

# ON THE HOME FRONT

With a long history of military service, the University has been home to generations of patriots.

by Alana Sewell

**I**t was not the thunder of the heavens that broke the still of darkness. Under the shroud of a cool, misting rain, the earth itself had belled forth an ominous warning as the thunder of 3,000 feet, cloaked by the veil of night, drew near. At long last, the rumors had proven true.

As the morning sky faded from black to gray, only the distinctive scent of gunpowder lingered, suspended somewhere between the trampled earth and its somber heavens. The gentle murmur of the Black Warrior's falls continued on as it always had, but the city on its banks was nearing the first of many transformations. The battle had been lost before it ever began.

The boys, known more for their rowdiness than their discipline, put up a val-

iant, if futile, effort. The Yankees, some 1,500 strong, had forced The University of Alabama's 300 cadets to retreat at the orders of UA President Landon Garland, who saw no sense in the useless sacrifice. The fate of the campus, nicknamed the West Point of the Confederacy, was now in the hands of the enemy.

From miles away, the cadets watched in a foggy mix of anger and sorrow as the campus succumbed to its destruction, the crackle of the flames disrupting the fearful silence of a city on the verge of ruin. As the buildings groaned and warped toward their death on April 4, 1865, Union soldiers withdrew past lanes of towering oaks unfazed by the inferno, and still rustling in the spring breeze.

## Till it's over, over there

The military history and legacy of patriotism at UA run as deep as the roots of its regal oaks. Post-Civil War Reconstruction and the politics surrounding it ushered in a period of unrest as a succession of northerners, deemed little more than carpet-bagging Yankees by locals, were brought in to administer the affairs of the University. But by the dawn of the First World War, a semblance of unity and order had been restored, and a new generation of young cadets would take up the call to service.

Pride and service weren't the only traditions that lingered, though. While the whole of Europe was busy waging war, it seemed that UA students of the early 1900s were just as skilled at disruptive behavior as their predecessors.

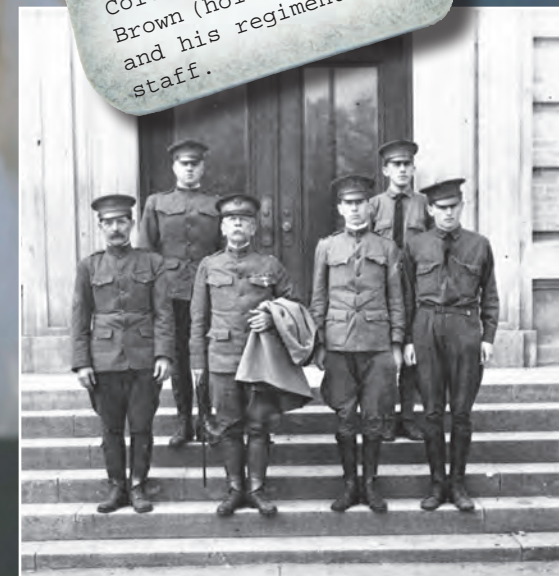
By this time, women had been admitted to the University, opening doors of opportunity that the cadets of the Civil War could have only dreamed of. In his memoir, *Memories That Lingered*, Laurence Milton McPherson, '30,



Soldiers furl their flag after the Confederate surrender, in a painting by Richard Brooke.



In 1917, UA's ROTC cadets were led by Col. George LeRoy Brown (holding jacket) and his regimental staff.







recalled several areas of prime real estate for young men on campus.

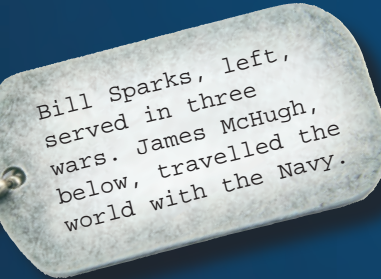
"Running from the post office was a wall about the proper height for a seat, which was called Buzzard Roost, because here sat the men students to talk and to watch the girls go by, mostly to do the latter," he wrote. Another favored location was the women's dormitory, nicknamed the Ranch in reference to all the "beautiful calves" that could be found there.

As the United States inched ever closer to entering World War I, however, the attention of young men on campus once again turned to honor and country. In 1916, the Reserve Officer Training Corp, or ROTC, was reinstated, and military units from across the South were brought to the University to train for war. Dormitories were vacated to make room for incoming soldiers, leaving many students to live in tents, and the thunder of military exercises once again reverberated through the thick woods surrounding campus.

