

ISL S 4 E10: Stories of Veterans

Ben Purcell 0:00

My dad is going on my grandpa what's going on my great grandfather, which is still you know, you're spraying it still hear me? Hello storm far away

Kami Ahrens 0:25

Hello and welcome everybody, you're listening to It Still Lives, the Foxfire podcast, where we take you on a journey through southern Appalachian history, one story at a time. I'm your host, Kami Ahrens, curator at the Foxfire Museum. This month in honor of the upcoming Veterans holiday, we're taking a look at stories from those who have served in different capacities and in different wars. There are many different interviews within the Foxfire archives from veterans. So we're just scratching the surface today, but we're going to just listen to some clips from different individuals who participated in different conflicts. These stories in their totality are gripping, and moving, and deep and raw. And we are grateful to the interviewees for opening up and sharing their experiences with Foxfire. These interviews were conducted in 1967, 1994, 2003, and 2014. Many of these interviews were published in Foxfire 12, which has a really great chapter on the World Wars. Some of these were only published in magazines. If you're interested in learning more about these individuals, please head to our website on our blog, where we'll have links to more information about each of them and where you can read their full stories. For the sake of this podcast, we've abbreviated their experiences, just so that we can get a snapshot of the resiliency of the human spirit.

A little bit of history about Veterans' Day. The holiday started as an informal acknowledgement of Armistice Day, in honor of the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, which ended the First World War on November 11, 1918. Unfortunately, as we all know, not too long after the Treaty was agreed upon the world entered another global conflict. And after that, we see a succession of wars that drastically altered modern technology and global culture. Again, while these conflicts are hard to hear about, difficult to imagine, they certainly illuminate the ways in which that we as people seek to still find good in all of the bad. So I encourage you to again, investigate these stories further or look into other stories within your own communities within your own families as we honor our veterans this month. The first interview that we're going to listen to again was conducted in 1967. This was with World War One Vet Harley Penland. Harley is a soft spoken elderly man who gently opened up his memories from serving during World War One overseas in France.

Foxfire 3:18

Were you in World War I?

Harley Penland 3:19

Yes ma'am. We went across the water in 1914. It was cold. I sure thought we weren't gonna find no land. I didn't believe there was no land over there. We stayed on the water 17 days and nights. The ship was named OPresident Grant. It got blowed up before I got back to the states.

Foxfire 3:57

What countries were you in when you were over there?

Harley Penland 4:02

In British France. Then they moved us down to St. Misael. That was closer to the foreign line. Boy they had the soldiers there. Every week or two weeks, they was killing 'em so fast, they loaded up - they had a train that run up to the front.

Foxfire 4:27

Were you all drafted or did you volunteer?

Harley Penland 4:30

Drafted. I never volunteered to go over. No siree. Some stayed over there, bused 'em out where they wanted to go to. Some stayed over there. But I had my bags ready to get on the first thing coming. 'Course we had to wear, we had to wear boots there in France all the time, through the winter. Old rubber boots, hip boots, come on up here and hang them in your belt. Where I was, I kept my rolled down, folded down about there. I was at the shipyard all the time, unloading heavy stuff.

Foxfire 5:34

Was that your job when you were there?

Harley Penland 5:37

Yes, ma'am. I stayed there; I first went to the hospital in British France and then stayed there 'til I got better.

Foxfire 5:45

Do you think that they were prejudiced at all about black people? The people in France?

Harley Penland 5:53

No, they treated 'em all about the same over there. I heard it before I got there, but I didn't believe it. But yeah, they treated them all the same.

Foxfire 6:08

Why didn't you believe it?

Harley Penland 6:09

I just didn't believe it; see I was raised here. This used to be a tough country, you know.

Kami Ahrens 6:20

We'll now listen to an interview with Teenie Howell. Teenie is the only woman featured in this podcast. And she served at a time when women weren't allowed into conflict. So she served as a nurse during World War Two. As she mentioned, both she and her husband were in the

military serving in different capacities, both in very different spaces. She served at a hospital in Italy during German attacks.

Teenie Howell 6:48

When I finished nursing school, I went in the service, that was World War Two. They needed nurses so bad. And I was in Oran, Africa, and then went on to Italy. And we ran, we moved a hospital there. So as the the troops moved, we moved our hospital. And I was over there two and a half years. So I, you know, I can't say I enjoyed it. But I'm glad I went. It was quite an experience. But I was young then, you know, twenty-one years ol.

Foxfire 7:26

Wow. You were young.

