

We submit to you the following biographies, presented to honor the military individuals who embody the character traits described herein. Writer Dave Stewart enthusiastically embraced my quest to interview a range of military backgrounds here in Ashe County that over my six years in the county, including two of recent ‘quasi-military’ experience, have stood out as examples of what is right about America.

Although their stories are vastly different, and one was not born here but chose to live here, who they are, what they stand for, their patriotism and love of country, honor, loyalty and ‘doing right’ are so similar as to be one man. Without exception, none wanted recognition. Their humility and humble hearts are legendary in their own circles. I begged. And sent Dave to them. And begged some more. They finally relented, grudgingly. From the Gentry brothers to Charles Knapp to the Roark brothers, it is with admiration and respect that we present to you these written words to memorialize what makes Ashe County great.

The Gallant Gentrys—80 Years in Uniform

by Dave Stewart

In every major conflict the United States fought in the 20th century, from the First World War to the First Gulf War, the Gentrys of Ashe County served their country with distinction. We profile the three Gentry brothers whose military careers form the heart of the family’s 80 years in uniform.

Tobe, John, and Joe Gentry are uncommon men by any measure, but perhaps the most uncommon aspect of these Ashe County brothers is that, between them, they are veterans of World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and Desert Storm—conflicts spanning nearly half a century. At first, these facts seem impossible to reconcile. How could three men separated by less than six and a half years in age have fought for their country from as far back as the mid 1940s to as late as the 1990s? There must be some mistake, any reasonable person would assume. There is no mistake. And the truth of it is extraordinary.

Tobe

In the highly successful Indiana Jones movies, they named Henry Jones, Jr., “Indiana” after the family dog, much to the embarrassment of the lead character. They named George T. Gentry “Tobe” after the family horse. But Tobe Gentry is far from embarrassed by that; in fact, it was his idea. So since early childhood, George T. Gentry (the T doesn’t stand for anything) has been known as Tobe.

Tobe Gentry is a commanding figure—tall, trim, straight, with a handshake like a vise. He turned 80 in January, which is hard to believe. Other than a nondegenerative eye disorder that has partially claimed his vision, he appears fitter than many men one quarter his age. Tobe still has about him the air of the firm but fair master sergeant that he was in the Army, the archetypal noncommissioned officer who comprised the backbone of the platoon, the backbone of the Army itself. Men can’t be taught to be like that, they are made that way, and it was Ashe County that made Tobe Gentry.

Floyd Gentry had grown up in the Three Top area of Ashe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During the First World War, he was called up and posted to Camp Jackson in South Carolina where, as a sergeant, first class, he taught culinary science. After the war and newly married, Floyd moved to the coalfields of Maben, West Virginia, where he worked as a blacksmith, fixing props in the shafts—a dangerous and often deadly operation. His eldest surviving son, George T., was born in Maben in January 1928. But the coal dust and the damp atmosphere of Wyoming County affected the toddler's health, and he quickly developed double pneumonia. In order to save him, the family returned to Ashe County, to a farm in the Buffalo area.

Tobe did well in his new surroundings. The family began to grow too, with John being born in 1932, Joe in 1934, and their two sisters Wanda and Ima Jean some years later. Toward the end of the 1930s, the family moved one last time, to a farm in Bald Mountain, where they raised and grew most of what they needed to subsist. Like so many farmers' sons, Tobe and his brothers grew up hunting, fixing machines, building, and making things. It would be invaluable experience when they joined the military.

Barely 18, only 5'4" tall, and weighing just 127 lbs, Tobe Gentry received his draft papers from the United States government in April 1946. Although Germany and Japan had surrendered the year before, the war had not technically ended, as there were elements of the Japanese forces still fighting. Hostilities would not officially terminate until noon on December 31, 1946, when President Harry S. Truman signed Proclamation 2714. So while Private Gentry did not fight in the Second World War, he is a veteran of that momentous conflict.

Within days of being drafted, Tobe Gentry made the decision to enlist. "I was inspired by my father's service in the First World War," he told this writer. "Plus, I wanted to go overseas, and enlisting would allow me to do that." And so the slight lad from the mountains of North Carolina signed on for 18 months' service.

After basic training in Alabama, he joined the 25th Infantry at Camp Stoneman, California, and soon traveled with the division to the Aleutian Islands off Alaska, then to Hawaii, and finally to Japan. In Osaka in late 1946, he joined B Company, a utilities unit of the 25th Medical Battalion, and for the next year and more, led a section charged with the maintenance and building of the battalion's medical facilities.

"We came back home [in late summer 1947]," Gentry said, "[arriving] in 'Frisco. They had a 'Welcome Home Veterans' sign for those who had served in the war. It was wonderful, and such a beautiful sight, that city. I was so glad to be back in the United States."

Corporal Tobe Gentry (with the grade of tech 5) was discharged from the Army in September 1947 and returned home to Ashe County. But laying oak floors and working in the lumber business didn't satisfy the young veteran, who had now grown to 6' and weighed 165 lbs. After a year, and despite pleas from his mother not to reenlist, he joined up again in November 1948. Unable to rejoin his old unit or maintain his discharge rank, he went to the 60th Station Hospital at Fort Dix, new Jersey, as a PFC. Again, he led a utilities section, maintaining the extensive medical facilities of the base.