Some men would be drafted; others volunteered, eagerly boarding stuffy train cars that would carry them away to what they hoped would be, at the very least, a glorified adventure to the faraway lands they had studied.

Despite a significant loss of men to the war, the number of students at UA remained steady. This can be attributed to the ingenuity of President George Denny, who began a campaign to bolster the national reputation of the University by advertising the football team and recruiting top-notch students from the Northeast, according to Dr. Earl Tilford, '69. Denny's vision created an increasingly sophisticated institution, and by 1935, The University of Alabama boasted more diversity among its student body than any other in the South, said Tilford, who is currently writing a book on UA history.

There were other changes as well. The veterans of WWI had returned home to a hero's welcome, as they marched in parades cheered on by



proud families and friends. In honor of those who did not return, the American Legion and the Million Dollar Band raised money to plant a double row of live oak trees along University Boulevard, each in honor of a particular veteran. The last of the trees were planted by 1922, including three for black soldiers whose names did not appear in the official listing.

The roaring '20s had come and gone, prosperity replaced by the strain of the Great Depression. Despite the trying times, the student population of the University continued to grow as a result of Denny's long-term vision.

## All the old familiar places

While the University may have managed to insulate itself from much of the turbulence of the Depression, the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor changed everything. Military preparations again commenced, this time for World War II, and the number of male students plummeted, said Tilford. The roar of airplane engines became a familiar sound on campus when the military began sending pilots from all over the country to Tuscaloosa for training. Students and locals alike lined University Boulevard to watch their boys march off to war.

Like so many who would now see combat themselves, James McHugh, '57, had grown up listening to his father's tales of war. His dad, Frederick Lynne McHugh, was a 1917 graduate of the University who served in France during

the First World War. As a student, Frederick enjoyed dragging cannonballs to the top steps of Woods Hall, where he lived, and rolling them down the stairs, undoubtedly resulting in the desired annoyance of his neighbors.

By the time the Second World War began, Frederick was living in Birmingham, Ala., which was considered a potential target for enemy attack because of its many wartime industries. During "blackout" practices, when the city went dark, he would don a Red Cross hat and walk the neighborhood, alerting others of the drill.

At 17, his son James was ready for adventure and "cheated a little bit" to enlist in the Naval Reserve a year too early, he said. James' Naval service took him all over the world before he returned home to attend his father's university.

Wilburn "Bill" Emmett Sparks, '79, also came from a family with a legacy of military service. A self-described country boy from Guntersville, Ala., Sparks was a teenager when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, prompting him to enlist in the Army. One year younger than the minimum age requirement, he needed his parents' consent, a decision his mother refused to make for his father, who was out of town at the time. Sparks managed to convince the recruiter that his father was crippled and his mother was busy with his five siblings. He took the consent form, signed it himself and returned with a pair of socks, some underwear and a

change of clothes. That evening he was on a train to San Diego for a nine-week boot camp.

Sparks left word with his aunt to wait a few days before telling his mother where he'd gone. He may have wasted no time in signing up, but Sparks did have plenty of time to weigh the realities of war on the five-day journey to California. "I thought about it a lot. Other boys were coughing and sniffing. They didn't want anybody to know they were crying," he chuckled. "We were supposed to be men now."

Soon Sparks was on his way to the Pacific as a gunnery sergeant. His father had told him stories of the trenches during WWI and the temporary truces called while soldiers from both sides entered the field to dig potatoes before resuming fire. But the war that he found in the South Pacific was quite different. At Guadalcanal, he fought in battles that included two of his brothers, both Marines, although he never knew that until he returned home on leave. As it turned out, this would be the first of several homecomings, but perhaps the most memorable.





When his ship reached port in San Diego, crowds of people were lined up and waiting to greet the soldiers. “The whole world was ours,” he recalled. “They couldn’t do enough for us. We were treated like royalty.”

But Sparks wanted to see Alabama. Given a 10-day leave, he made the four-day train ride home, which would prove a fateful decision. On the return trip, his train was delayed and he missed the midnight curfew. This was no excuse, and as punishment he was assigned instead to another ship, bound for the Marshall Islands. Its mission was to assist in the testing of an atomic bomb, technology that would eventually settle the conflict once and for all, but with a toll that would resound through all time.