Teenie Howell 7:29

I got married while I was at Lawson General in Atlanta. I'd been going with my husband for two years. And he was he was in the service. He was drafted. And he was down at Fort Benning.

Foxfire 7:42

Now what was he in, the Navy?

Teenie Howell 7:43

No, he was in the army. And he was in the signal corps. And he was coding and decoding secret and confidential messages. He had a very interesting job. Anyway, we got into Naples and they didn't really have a place for us. And they put us in these bombed-out buildings. And so we didn't get our stuff until, oh, let's see, we were there two nights that we were there without any supplies really, you know, we didn't get our battlepacks or anything. We were just there stranded. And I remember these, these two, two officers, they told us and now that anything happened, y'all stick together and get in these foxholes. We got separated and I had the hand of one of them. And she was scared to death. She said, "I can't get in there." I said, "Jenny, you can too." So I was pulling her. And we crawled in and I got on a black fella. What we thought - well it was the Germans were bombing the fort - but our aircraft guns were up on the mountain shooting at the Germans, and I thought it was the Germans shooting at us. So that was my experience of gettin' there. And then we finally, they finally did give us a place to put up cots and everything. And then we then set up a hospital. We went out of Naples up on the mountain and took over a hospital from the Italians. But it was hard, working you know, I mean you were tired all the time. And you work 12 hours and if you could, you got maybe an hour off during the day, and 12 hours at night if you worked night duty.

So

Foxfire 9:40

Did you - you took over an Italian hospital?

Teenie Howell 9:44

Yes.

Foxfire 9:45

So it was like actually like a building and everything?

Teenie Howell 9:47

They had moved their patients out and we took it over. I don't know what they did with their patients. But anyway, it had Mussolini's name up on the, up there, and it had been chiseled off. 'Cause, you know, he went with the Germans. So, it was a big hospital, and they dropped the bomb right out at the gate. See, we had Red Crosses all over and they weren't supposed to bomb.

Foxfire 10:14

Red Cross?

Teenie Howell 10:15

Mhm. But they did drop one outside the gate one night. And then if we had an air raid, we had to get out in the hall and get our patients out there too, if we could, you know, against the wall. And the worse part of it, too, was in the daytime, the Germans strafed. And they would fly over the hospital and you could see the pilot sitting in there. And they would shoot these guns up, they were shooting at supplies going to the front, you know, and some of it was ammunition and just general supplies for the troops. And they would go right up that road and they would strafe and they shoot out of these planes, they're low. And they never did hit the hospital, but they'd fly over our hospital. So that was very frightening. I remember, the first time they did that. We had, my helmet - we used to take a bath out of it, you know if we didn't have a shower or anything. So I was taking a sponge bath out of my helmet and they flew over. And I poured water out and put my helmet on.

Foxfire 11:41

Everything was all wet.

Teenie Howell 11:46

Some moments are funny. And some of it was very sad. When I think about all this now, how much publicity and everything they've gotten from this war now and even Vietnam, that was terrible. But in World War Two, veterans were not, you know, they didn't get any publicity much when they came home. Now I belong to this building in Washington, D.C., it's for women who is serving. And I don't know how I got an application to join, but I did join it and I haven't been able to go to Washington see the building but it's for all women who were in the service.

Kami Ahrens 12:41

This next interview comes from Colonel Ben Purcell. His extensive interview recounts his experience as a prisoner of war with a Viet Cong for five and a half years. Again, his interview is published in a Foxfire magazine, he and his wife also wrote a book together. So this is a very, very short clip compared to the interview that the students conducted with him. If you close your

eyes, you can almost see yourself walking alongside him in the jungle, which provides us with a better sense of just the weight of his experiences. And yet here he can share this experience two decades later, in 1994, with the Foxfire students that they might learn from him.

Foxfire 13:31
that would help

Interview with Ben Purcell, October 23rd, 1993.