As the decade of the forties ended, the Army sent Tobe Gentry to Fort Belvoir, Virginia, on what proved to be the decisive training of his life—a foreman's course in construction engineering, where he learned the intricacies of building and maintaining roads, bridges, and other infrastructure vital to the military. He would use the knowledge

he gained at Fort Belvoir in many aspects of his future Army and civilian career. He also took time away from his unit to marry his Ashe County sweetheart, Lettie Howell.

After a solid and successful four years at Dix, Sergeant Gentry received his next orders—a posting to France in 1952. In the foothills of the Pyrenees close to the Spanish border, his responsibility was to ensure that his company maintained the medical facilities of the base they were assigned to, as well as to help rebuild French infrastructure where feasible. Lettie joined him in southern France for the latter part of his three-year tour there.

“I liked France and I liked the French people,” Tobe Gentry said. “They were still rebuilding after the war, and we were helping them. They liked us too.”

In 1955, after the success of his mission in France, the Army assigned Sergeant Gentry to 577th Construction Engineers at Fort Benning, Georgia, where he led his team in the construction and maintenance of the facilities of this sprawling base. Within a year, though, his skill as a rifleman took him to Fort Jackson, South Carolina, where he joined the 2nd Regiment, the M1 Committee, and instructed soldiers in the use of the M1 carbine.

He left Fort Jackson in 1958 for another tour of duty overseas, this time in the still-tense Korean Peninsula. There, for the next 12 months, he held the pivotal position of duty NCO, or “field first,” of the Headquarters Company of the 7th Infantry Division, charged with always ensuring that the company met or exceeded the prescribed standards of discipline, presentation, and efficiency. His younger brother John, also a sergeant in the United States Army, briefly served with Tobe in Korea, a fact noted in the press at the time. So outstanding a job did Tobe Gentry do with HQ Company that the Army awarded him a certificate for it.

After a brief posting to the 31st Infantry Division at Fort Rucker, Alabama, as truck master, supervising the maintenance of heavy vehicles, the Army again recognized Gentry’s expertise with a rifle and attached him to a marksman unit at Fort Rucker. For the next three years, he competed in M1 shooting all over the South, eventually becoming a master shooter, the second highest category. (Marksman, expert, master, and distinguished are the four grades.)

In 1964, the Army posted Sergeant Gentry overseas again. This time he went to Germany as a platoon leader in the 1st Brigade of the 51st Infantry Division. Now an E7 sergeant, he returned to the United States in 1966 for a brief stint at Fort McClellan, Alabama, first as an instructor in survival and later as a drill sergeant. Then, in early 1968, on the threshold of his retirement, the Army sent First Sergeant Gentry to Vietnam, where his brother John had been serving for some time. Selected for the mission because of his vast engineering experience and knowledge of French, Tobe went to Saigon to join the 513th Engineering Control Advisory Detachment, the unit charged with helping ordinary Vietnamese villagers improve their lives.

“We lived in the Mekong Delta and went out among the villagers identifying and supervising engineering projects,” Gentry explained. “There were 21 people in our unit—six officers and 15 enlisted men. But the villagers would actually do the work. The Vietnamese there liked us. They warned us when the Viet Cong were around and even protected us.” It would have been extremely dangerous for the villagers to give such aid to the American forces at that time—reprisals for collaboration were harsh and often deadly—and it is a testament to the characters of Tobe Gentry and his team that they did.

First Sergeant Gentry completed his 12-month tour without major incident, but the constant threat of injury or death hung over him and his men every moment they worked in the Vietnamese countryside. Back stateside once again, he retired from the Army in July 1969 as an E7 first sergeant. Among his service decorations, he can number two Bronze Stars, two Army Commendation Medals, seven Good Conduct Medals, the Asiatic Pacific Campaign Medal of World War II, the World War II Victory Medal, the Army Occupation of Japan Medal, two National Defense Service Medals, the American Vietnam Service Medal with two stars, the Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Palm, and the Vietnam Campaign Medal.

In addition to his medals, which are proudly displayed in two imposing cases on the wall of his Jefferson home, Tobe Gentry has numerous certificates of commendation and training courses completed. One certificate, however, stands out from the others. It recognizes his service in the Cold War, for which, it says, "the people of this Nation are forever grateful." The certificate is signed by Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense.

Although a veteran with 22 years' honorable service behind him, Tobe Gentry was barely in his forties when he left the Army. He had another life ahead of him. He and Lettie settled in Ashe County and built their house on Friendship Baptist Church Road in Jefferson. For nine years, Tobe worked for Ashe Home Improvement Center on Highway 16 and then went freelance building cabinets and furniture and installing garage doors. Today, with his eye disorder restricting his ability to drive, Gentry can only do small remodeling jobs around the county. Most notably, he is currently working on the VFW/DAV Hut on Ashe Park Road in Jefferson. Typical of his selfless attitude, he says that what he regrets most about his limitations is that he can no longer help the widows he once did small maintenance jobs for. His vision also prevents him from shooting now, something this master marksman misses very much.

Tobe and Lettie have one son, Denzil Mark. A ten-year veteran of the United States Air Force military police, Denzil is currently in the construction industry in Colorado. He has a daughter and two sons. Tobe and Lettie also have a daughter, Teresa Woodie, who lives in Ashe County and has two sons and a daughter.

John

"Why were you awarded the Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm?" this writer asked John Gentry, Tobe's younger brother.

"Well, it wasn't for gallantry," he replied with some embarrassment. "It was more for stupidity. No, it was for nothing really."

"If it was for nothing, then there's no problem with telling me about it, right?"

