

To Hell and Back



Alumni recall
'The War'



by Betsy Robertson | photography by Melissa Humble
and courtesy of AU Special Collections and Archives

They were so young when it happened. The biggest war our nation has known, fought mostly by American men—just kids, many of them, too young to have finished school, married, or have had careers and children. Many were college students who hadn't yet learned much about life, much less death. Some say they are our country's greatest generation.

Six years ago, Emmy-winning documentarian Ken Burns and producer Lynn Novick embarked on an epic project to record the memories of Americans who lived “The War” at home and overseas. The resulting 14-hour documentary—which aired on PBS stations nationwide in September—featured four Auburn University alumni from Mobile, each affected by World War II in ways both subtle and profound. Here are their stories.



The co-ed: Katharine Phillips '44

Auburn sophomore Katharine “Kitty” Phillips and her roommate had just eaten lunch in the quad dining hall and walked back to Dormitory 2 for an afternoon of studying. It was Dec. 7, 1941.

“We couldn’t believe it—we heard all this crying and yelling,” Phillips recalls. “Some of the girls came flying down the hall ... and they said, ‘Run turn your radio on! The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor!’ So we ran to our room, which was out on one of the wings, and turned it on and just sat all afternoon listening to (news reports). We knew this was war.”



Nearly 70 years have passed since Phillips and her fellow students gathered on the steps of Langdon Hall the following day and listened over a portable loudspeaker as U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt called for Congress to declare war against Japan.

“I look back on the picture now, and I realize most of us stood with our heads bowed, because we just knew our lives would change,” Phillips says, eyes welling, voice wavering. “Here we’d been this delightful college campus—playing football, having pep rallies, going to class—and then suddenly, we were in war, and all the boys would be gone, and we knew they’d be gone.

“By that next fall, the population on the campus was changing completely.”

About 3,700 students were enrolled in classes at Auburn University, then called Alabama Polytechnic Institute, when the United States entered World War II. Within two years, the student body was down to 1,710. Campus fields

and facilities morphed into training grounds for groups of Army, Navy and Marine recruits.

“Our classes were small. ... My huge chemistry class, which had been 250, was down to 20, 30 ...and to mostly women,” says Phillips, whose 17-year-old brother, Sid, joined the Marines in January 1942 and fought in the battle for Guadalcanal.

In Auburn and everywhere else on the home front, rolling bandages and writing letters became a pastime.

“I think it had a great effect on my entire generation. All the boys were changed—all of them,” says Phillips, who graduated in November 1944.

Since “The War” aired last fall, Phillips has collected a boxful of letters from viewers and continues to get phone calls from around the country. Some are from children of veterans; many are from veterans themselves, anxious to share their own memories.

“They want to just talk to me and tell me their experiences, so I spend a lot of time listening to what they did during the war,” says Phillips, whose deep Southern drawl and wide smile punctuate much of the documentary’s seven episodes.

After graduating from Auburn, Phillips briefly taught school, then became an airline stewardess and married former U.S. Navy pilot Harvey Singer, himself a World War II veteran. Shortly before his death in 1998, Singer asked to be buried in his Navy uniform.

“The boys that came home were not at all the boys that went off to war,” says Phillips. “They came home men.”✱

members in *The War: An Intimate History*, a companion book to the Burns documentary. “And by nightfall, the sergeant major came to me and told me I was the only officer they had left. And that’s out of a battalion (of 600 men). It just chewed people up.”



“There were about 40 of us in a room,” Galloway says in “The War.” “And for heat, each man got a lump of coal a day, which is 40 lumps of coal for a big room, and so that didn’t help much. Your food was little or nothing. I probably lost about 50 pounds in just a few months. ... Hunger was just foremost in everybody’s mind.”✱