Ben Purcell 13:37

I was shot down in a cemetery just east of Quang Tri City in South Vietnam, on the 8th of February 1968. On March the 28th of 1993, a group of Americans went to Quang Tri and we asked for permission to go to the cemetery. We knew the village where it was near, but we didn't know where the cemetery was. So we asked around through an interpreter, and he found this man who was 80 years old. And he remembered the crash. He said, "I went out to the crash the day after it occurred and right here's where it was," and he showed me where the aircraft hit. And where I was taken as a prisoner in in 1968. I spent more than 62 months as a prisoner and 58 of those months I was in solitary confinement. In other words, I didn't have anybody to talk to during those period of time. Well, initially I was shot down as a passenger on a helicopter; there were six Americans. All of us got out of helicopter but the chopper had caught fire in the air. I mean, it was burning when we crash landed. And the other passenger who was a young enlisted man came through the burning helicopter to recover his rifle to pick it up to bring with him and his clothing caught fire. And he burned severely about the face and the head; face and the arms. And pilot, one of the pilots had been hit with a bullet out of the burst of gunfire that actually caught the plane on fire. And we put a bandage on his leg. But we couldn't do anything for the man that was burned. We tried to cross that sandy cemetery we talked about earlier. And as we got into the tree line, we found ourselves in that hamlet, where the people, children, everybody else, was playing and working. So we jumped in a hole trying to protect ourselves from the enemy who was following us. By this time, they had gone to the burning helicopter, and saw our tracks as they went across the sandy cemetery. And so they were following us. And, you know, we didn't want them shoot us in the back. So we jumped into a big crater which had been made by a bomb or an artillery shell, and turned to face him and pointed our guns at them. They came, a circle halfway around the bunkers, of the crater and pointed their guns at us. And they were 12 of them. There initially were only six of us and then the two men who were wounded climbed out of the hole and hid. We hoped, you know, they'd get away. So then there were only four of us facing 12. And we didn't have a chance. So we gave up. They tied us up very strongly took our boots from us, took everything from us, worth anything. You know, ring, billfold, watches, photographs, and then he took our boots and use the strings out of the boots to tire thumbs together behind our backs. Then heavier rope above our elbow so it wouldn't slip down. One man held the gun in our back and another one a rope and we marched out across the rice paddy. Went a ways and had to get on a boat to go down the river away. And we got on the boat. And the young soldier who was burned happened to be on the boat with me and he said, "Colonel, are you a Christian?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, let us pray." So we had a prayer there right after our capture. Soon we went down the river and got out started walking,

walked all night, and the next morning, we were heading into the mountains and the young soldier said, "I can't see the walk because my eyes are swollen shut from the burns." Very painful. And so they told him sit down by the trail and before we kept moving, we had another prayer with him and, and moved on out of the way. You know, the gun at our back, we had to keep walking. Soon I heard a pistol go off and I said, "Lord, they've executed him." I didn't want to accept that. But common sense told me that's what happened. They realized that he was would never survive in the jungle. Anyway, they took us on for five more days walking in the jungle. They untied us the second day, so that we no longer our hands tied behind. We climbed up the mountain time down, walking barefooted, our feet became blistered, so we couldn't stand on them. We'd climb up the hills on our hands and knees and slide down on our rear ends. It was rainy, overcast planes overhead, but they couldn't see us because of the terrible weather.

Foxfire 13:59

What did you eat?

Ben Purcell 14:12

They gave us boiled rice and a little bit of water on the trail. And then on the 13th of February, we got into a cabin that wasn't as big as this room. And I had broken ribs from the crash and blistered feet from the walking, barefooted. And I was cold and I was hungry. And I was quite despondent because of my situation, which was natural. And all of a sudden, I remembered it was my 40th birthday. And I don't know if you've ever heard the adage that life begins at 40 but I'm sure you and I said, "Lord, I just as soon stay 39. If life's going to be anything like this, I don't want to live." Sometime later they told me supper was ready. Now as I mentioned all my head ball ration water up to this time. I couldn't see what the man was offering me. But while I was out to him, laid an egg, and they picked up that egg and had scrambled it for me and handed it to me. And I couldn't see it in the darkness of the cabin, but I remembered his words he said it's a custom of the Vietnamese people to remember the special days and lives in the lives of guests in our home. And though you're not a guest in this man told me notice that you birthday and he wants to honor it with the only thing he has. Here's an egg for your supper. There I was, 12,000 miles from home, poles apart. Just as opposite from that man as any other person in the world, and yet he showed me a bit of humanity that I can almost feel tonight on the 12th day of March '73, just two weeks before I was released on the 27th. They brought in packages from the American Red Cross, and there were addressed each prisoner by name. And mine was addressed to Colonel Ben Purcell. I said man's most precious possession second only to life is freedom. And that day 32 of us regained our freedom and a chance to start life anew and hopefully find a place to serve us.

Kami Ahrens 20:43

And finally, we're going to listen to James Jobbit, who was interviewed in 2013, about his experiences fighting in Iraq.

Foxfire 20:55

This is a 10th of September, Thursday with James to Jobbit, Breanna Finley, and Cory Lovell and Thomas Fountain.

James Jobbit 21:06

I served in the Navy and in Iraq two years and with with recon, but I was technically still part of the Navy but mainly just Iraq. They didn't really, once you were in one, theatre of the war, one part of the war, they pretty much kept you there until it was over.