Checkmated, this reserved man smiled. Then, reluctantly, he told me why he had been awarded this coveted decoration.

Sergeant Gentry, his driver, and his radioman were driving in their jeep through the countryside of war-torn Vietnam, just before the vast Tet Offensive of January 1968. Ahead on the road, Gentry caught a glimpse of a Viet Cong unit waiting in ambush. He ordered the driver to stop the jeep and wait. Armed only with his M1 rifle, he circled around under cover until he commanded a view of the Viet Cong force. At great risk to his own safety, Gentry attacked the enemy alone, firing on them with his rifle. The Viet Cong immediately retreated, at least one of their number wounded.

This certainly was not “nothing.” But John Gentry, like many who have performed heroic acts, is extremely uncomfortable with recounting his actions that long-ago day on a dusty road in Vietnam. In fact, it could be said that he is the definition of modesty.

Four years younger than Tobe, John was born in March 1932 in Buffalo and raised on the family farm at Bald Mountain. Like his brothers, he went to school locally, first at Buffalo, later at Jefferson, and then finally, in his high school years, at West Jefferson. He left before graduation, as so many farm boys did in that era, and went to work in the lumber business, driving a truck for Grant Houck. At 18 or so, he went to Alliance, Ohio, near Canton and Akron, working in a brick factory initially and then as a meat packer. His younger brother, Joe, then only 17, joined him in 1951. The two brothers stayed together in Ohio until the end of 1952, when John was drafted into the Army. At that time, he could not know how important a role the military would play in his life and how perfectly suited to it he would prove to be.

After basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, John received his orders. He would be going to fight in Korea. With K Company of the 179th Infantry Regiment of the 45th Infantry Division, he landed in Korea in April 1953 while the stalemated war was still raging around the 38th parallel. Gentry’s natural aptitude for leading men became immediately obvious to his superiors, and they made him a private first class and a squad leader. He had barely turned 21 years old. Within days, he found himself at the front with his unit.

“There was constant artillery, mortar, and machine gun fire from the North Koreans and Chinese, mainly at night. And they would send up flares and we would send up flares. The night was filled with these green and red tracers and all this noise, and it seemed like the Fourth of July.”

PFC Gentry and his fellow soldiers dug in, living in an elaborate network of trenches and bunkers, repelling the intermittent forays of the enemy and taking cover from the incessant shelling. Before long, his unit was ordered to defend a hill the allies had recently taken and which the North Koreans and Chinese were desperately fighting to take back. The hill became notorious as Heartbreak Ridge. Again, John Gentry and his platoon dug in and successfully repelled the regular probing attacks of the enemy, who occasionally infiltrated the American trenches, sparking fierce close-order combat and hand-to-hand fighting.

Always a good shot, like his brother Tobe, John became a master marksman at this point in his career. The M1 was his weapon of choice. In his final test, he fell a mere two points short of reaching the top category of distinguished shooter.

John Gentry must have had a lucky star even then, because, unlike many of his comrades, he left the front largely unscathed. Shrapnel from an enemy mortar, however, did rip into his leg on one occasion. He dressed the wound himself, refusing to go to the hospital. “They would have given me a Purple Heart,” he explained, “and I had no interest in getting it.”

When the Korean War ended, Gentry found himself a platoon sergeant in the 1092nd Engineer Battalion, maintaining and building roads and bridges throughout war-torn South Korea. Based at the giant American facility known as the Punchbowl, he ate breakfast regularly with a young tank company commander, Captain Patton, son of the legendary World War II commander, General George S. Patton. His tour finally over,

Gentry left Korea in May 1953 to join the 20th Engineer Battalion at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

A year later, the Army assigned him to the 41st Engineer Battalion of the 10th Infantry Division. After a short time at Fort Riley, Kansas, he shipped out with the whole division for a base near Frankfurt, Germany. Again a platoon leader, he spent two years with his team in Germany constructing school playgrounds, roads, bridges, airfields, and other infrastructure for the military and the German populace. He also underwent training in the demolition of atomic munitions. “We were trained to blow them up,” he said with a sly grin, “but we never did.”

Back in the U.S. in 1957, he spent a year at Fort Benning, Georgia, with the 499th Engineer Battalion, repairing rifle ranges and maintaining training facilities. Then, in 1958, the Army posted him for a second tour of duty in Korea, this time with the 13th Engineer Battalion of the 7th Infantry Division, maintaining the division’s facilities in Korea. He worked briefly alongside his brother Tobe, then with the Headquarters Company of the 7th. After a year in Korea, Sergeant Gentry returned to the U.S. for a two-year assignment with the 54th Engineer Battalion at Fort Knox, Kentucky.

During this period, in June 1961, he married Shirley Wyatt from the Laurel Springs area of Ashe County. The newlyweds were soon split up, however, when John was posted for another tour in Germany, this time in the center of the country. Again he and his unit built and maintained infrastructure for the American military and the German people. Shirley joined him in Germany in 1962, and the couple lived off base, in the local community. “We got on well with the Germans,” Gentry said, “and vice versa. They particularly respected Shirley because she did all her own housework, which was unusual for Americans.” Their first child, Pam, was born in Germany in 1964, just before the Army shipped John back to the U.S. For the following two years, he was attached to A Company of the 391st Engineer Battalion, a Reserve unit based in Asheville, North Carolina. He instructed the company’s officers and men in the complex field of military engineering.