### I’d ring out a warning

In 1947, Sparks left the Navy and became a founding member of the Air Force, which until that time had been part of the Army. With the Air Force, he served in the Korean War, a precursor to the conflict that would forever change the way society viewed military service.

The atmosphere on campus during the late 1950s could be described as the calm before the storm. Although the Vietnam War was not yet a contentious issue, by 1962 it was evident that the University was going to have to desegregate, against the wishes of many in the state. In preparation for the upheaval that was to come, UA President Frank Rose began establishing alumni chapters in each county of Alabama to introduce the idea of integration, in hopes that the violent riots seen at Ole Miss would not be repeated in Tuscaloosa.

On a scorching day in June 1963, Gov. George Wallace made history as he stepped aside to allow black students Vivian Malone and James Hood to register at The University of Alabama.

As the decade progressed, enrollment reached record numbers, and a



Clark on the Saudi Arabian shore of the Persian Gulf during Operation Desert Storm

ten the sight of a Tennessee cornfield bathed in the soft light of morning as a thick layer of dew steamed off it. That would be his last glimpse of home for a while as he entered a C5 cargo plane. He had served in places like Egypt, Turkey and the Philippines, but had never seen war. Now, Clark was on his way into combat as a reconnaissance officer with the Tennessee Army National Guard.

“Along with my rifle and gear, I deployed with my Mauser knife, a few photos and my Ray Ban Aviator sunglasses,” said Clark. “I figured if I was going to get killed, at least I’d look cool.”

In March 1991, Clark made it home intact. His convoy was greeted by yellow ribbons and crowds lining the highway, an especially poignant moment for the Vietnam veterans in his unit—men who were once labeled murderers were finally receiving a proper welcome. “People always want to know how many people you killed, but no one asks how many people you saved,” he said.

### You raise me up

Clark, commander of the Army ROTC and a professor of military science at the Capstone, now prepares new generations for war. Under his leadership, today’s program is less about military slogans, creeds and traditions, and focuses instead on the skills that will increase the survivability of not just cadets, but those under their leadership, he said. “What I care about is teaching them to think critically, pulling them out of their comfort zones to think outside the superficialities of time, space, uniform, country and politics,” he explained.

It is men like Jermaine Groce, a 24-year-old Iraq veteran, who now carry the torch into the 21st century. Groce, a UA junior who enlisted in the National Guard to help pay for school, had never even held a gun before joining the military. He was 18, barely old enough to cast a vote for his commander-in-chief,

when he became a combat veteran.

For Groce and many others like him, putting life on hold is one of the most difficult aspects of serving in war. While his classmates were starting college, he was driving Humvees across the Iraqi desert. Life moves on, but for many service men and women it feels as if time stands still, he said. “I don’t think people really understand the sacrifices that soldiers make when they go off to war,” said Groce. “Your hopes and dreams all get put on hold. When I got back, I still felt like I was 17.”

When he did return, Groce was grateful for the warm welcome he received from his community, friends and family, though he struggled to cope with his experience. He had difficulty watching news coverage of the war and fought to maintain control over his anxiety after months of feeling as if he may be ambushed at any moment.

At the suggestion of an aunt, he began working at a camp for children with special needs in 2007. It was there that Groce found healing, and a calling. “I saw how they handled everything in their life,” he explained. “Regardless of their disabilities, they had a passion for life.” Today, Groce is pursuing a degree in special education.

His life-changing experiences remind us that soldiers of every era are only people who answer a call to serve. They leave behind mothers, fathers, wives and children to defend strangers they may never know and sometimes causes they don’t support. “What they all have in common,” said Clark, “is a dedication to making the world a better place for those who come after, and the willingness to make a deeply personal sacrifice to serve their fellow citizens.” ■

*(Background collected from Dr. Earl H. Tilford, Dr. Jerry Oldshue, Clark E. Center Jr., Memories That Lingered by Laurence Milton McPherson, Rammer Jammer magazines from the 1940s and the 1971 Corolla. Some photos and artwork from the Anniston Star, 200 Years: A Bicentennial Illustrated History of the United States, The University of Alabama: A Pictorial History and the W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library.)*

