long career as a local truck driver for Strickland Transportation. Today, he and his wife are members of River of Life Assembly of God Church, where he is Elder Emeritus.

Ellis was awarded the Purple Heart for his combat wounds while he was in hospital, but never actually received the medal because the officer awarding them ran out of the medal before he got to Ellis’ hospital room. Circumstances, life and time continued on for Ellis, but never quite aligned for the awarding of his long deserved honor. During a conversation with the late Tennessee Senator Fred Thompson, Bob mentioned that he would really like to receive the medals he earned. Thompson, took that request to heart, and in 1997, Ellis finally received the long-awaited decorations earned 47 years prior during a ceremony held in Munford City Park.

Ellis often thinks of his late grandfather, silently thanking him for believing in him and that he was old enough to handle military life.

“When I started getting paid, I sent them a little money every month by allotment,” said Ellis, “and when they sold their house, nothing would stop him from giving me the money back that I had helped him with. He was a fine, fine man and I miss him.”

Ellis is authorized to wear the Purple Heart, Combat Infantry Badge, Good Conduct Medal, United Nations Service Medal, Korea Service Medal and the National Defense Service Medal. He is a member of the Disabled American Veterans and the Military Order of the Purple Heart. He was recently honored as the January 2019 Veteran of the Month at a ceremony held at the Tipton County Museum, Veterans Memorial and Nature Center.