By 1967, the U.S effort in Vietnam had reached a critical point, and the Army needed him there. He joined the 4th Engineer Battalion of the 4th Infantry Division and immediately went to work in the Central Highlands of Vietnam supporting the infantry. “A lot of what we did,” Gentry explained matter-of-factly, “was rappelling from helicopters into the jungle, carving out bases for our troops, and constructing tropical buildings for them.” In late 1967, he single-handedly foiled the Viet Cong ambush that earned him the Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm.

After the Tet Offensive—the enormous attack on U.S. forces by the Viet Cong in January 1968—John Gentry and his fellow engineers became infantrymen. Again, though, Gentry had that lucky star over his shoulder, and he ended his tour in the summer of 1968 without serious injury.

At Lavonia, Georgia, later that year, he became an advisor on engineering matters to the National Guard’s 105th Engineer Company. Before long, however, the Army needed his skills and leadership ability in Korea once more, and he returned there for his third tour in 1970. This time, his role would be even more important. Working through the U.S. embassy in Seoul, Master Sergeant Gentry became the senior enlisted advisor to the chief of engineering of the South Korean Army. Gentry’s prime responsibility was to advise the Korean on the number of engineering battalions and equipment his army

would need over the following five years. Gentry even computerized the entire inventory of South Korean Army equipment, a phenomenal and invaluable process that took him six months and brought him great praise from the Koreans and the Americans. His commanding general heard about the computerized inventory and demanded that Gentry's counterparts in other units do the same.

Back from Korea in 1971, Master Sergeant Gentry went to his final posting—Greenville, South Carolina—where he became the senior advisor in the engineering section of Readiness Group Jackson, the advisory group for all National Guard troops in South Carolina. Working at battalion level, he advised on military engineering matters to all ranks up to and including full colonels. Such was his reputation for accurate information and straight talk that a Guard general remarked to one of his officers, “Now Gentry's with us, we're going to hear the truth.”

After 22 years of honorable service to his country, John Gentry retired from the Army in 1975. He had earned many decorations during his service. Apart from the Vietnam Cross for Gallantry with Palm, a grateful nation had awarded him the National Defense Service Medal, the American Commendation Medal, two Bronze Stars, six Good Conduct Medals, the Vietnam Service Medal, the Vietnam Campaign Medal, the Combat Infantryman's Badge, the Presidential Unit Commendation Medal, the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal, and the Korean Service Medal. In addition, he had many training certificates and other citations.

John and Shirley moved back to Ashe County after his retirement. Two years before, they had bought land in Jefferson and built their home there. After a year's well-earned vacation, John Gentry began a new career as a builder with his brothers, Tobe and Joe, together with Wade McNeil and John's nephew, Johnny Taylor. For the next two decades and more, they built many homes and other structures in the district, including the present Jefferson post office.

Since he lost the sight in his right eye in 1997 and suffered a shoulder injury some time later, John Gentry has not done much construction. He does odd jobs of carpentry today, including work on the VFW/DAV building in Jefferson. And he still likes to fish and shoot. “Mainly I potter around now,” he told me, although I think that's probably the modest John Gentry understating it once more.

John and Shirley have two children. Pam, an operating room nurse, is married to anesthesiologist Clyde Edwards. They and their two children live in Winston-Salem. Kevin Gentry, John and Shirley's son, lives in Ashe County.

Joe

Seventeen years ago, at the age of 56, Joe Gentry drove a gasoline tanker truck up the eight-lane highway from Saudi Arabia to the front in Iraq during Desert Storm, the first Gulf War. There is a snapshot of him taken at that time, an imposing figure sitting behind the steering wheel of his vehicle, an M1 carbine hung barrel-down an easy reach away, the Middle Eastern sun blazing through the windshield. Although he is wearing a faint smile for the camera, he has a glint in his eye that would have daunted the Guard troops in his care, not to mention the Iraqis who might step up to fight him.

The youngest of the three Gentrys was born at Buffalo in May 1934. Like his brothers, he went to school there, and later in Jefferson and West Jefferson after the family moved to the farm at Bald Mountain. He grew up helping his family raise horses,

cattle, hogs, and chickens, and growing corn and other vegetables. After he left school at seventeen, Joe Gentry moved to Ohio to be with his brother John. The two worked in the brick factory at Alliance, near Akron and Canton. Joe stayed even after John went into the Army at the end of 1952 but came home to Ashe County in 1954.

Soon after, on a double date with brother John, he met Catherine Burkett, daughter of Laurence Burkett who had been killed in the Second World War. Only later did he realize that he'd known Catherine years before when they were children playing together in the Buffalo area. Joe and Catherine were married six months later, in 1955, and honeymooned at Fort Benning with Tobe and Lettie.

Married life would be short for Joe and Catherine, however, at least for the moment, as Gentry was drafted into the Army at the end of 1955. Unlike his brothers, who went into the infantry, Joe joined the artillery. After basic artillery training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, and training in 75mm guns at Fort Bliss, Texas, Joe Gentry was posted briefly to Fort Sheridan, Illinois, and finally to the 78th Antiaircraft Artillery Missile Battalion at Mundelein, Illinois, in the northern suburbs of Chicago. There he and his unit manned a Nike (later Hercules) guided missile battery, which was buried 40 feet underground to protect it from attack. The Nike and Hercules missiles had conventional warheads, but they were formidable weapons just the same.

Joe Gentry completed his service in 1957, but, again unlike his elder brothers, he decided a military career was not for him. Some years later, when he tried to reenlist, the Army turned him down as he had too many dependents at that point.