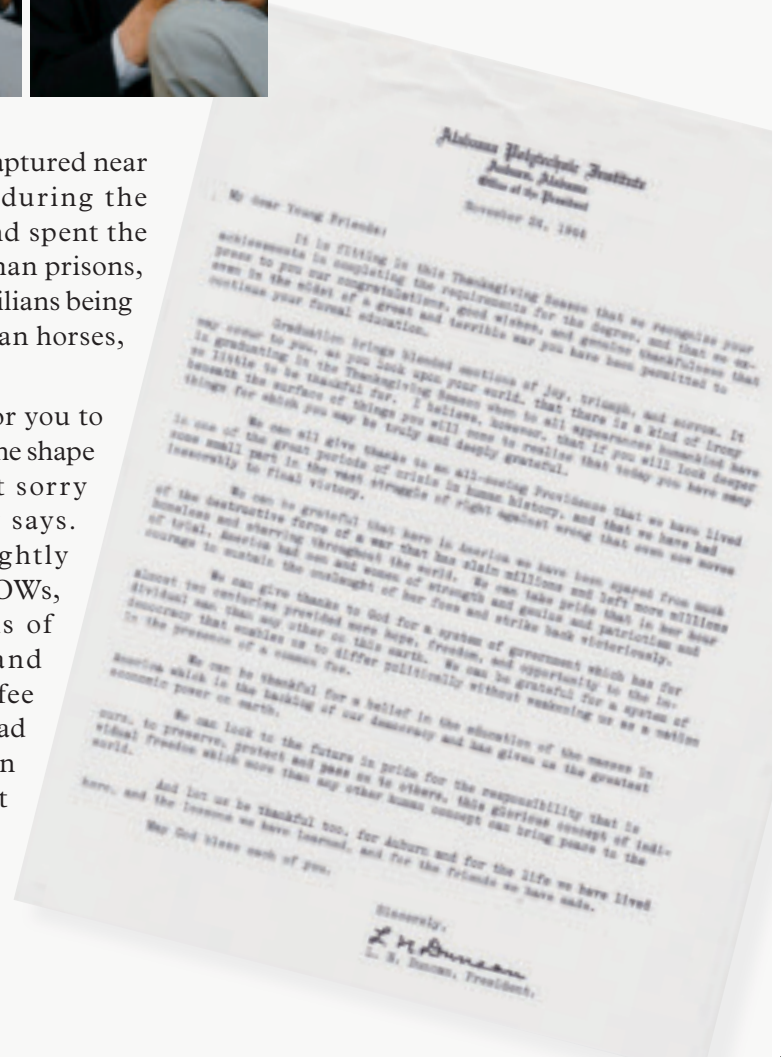
The POW: Tom Galloway '46

Tom Galloway was a 19-year-old senior at Auburn when he joined the U.S. Army, attended Officer Candidate School and trained as an artillery officer and forward observer. After arriving in France as a replacement second lieutenant with the 28th Infantry Division, he initially beat the odds, surviving the brutal battle for Germany’s Hurtgen Forest in late 1944 with cuts, scratches and a case of trench foot. Ultimately, some 24,000 American men died or were wounded there.

“I recall one morning, I went in with the battalion,” Galloway re-

Galloway was later captured near Bastogne, Belgium, during the Battle of the Bulge and spent the rest of the war in German prisons, where he saw Jewish civilians being forced to work as human horses, pulling carts.

“If it was possible for you to feel sorry for people in the shape you were in, you felt sorry for them,” Galloway says. Conditions were slightly better for American POWs, who were served tins of soup for breakfast and dinner along with coffee and “half a slice of bread with sawdust in it.” On Sundays, there was meat in the soup.





The officer: Dwain Luce '38

By the time he stormed the beach at Normandy in June 1944, U.S. Army Capt. Dwain Luce, a glider artillery squad leader in the 82nd Airborne Division, had a degree in chemical engineering from Auburn,

a job at his family's Mississippi cannery, a wife and a pair of children under 2 years old.

