

Survivor of the troop train wreck returned to Jellico

by Peter Sawyer

By CURRENT BOXHOLDER

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Clarence L Eckstine, a passenger of a troop train that wrecked in the Narrows on July 6, 1944, returned to Jellico last week.

Eckstine, 87, was greeted at Buck's Hardware Store Friday by Jellico Tourism Director Jake Bennett, Director for Veteran's Affairs Kevin Walden, Buck's Hardware Store owner Ronnie Buck and other locals.

As he toured the museum, looking at photographs of the wreck, Eckstine recalled some of his experiences.

Eckstine, who was 22 years old at the time, remembers being loaded onto a train in Indianapolis along with around 1,000 other troops. They were headed to Fort Bragg N.C. for training. The train got derailed near High Cliff.

"I remember the boys saying 'boy we're really moving along now,'" Eckstine said. "We had just moved into the bunks and all of a sudden, there was shuddering and stopping."

The train left the tracks, and dragged five coaches into Clear Fork River near Haystack Rock, an article in the July 1, 2004 issue of the LaFollette Press said. Two coaches burned and others were smashed and bent, the article said. Thirty-five soldiers died, and 100 were wounded, the article said.

There were some civilian casualties, including the engineer, Bennett said.

Eckstine was in the rear car, and remembers marching out.

“I didn’t have any injuries,” Eckstine said. “Those who were wounded were taken to the hospital.”

Local people were drawn to the wreck.

“The people of Jellico was there within five minutes of the wreck after it happened, assisting in the rescue,” Bennett said.

Doctors, nurses and ambulances came from LaFollette and Jellico to help the soldiers from the wreck, the July 1, 2004 LaFollette Press article said.

“During that tragedy, the local folks responded,” Bennett said.

The troops who were involved in the train wreck were moved away from the area, while soldiers from Oak Ridge were brought in to help with the rescue.

“The Army thought (that it) was espionage, so there was no publicity,” Eckstine said.

There are some theories about the cause of the wreck, but nothing conclusive has been determined, Bennett said.

“It turned out to be the worst wreck of World War II,” Eckstine said.

The significance of the catastrophe Eckstine survived was lost in the maelstrom of hazards that lay before him. So much occurred in such a short amount of time that this train wreck was really secondary, Eckstine said. He remembers only staying in Jellico for about a day before heading to Camp Croft in S. C. Six weeks after arriving at Camp Croft, Eckstine found out his mother died. He was later assigned to a new unit, the 11th armored division, before leaving for Europe.

Eckstine left home on Christmas Day in 1944. On Jan. 7, 1945, he joined the fighting in Belgium during the Battle of the Bulge.

After this decisive Allied victory, Eckstine began marching toward Berlin.

One day as Eckstine was clearing territory of German soldiers he was wounded.

“I walked out of a flower shop,” Eckstine said. “The guy was on a hill.”

Bullets were flying everywhere, Eckstine said. He leapt behind a fence, but was shot through the shoulder.

“It was just a flesh wound. I was very lucky,” Eckstine said. “You never know what’s going to happen day by day.”

Eckstine was sent to England to recuperate. By the time he had recovered, Hitler was dead and the war was over.

Eckstine finished his service digging to recover American bodies in Germany. After his service Eckstine returned to Celina, Ohio where he lived his whole life.

The tumultuous events of the war and his personal life pushed the train wreck from the forefront of Eckstine’s mind. It was not until later in life that Eckstine became interested in it. One of Eckstine’s friends, Harold Vantilburg, told Eckstine he needed to come to Jellico, and gave him a book about the accident, “She Jumped the Track” by John Ascher. Eckstine returned to Jellico for his first visit in 2005. Last week was his second visit since the wreck.

Jellico was excited to receive Eckstine.

Fewer and fewer of the World War II veterans, dubbed “The Greatest Generation” by Tom Brokaw, are alive. Vantilburg, from Florida, has passed away.

“I just don’t think there’s many up there living,” Eckstine said about World War II veterans in Ohio.

“It’s an honor for us,” Bennett said. “A true hero in my mind.”

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