Back in Ashe County, Gentry forged a career in construction and meat cutting. But the urge to serve never left him. In 1975, he joined a new National Guard unit, the 1453rd Company based in Ashe County, part of the 7th Transportation Battalion of the 540th Brigade. He had to serve one weekend a month and attend two weeks of summer camp, actively training in the driving and maintenance of heavy transport vehicles. His training took him all over the southeast, from Virginia to Georgia, as well as to Fort Irwin, California, for specialist training in hauling fuel for tanks. On two occasions, his company traveled overseas for war games, once to Egypt and once to Germany. The 1453rd, later to become the 1450th, supported the Army by transporting not only fuel but munitions, equipment, and even armored vehicles. Joe Gentry, like his comrades, spent many, many hours behind the wheel.

Sergeant Gentry might never have left the United States with the Guard had it not been for the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein in August 1990. The 1453rd shipped out to Log Base Charlie, the American military base in the Saudi Arabian desert, seven miles from the Iraqi border. Gentry and his comrades hauled fuel from Saudi ports to the bank of million-gallon bladders at the base during Desert Shield, the buildup to the war. When hostilities broke out in January 1991, they trucked the fuel up to the front for American tanks, other combat vehicles, and helicopters. Gentry described the nearby fighting. "We slept in tents at night when we were out on the road. We could feel the tents shake when they were bombing Baghdad. I was glad to be a part of it."

In May 1991, with the war won, the Army shipped the 1453rd back to the U.S., and Joe Gentry resumed his peacetime National Guard duties. In 1994, at the age limit of 60, he was compelled to retire after 21 years, 7 months, and 11 days of service to his country. Like his brothers, he left the military with many certificates of completed training and commendations. Among his decorations are the Army Service Ribbon, the

National Defense Service Medal, the Army Reserve Components Achievement Medal, the Driver's Badge, the Southwest Asia Service Medal, the Kuwait Liberation Medal, the Meritorious Unit Commendation, the North Carolina Service Award, the Armed Forces Reserve Medal, the Humanitarian Service Medal, the NCO Professional Development Ribbon, the Army Reserve Components Overseas Training Ribbon, the North Carolina State Active Duty Award, and the Southwest Asia Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm Medal. In addition, he is the recipient of the Patriotic Citizens Award from the Veterans of Foreign Wars for flying the national flag and was made a Wildlife Cooperation Agent by the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission in recognition of the information he collected to promote big game hunting in the state. He is also a life member of the North Carolina National Guard Association.

Today, Joe runs the recycling center on Highway 16 at Crumpler a number of days a week. While always friendly and considerate, this big man is a force, even at 74 years of age. He manages the center with the same powerful authority that took him and his comrades safely through decades of service in war and peace.

Joe and Catherine live on Friendship Baptist Church Road in Jefferson. They have three children. Curtis, who served three years with the 1450th, lives in Ashe County. Robin Lynn works for Western-Southern Life in Thomasville. Laurecene lives in Jonesville. All three are married. Joe and Catherine have three grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Nowadays, the three Gentry brothers are as close to one another as they have been since childhood. They work on projects together, socialize together, hunt together. While they are all different, as individuals, they share one quality: humility. Between them, they served their country for two-thirds of a century, with distinction, and often with bravery. While intensely proud of their years in uniform and of the nation they fought for, they are uncomfortable about discussing their own achievements. They are modest men who require no plaudits for the service they have given to their country and to their community. In fact, they would be embarrassed by such attention. They will probably be embarrassed by this story. They represent a tradition in American life, the tradition of the ordinary citizen who takes up arms when necessary and lays them quietly down when the crisis is over.

The brothers are polite and courteous men, and, although they would object to the statement, they are courageous. These three words—polite, courteous, courageous—almost completely comprise the dictionary definition of the word “gallant,” and gallant the Gentrys certainly are.



Charles Knapp—A Life of Quiet Service
By Dave Stewart

In the lead up to Ashe County's Armed Forces Tribute, we profile the life of Charles Knapp, a resident of our county whose extraordinary military career in medicine has made the world a safer place. The Armed Forces Tribute, which honors the

region's men and women who have served their country in uniform, will be held in Ashe Park on Saturday, August 23. The event will be televised live on UNC-TV.

On a chilly Tuesday evening in early January 1991, company executive Charles Knapp pulled his car off Interstate 20 at a stop somewhere in northern Georgia. It would be a long haul back home to Tampa from his business trip to Atlanta, and he felt like a brief rest and something to eat. With a slice of pizza in one hand, he dialed his wife from a payphone with the roar of the interstate in the background.

After 33 years of marriage, he could tell from Mary's voice that something was wrong. "It looks like orders," she eventually told him. "That can't be," he replied in astonishment. He'd retired from the United States Army five years before. Knapp asked his wife to open the official-looking envelope from Washington, D.C. Mary's intuition had been right. The Army had called up the 54-year-old retired veteran.

The orders from the government of his nation were to report to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, the next Sunday. Four days to buy a new uniform, pack, get a regulation haircut, and find his way to Fayetteville, south of Raleigh. And four days to hand over the reins of two successful businesses that he had started half a decade before and directed ever since. But he would do all that, lay aside his civilian life for the good of his country, in the spirit of American patriots from Jamestown on, and he would report to Bragg on Sunday exactly as prescribed in his orders.