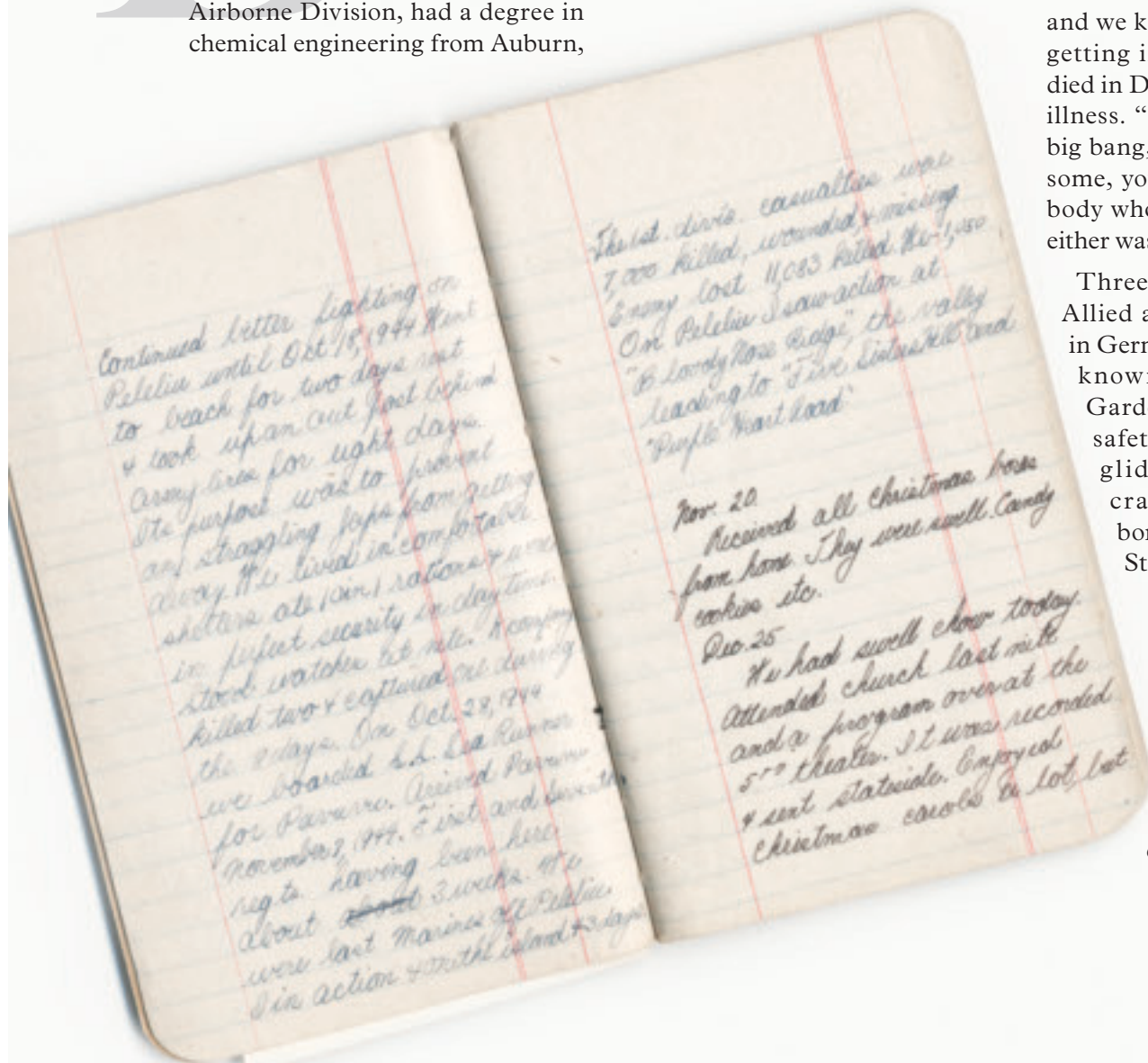
The day after the Japanese raid on Pearl Harbor killed more than 2,000 of his fellow Americans, Luce asked to be recalled to active duty from a reserve commission. He flew in the American invasions of Sicily and Italy, was promoted to captain and then trained for the Allied invasion of France.

As D-Day dawned, Luce's first glider crashed shortly after takeoff in England. By the time his second aircraft flew south toward France, the battle had begun.



"We had been in combat before, and we kind of knew what we were getting into," recalled Luce, who died in December after an extended illness. "But we knew this was the big bang, and it was kind of worrisome, you might say. I mean, anybody who says they weren't scared either wasn't there or they're lying."

