

## ***The Last Doughboy***

***By Mel Lavine***

*Special to the Times*

The last World War I doughboy died Sunday at 110. He was Frank Buckles of Charles Town, W. Va. When the United States entered the war in April, 1917, to make the world “safe for democracy,” Buckles was 16, spurred to enlist by recruiting posters. The marines turned him down. Too young and underweight. The Navy said no. Flat feet. He lied about his age, and the Army took him.

Like many young people, Buckles was fired by a desire to get to the front. Hearing that driving an ambulance was an almost sure ticket to see the war up close, he volunteered for the job. Although he wound up in France driving military vehicles and ambulances, he never got to see the real war, but he did see the affect of the war on the people.

In its obituary Tuesday, the New York Times cited a passage in a Buckles 2001 interview for the

Veterans History Project of the Library of Congress.

“The little French children were hungry,” he recalled. “We’d feed the children. To me, that was a pretty sad sight.”

After the war, Buckles, who was born Feb. 1, 1901 on a farm near Bethemy, Mo., worked for steamship companies. He was in Manila on business when the Japanese invaded after the attack on Pearl Harbor. He was imprisoned for more than three years, losing more than 50 pounds, before he was freed by an American Airborne unit in February 1945.

In the mid-1950s, Buckles retired from working for steamship companies and took up cattle ranching in West Virginia. He reportedly was still riding a tractor at 106. He is to be buried at Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors.

As the Times put it, Buckles, who was only a corporal, “became something of a national treasure as the last link to the two million men who served in the American Expeditionary Forces in France” in what used to be called the Great War.

In like manner, he was the last link to my own father, a first sergeant, older than Buckles by five years. Dad, who was wounded in trench warfare, was awarded the Silver Star Medal for gallantry. When he came home from France, he tried law school, dropped out, and went into the flooring business as a contractor and a lumber salesman.

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The one thing I remember was his saying: You didn't think about flag and patriotism in combat. You worried only about yourself and your buddies.

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At times, my father seemed to relive the trauma of the war. They used to say fellows like my father were suffering from shell-shock, or battle fatigue. Today, they might call it a post-traumatic stress disorder. The older he got, the more he looked back, though he was not truly old when he died at 62 of a heart attack on a business trip to Texas in 1958.

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Had he lived until 2011, my old man would have been the last doughboy at 115.

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