In the private-sector world Charles Knapp had successfully inhabited for five years, few knew how much his government needed this modest man, forever reticent about the achievements of his military career. His government did know, however. His recall had gone up the chain of command all the way to the secretary of the Army who had signed the veteran's new orders personally. Charles Knapp was no ordinary soldier, no ordinary man. The United States needed this retired full colonel to be the United States Military Medical Liaison stationed in the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Defense to coordinate the medical care of wounded American and allied servicemen and -women hospitalized in Saudi medical facilities. He had been the U.S representative who had negotiated the bilateral hospitalization agreement between the two nations six years before.

With war fast approaching and American infrastructure rapidly building up, Colonel Knapp was "left helpless at Fort Bragg awaiting political decisions [regarding his liaison function with the Saudis], decisions that were never made." Instead, the Army kept him on active duty and ultimately gave him the responsibility of being the officer in charge of what the Army termed its Medical Mobilization and Demobilization Activity—in plain English, the coordination of the medical pre- and post-deployment evaluations of the Army's Reserve and National Guard as they mobilized and demobilized tens of thousands of men and women for the imminent Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. In any event, Colonel Charles Knapp, U.S. Army (retired) was retired no more. He was going back to war.

Certainly no ordinary soldier, no ordinary man he. A physician with vast experience in the logistics of treating large numbers of sick and wounded military personnel, with a lifetime of engineering materials and developing strategies for keeping our troops safer, Knapp was the perfect man to fill his new post. He began to acquire his singular qualifications for the job from the day he was born in Flint, Michigan, a half-

decade before Pearl Harbor. His father, a metallurgical engineer at General Motors and later a proprietor of his own laboratory, introduced his young son to many of the fundamentals of what made things tick in the universe. Young Charles finished high school in Grand Rapids, rubbing shoulders with a student named Ford, whose father would, a generation later, step into the presidency of the United States in one of this nation's darkest hours.

On graduation, Charles Knapp enrolled at Andrews University in nearby Berrien Springs, Michigan. Not surprisingly, given his family background, he chose metallurgical engineering as his major. He liked the precision and certainty of engineering, he thoroughly enjoyed the field, but before he graduated in 1958 with a B.A., he changed the course of his studies completely. One of his professors at Berrien took pride in being able to identify those students who were good enough to go on to medical school, and he had a perfect record at it. Charles Knapp would never make the grade, he told the undergraduate. Always one to pick up the gauntlet, the young man took the difficult zoology class that was a prerequisite for medical school, and he passed it with top marks. On the strength of this result and his other academic achievements, he was accepted into the prestigious Loma Linda University School of Medicine in Southern California. To this day, Knapp takes a mischievous but quiet pride in the fact that he ruined his Berrien professor's perfect record as a prognosticator.

The initial years of medical school did not suit the 22-year-old graduate. He found the necessary memorization tedious. But he persisted in his studies, and, while working on the side as a test engineer for the County of San Bernardino, he ultimately graduated with an M.D. in 1962. Five years married to Mary, their first son a toddler, and on the threshold of a four-year residency in obstetrics at an elite California hospital starting later that year, young Doctor Knapp was startled to find himself drafted into the United States Army. He had been expecting a deferment at least for the period of his residency, but the Army needed a man of his capabilities and character immediately. Before the year ended, he had been commissioned as a first lieutenant. He entered on active duty as a captain and was eventually assigned as battle group surgeon and medical platoon leader of the 1st Battalion, 325th Infantry (Airborne), 82nd Airborne Division. And so began a military career that would, with one interruption, span nearly three decades and culminate in the secretary of the Army calling Colonel Charles Knapp back into service one last time.

Even in the 82nd, he could have kept his feet on the ground, in the clinic, wearing a white coat and a stethoscope, but that wouldn't have been Charles Knapp. The young officer went to jump school and earned his wings. Following his tour with the 82nd, he was transferred to Panama and became the battalion surgeon of the 3rd Battalion, 508th Infantry (Airborne). He made jumps alongside his men all over South America.

This was the era of the space race, the ambitious challenge thrown down by President Kennedy in the early sixties to land men on the moon before the close of the decade. Many dreamed of being astronauts. A tiny few ever would be. Captain Knapp wanted to be among that select number. An Army man, though, would never be selected for the program, everyone told him, least of all a physician. Only Air Force officers made the team, and almost always test pilots at that. For most people, an insurmountable object is an insurmountable object. But for Charles Knapp, it is merely an insurmountable object lacking a way to be surmounted. If he couldn't be an astronaut, he would become a

doctor to astronauts. At first the Army balked at the idea but then agreed to train him. At this juncture, he gave up his aspirations of becoming an obstetrician.

To begin his training as a doctor to astronauts, the Army sent Charles Knapp to the United States Navy where he became a Navy flight surgeon and learned to fly fixed-wing aircraft, something almost unheard of for an Army man to do in those days. After this adventure at Pensacola, he went back to the Army to obtain his Army flight surgeon's wings and to learn to fly helicopters.

In 1967, after completing his studies at the University of California at Los Angeles and graduating with the degree of Master of Public Health, he persuaded the Army to transfer him to the Air Force as a resident in aerospace medicine, both teaching and conducting research. While at Brooks Air Force Base in Texas, he completed basic Air Force jet flight training. Captain Knapp did not achieve his dream of flying into space, but in his two years transferred to the Air Force, he played an active role in selecting astronauts for the Gemini and Apollo programs as well as test pilots for conventional aircraft.