Foxfire 21:34

Do you have any specific training that was given to you?

James Jobbit 21:39

Mainly in the the Navy-related, it was like mainly automotive related, but it was all large engine, which is basically large diesel repair, machinists made, boiler tech - stuff like that. And then recon, which was diving, parachuting, weapons training, stuff like that. So for me, I was able to find that I was blessed to be alive after the whole, a total of about three, three and a half years give or take in a combat zone to understand it.

Foxfire 22:22

How had the war changed you and Rabun County?

James Jobbit 22:29

Well, I didn't see that as much when I left but coming back, I see that we were, the county itself was really a tight knit community and everyone, practically knew everyone as far as growing up and all. There were a lot of either retired, people that retired or other veterans that call Rabun County home. So I like to think that we all contributed to the change of the county, but as far as in the in a positive direction, how it affected me, I like to think it was on a positive note. There's a lot of things I had to deal with mentally when I got back. I hate to make it sound like it was bad, but really, they did it - the military did it as nice as possible. But this, for the lack of time sake, it's like somebody reaching in and yanking you out of a combat zone and dropping you into a peaceful community and expecting you to adjust overnight when something like that takes some time to refer back to.

Foxfire 22:44

What do you miss most about Rabun County?

James Jobbit 24:08

I think Rabun County and the surrounding counties are really rural areas in which we're able to be a really tight knit community. There's, like, when I was growing up, there's - I don't think I've ever gotten a ticket when I was in high school only because every police officer knew my dad. They would see me speeding and before I got home, my dad was called. I didn't even have a chance to tell him that I was speeding. So I think it's the the tight knit close community which I guess it helped helped me with a lot of things in life. That's the one thing that I missed the most when I went overseas is is that everyone knows everyone and everyone actually caring for each other. So in the in the military, it felt like a blink of an eye it went by really quick to tell you the truth. Five years felt like five minutes. They this, you're just continuously physically moving. Your

mind's trying to play catch up the whole time. So you're just everything feels like a flash. But it was fun. I got to meet a lot of new people, get to see a lot of different cultures. Honestly, it varied from day to day. Like I said, earlier, we were there to have a war on a group of terrorists, but also at the same time being a peacekeeping force for the local population. Because we're practically doing operations in their backyard pretty much and to be able to move around freely, we have to keep them, stay in their good graces. Weeding out, I guess I keep saying terrorists, but pretty much root out the enemy at the time. And then again, this September 11th happened. So we were, just like every war, the country was really gung ho about it at first. Which, personally, I'm not so eager to jump into a fight without knowing what I'm fighting for. But then again, I was one of those patriotic people. And I just went and enlisted right off the bat. So the funniest thing is we actually had two small puppies that we actually brought into the base. That was hilarious, because every day they got they - we all ate MREs and they got their own little MRE This little three year old puppy and it was just hilarious. When we went over, our lives pretty much got put on pause. But everyone, everything that back at home pretty much kept going and changing. So when you get home, even something as short as three years, there's a huge gap from where you left it three years earlier. Honestly, I don't think you fully readjust back to civilian life.

Kami Ahrens 27:44

So although this was just a brief look at some veteran stories within the Foxfire archives, I hope it presents you with a sense of understanding of how global conflicts still impact small towns, and how it impacts those individuals especially. And I hope that, again, you can share stories with the veterans in your life, whether they're in your community or in your family, and help to celebrate them this month as we again recognize Veterans Day. If you'd like to read more about veteran stories, please check out Foxfire 12 which has a chapter on the World Wars. There are other individuals listed throughout the Foxfire books who do share their experiences, you know, since most of the interviews conducted in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s would have been with men who were of age during World War One and World War Two for the drafts. There are a considerable number of experiences captured within the Foxfire books. Again, some of the interviews specifically are only in the magazines and that is Ben Purcell and James Jobbit, and those references will be listed on our website. Thank you for joining us this month we appreciate you listening and taking a dive into our archives with us. Remember that we are a 501c3 nonprofit. We do rely on your generous support to keep our projects going. If you're interested in supporting us this giving season, please visit our website for more information on ways that you can support Foxfire, whether it's through a donation through a membership, purchasing a book or another product that we have to sell. All of that goes back to supporting our mission to preserve and promote southern Appalachian history and especially to engage youth within their communities and cultural traditions. We will be back at you next month with the final podcast of the year. Hard to believe already we're nearing the end of 2022. We hope you all have a very safe and happy holiday this November season and we will be back with you again in December. Y'all take care.