Three months later, during the Allied attempt to secure bridges in German-occupied Netherlands known as Operation Market Garden, Luce led his squad to safety after several American gliders, including Luce's, crashed near the German border. He received a Bronze Star for the effort. ✱



Eugene Sledge '49 recorded the emotional toll of combat duty in his wartime journal. The diary is part of the Eugene B. Sledge Collection at the AU Libraries.



Eugene Sledge's son, John Sledge '80, says his dad's background as a scientist compelled the University of Montevallo professor to write about World War II "without artifice."

"War is brutish, inglorious and a terrible waste," Sledge wrote in his chilling 1981 combat memoir, *With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa*. "The only redeeming factors were my comrades' incredible bravery and their devotion to each other. ... That esprit de corps sustained us."

Portions of *With the Old Breed*, narrated by actor Josh Lucas, punctuate "The War" documentary. After the war, Sledge returned to Alabama, earned bachelor's and master's degrees at Auburn, and eventually served as a biology professor

at the University of Montevallo for nearly 30 years. He died in 2001.

"People would call him from their deathbeds—one guy was buried with the book," says Sledge's son, John Sledge '80, an architectural historian for the

city of Mobile. "The book has got a haunting quality. I don't think he was consciously trying for that; he was just using his training as a scientist to write without artifice. He wanted to tell it without a lot of embellishment, and I think that's part of what makes it so powerful."

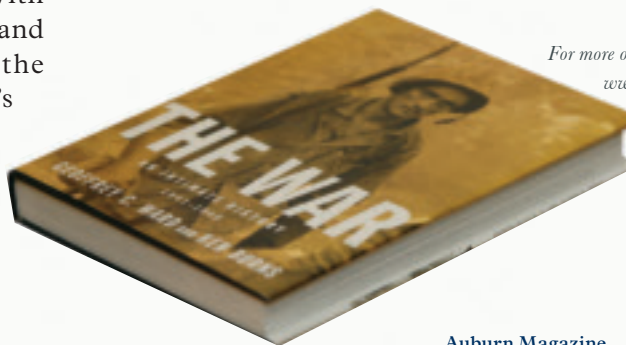
With the Old Breed also forms part of the basis for an upcoming 10-hour HBO miniseries, "The Pacific," produced by Tom Hanks, Steven Spielberg and Gary Goetzman, the team behind the network's Emmy-winning miniseries "Band of Brothers." Filming is now under way in Australia; the series is scheduled to air next year.

Sledge followed *With the Old Breed* with a second book, *China Marine: An Infantryman's Life after World War II*, published posthumously in 2002. Even as the former Marine regretted the war's sacrifices, he remained resigned about its necessity.

"In looking back, I am still amazed I escaped the killing machine," Sledge wrote in *China Marine*. "Why I never fell killed or wounded in that storm of steel thrown at us countless times still astonishes me. I am proud of the number of the enemy I fired on and hit with my mortar, rifle or Tommy gun—and regret the ones I missed. There is no 'mellowing' for me—that would be to forgive all the atrocities the Japanese committed against millions of Asians and thousands of Americans. To 'mellow' is to forget."✱

www.pbs.org/thewar

For more on Eugene Sledge, see www.aualum.org/magazine. To view the Eugene B. Sledge Collection, see diglib.auburn.edu/collections/ebsledge.



The infantryman: Eugene Sledge '49

After the war and for the rest of his life, Eugene Sledge's stomach would lurch at the scent of fresh coconut. It reminded him of the days when the odor of spoiled fruit mingled with that of rotting corpses.

As a 19-year-old freshman at Marion Military Institute, Sledge had been so eager to fight in the war that he left school and enlisted in the U.S. Marines in December 1942. Trained as a mortarman, he first saw combat in September 1944 on the Pacific island of Peleliu, where American forces hoped to secure an airstrip. Along with some 2,000 American soldiers and more than 10,000 Japanese, the Battle for Peleliu killed Sledge's enthusiasm for combat, and nightmares haunted him for years after participating in the bloody assault on Okinawa in spring 1945.