In 1969, NASA invited now Major Knapp to work directly with the Apollo 11 program as a support physician. There, the Army man with his Airborne Army and Navy wings, helped ensure that Armstrong, Aldrin, Collins, and their back-up crew were fit to fly to the moon.

After Neil Armstrong took one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind in July 1969, it was back to the Army for Charles Knapp. The Army had something vital for him to do. Toward the end of the year, it appointed him director of the Bioengineering and Life Support Equipment Division of its Aeromedical Research Laboratory at Fort Rucker, Alabama. There, for the next eight years, interrupted by numerous operational missions to Vietnam and elsewhere around the world, he led the research into developing safer military technology, including headgear for soldiers, life support equipment for aircrew, helicopter seats, parachute delivery systems, aircraft escape mechanisms, and fire-retardant materials for pilots. In addition, his team studied the survivability of helicopter and aircraft crashes, which resulted in the implementation of safety procedures that ultimately saved the lives of a large number of military personnel and civilians. The safety helmets worn today by service personnel, pilots, bicyclists, and others in the military and private sector are, in many respects, the legacy of the work Charles Knapp conducted at Fort Rucker. His innovations in the field of aviation safety were recognized in 1991 when he was honored with the Harry G. Moseley Award, given annually by the Aerospace Medical Association and the Lockheed Aircraft Corporation for the most significant contribution to aviation safety.

During this busy period for Charles Knapp, he also attended the United States Army Staff College, where he graduated with distinction; became board certified in aerospace medicine; and was inducted into the International Academy of Aviation and Space Medicine. In 1974, the Association of Military Surgeons of the United States and the Air Garrett Corporation recognized his outstanding contributions to military medicine by awarding him the Major Gary P. Wratten Award.

With his promotion to colonel came even greater responsibility in the summer of 1977, when the Army made Knapp commander of the Army Aeromedical Research Laboratory at Fort Rucker. For the following five years, he directed the overall operations of this multidisciplinary occupational medical research facility with its 175 scientists,

engineers, technicians, and administrative staff. Under Knapp's stewardship, the laboratory's budget grew significantly and its field of research broadened dramatically from aviation medicine alone to include a wide range of occupational medicine issues. With Knapp at the helm, the lab's real estate also expanded hugely with the building of a 150,000 square foot, technologically advanced facility.

The Army gave Colonel Charles Knapp a new challenge in the late summer of 1982. It posted him to MacDill Air Force Base in Florida, where he became briefly the command surgeon of the Rapid Deployment Task Force and then, from January 1, 1983, command surgeon of the entire United States Central Command. Although a post that attracted little fanfare among the general public, it was critical to the interests of the United States in the depths of the Cold War. With the Soviet Union mired in Afghanistan, no one could predict what the USSR's next strategic move might be—in effect, no one could predict when the Cold War might turn hot. The United States needed desperately to ensure that medical facilities were available to its armed forces all around the world in case fighting did break out between the superpowers.

The Army charged Charles Knapp with making sure those facilities were available in 19 countries throughout the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, and Southwest Asia. A consummate diplomat, he allayed the fears of leaders from Northern Africa to the Indian Subcontinent that opening their medical facilities in time of war would mean a loss of their national sovereignty. It was a delicate mission indeed, but he succeeded in it by liaising closely with senior government officials in foreign countries and, not infrequently, their heads of state, both at an individual level and within large organizational groups such as the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). In his diplomatic role, Colonel Knapp acted on behalf of the commander-in-chief of the U.S. Central Command (always a four-star general) and the assistant secretary of defense for health affairs.

Another facet of his role involved developing mass casualty emergency response plans for U.S. embassies in the region. After Saddam Hussein laid siege to the embassy in Kuwait at the time of the First Gulf War and after the conflict had ended, the ambassador to Kuwait called Knapp personally and thanked him for the plans he had implemented and his training of embassy personnel, citing them as a principal reason his staff were able to maintain their health while imprisoned in the embassy compound.

Although his job required him to spend most of his time in the spick and span environment of offices, hospitals, and the halls of power, Knapp did not become a stranger to the battlefield. On many occasions during his years as command surgeon of the U.S. Central Command, he bailed out of aircraft with U.S. troops all over the world. Apart from the enjoyment of jumping, which he never lost, the drops served an extremely practical purpose. Military contingency planning in Washington during the Cold War called for the withdrawal of our troops from areas such as the demilitarized zone (DMZ) of the Korean Peninsula. The staff planners had to know how well those troops could quickly redeploy if needed. It was part of Knapp's mission to find out, and he did it in the most direct way possible—by becoming one of the men in the redeployment exercises the United States regularly mounted.

Despite requests by senior Army leaders to stay on in the service with the view that he would become a general officer, Colonel Charles Knapp decided that, after a quarter century in uniform, he needed a fresh challenge, a challenge in the civilian world.

In October 1986, he officially retired in Tampa with his wife, Mary, and launched two companies. One specialized in researching medical equipment patents for international venture capitalists and other organizations. He numbered NASA as one of his clients. With his elder son, an information technology expert, later joining the company, Knapp quickly created a success in private business that mirrored his success in the military. The second company provided employee wellness and health risk management consulting and services. But he was not destined to run his new companies for long. Only four years after its inception, he stopped on I-20 to place an everyday call to Mary and found that half a week later he would have to manage a far different operation.

Long after coalition forces won the First Gulf War, the Army kept Charles Knapp at his post at Fort Bragg, overseeing the medical activities associated with mobilizing and demobilizing the Reserve and National Guard of the United States. His superiors clearly found it hard to do without him. On the very last day it could order him to serve, the Army discharged Colonel Knapp. It was September 1991. This time, his retirement would be permanent.

Decades ago, while still in the military, Charles Knapp and his family began to visit the mountains of North Carolina, eventually traveling north of Asheville. In 1977, after a long hike on the Appalachian Trail, he bought land and an old house in Sturgills, in the northern section of Ashe County. Later, after an unsuccessful return to his technology transfer and wellness management companies in Florida after the First Gulf War, he moved to Ashe County permanently, building a home for himself and Mary on a mountain near the property they had first bought here. They have two sons (one in Tampa and the other in Reston, Virginia) and six grandchildren.

“What made you choose Ashe County, of all the places in the United States you could have lived?” this writer asked Colonel Knapp recently.

“It’s where everyone else comes to vacation,” he replied with the slightest trace of a smile. And after a while he added, “I love it.”

In his years in Ashe County, Charles Knapp has remained as busy as ever. Many will know him as the founder of Rooster Ridge Log Homes, a company he finally sold in 2002. Many others will know him as the current chairman of the Ashe County Free Medical Clinic in Jefferson; or as a former board member of Ashe Services for Aging, the Ashe Arts Council, or Ashe Group Homes (now Summit); or as a past chairman of the High Country Assist Coalition.

Seventy-two at the end of August, he still maintains a pace that would crush people half his age. In addition to his work for the clinic, he has become the chair of the Desmond Doss Council, a Calhoun, Georgia, based body that ensures that the life of this Congressional Medal of Honor winner is faithfully represented in movies, documentaries, books, and other media. Doss, a conscientious objector from the hills of north Georgia, became a medic in the Second World War. On Okinawa in 1945, he stood on the Meda Escarpment exposed to Japanese fire for hours, lowering 75 injured soldiers to safety below. When the firing stopped, Japanese bullets had shredded almost every part of his uniform, but not one round had touched his body. For his unparalleled act of bravery and concern for his fellow servicemen, a grateful nation awarded Doss its highest honor. Although wounded later in the war, Doss survived and died only a few years ago. Charles Knapp assisted in the filming of a documentary of Doss’s life, and Hollywood now plans to make a feature film about this most extraordinary man. Casey Affleck, brother of Ben

Affleck and an Academy Award nominee for his powerful role in *Gone, Bay, Gone*, is slated to play the part of Doss.

Charles Knapp is also deeply involved, together with Vicky Moody and others in the Jeffersons Rotary Club, in organizing the Armed Forces Tribute, which will be held in Ashe Park on Saturday, August 23. “Each year, the Ashe County community gathers to pay tribute to the region’s men and women who have gone to serve their country in the armed forces,” UNC-TV says in its preview of the event that it will cover in a live broadcast. “They honor both veterans and those currently serving. It is a heartfelt tribute to those who have put their personal comfort behind them when duty called.”

Charles Knapp would be the last person to claim to be one of those who “put their personal comfort behind them when duty called.” He would say, “Honor the others, not me. They deserve it.” A modest man, he would rather talk about anything other than himself, his life, his career. When I interviewed him for this piece, he told this writer, “I don’t want people to think I’m something special, that I’ve done extraordinary things, because I’m not, and I haven’t. I’d prefer you to tell somebody else’s story.”

The truth is, though, that Charles Knapp is something special, and he did do extraordinary things. Only after my extensive interview with him did I find out that he was the recipient of the coveted Expert Field Medical Badge, the Army Commendation Medal, the Meritorious Service Medal (awarded two times), the Army Legion of Merit, the Defense Superior Service Medal, the Air Medal, the Vietnam Service Ribbon, and the Peruvian Commendation Medal. I learned besides that he is the author of many tens of papers and several book chapters on medical matters, has appeared in numerous films on aviation safety, has been the recipient of a host of professional awards, and has sat on an array of key industry boards. He simply keeps most of what he has done to himself.

Thanks to the long and varied service of Colonel Charles Knapp—in particular, his pioneering research in the field of bioengineering technology and its application—we are all safer and healthier today. That’s the reason I’m not telling somebody else’s story. That’s the reason I’m telling his.



Ashe County natives Kelly (left) and Lance (right) Roark are some of the young men that America produces who share a strong sense of duty and commitment to serving their country.

Kelly Roark joined the Army in September 2005, with basic training at Ft. Leonard Wood, MO, followed by Airborne school at Ft. Benning, Ga. Kelly’s first duty station was Ft. Bragg, NC, where he was deployed and served in Iraq from November 2006-January 2008. Currently an MP at Ft. Bragg Kelly is currently thinking about special forces. When asked why he would consider special forces, he replied “I don’t want to sit around at 60 years old and wish I had tried”.

Kelly admits that prior to joining the Army, he really was not very patriotic, but it didn't take long for his admiration and respect for the veterans who came before him to bring out that strong sense of patriotism. Thinking about those who served in World War I and World War II, as well as his grandfather Mack Donald Roark who served in Korea, he admitted that he thinks he has had it easy compared to what they endured while serving. Kelly says "I really wish more people would walk up to the Veterans they see wearing these caps and take the time to to say 'Thank you'."

Following in his brother's footsteps, younger brother Lance left last week for Infantry training at Ft. Benning, GA. He is hoping to also go to Airborne school and eventually Ranger school.