

'LAST BATTLES' A WAR BOOK ABOUT FAMILIES

by Megan Trotter

COOKEVILLE — When Cookeville author Bernie Keys decided to write a book titled “The Last Battles of World War II,” he decided he wanted to focus his topic a little differently than other books about the war that he had read.



“My book is about five civilians who went to war when they needed to,” he said. “It’s not a war story, but it’s a family story and battles. There’s been plenty of stories just about the killing in Iwo Jima and the Navy and the bombings and that sort of thing. I tried to make this a story ... about them all hearing about Pearl Harbor and being

willing to go to war, and then all of them coming home and the different things that happened.”

Keys co-wrote 12 academic books during his time as a professor in Georgia, but his desire to write about World War II did not come about until 2009, when visiting a church in Beaufort, S.C. During the services, those who had served in the Marines were asked to stand. Keys, having served, stood and was later approached by a fellow Marine, a man named Lt. Col. James (Red) Qualls.

“He had been on Iwo Jima, wounded with nine surgeries, (won) medals and when he was shot with a hollow-point bullet, he had a corpsman across his shoulders from his platoon and was dragging another guy and wouldn’t quit until he passed out,” Keys said. “I thought, ‘This is a man whose biography needs to be written.’” Keys asked permission and returned to Beaufort twice to collect enough information. It was the beginning of his book.

Later, Keys returned to Cookeville and was sharing breakfast with a friend Dr. Jack Johnson and casually brought up the topic of the war and Iwo Jima. Keys was stunned to learn that his Cookeville friend had also been in the battle as a boat signalman. Excited by this news, Keys asked more questions and was delighted to find out that Johnson had some interesting stories of his own.

“Of my class of 27 boys, five of them were killed in World War II,” Johnson said. “Two of the boys’ names were Jackson and Jones. Jones I knew real well because he was born

and raised about two miles from me. We were all three going to stay together.”

The three enlisted to serve and took their exams. However, while in line to be given their assignments, Johnson was disappointed to hear he had been assigned to the Army when he and his friends had their hearts set on the Navy. He protested and was allowed to switch his assignment to the Navy. He then stepped aside to let his friends receive their assignments.

“I was sure Johnson and Jackson would do the same thing,” Johnson said. “The man turned to them and said, ‘Congratulations, you’re in the Army now.’ But both of them went into the Army. They lost their lives crossing the English Channel. I would have been right there with them.”

Johnson also tells of the unique way he got his position of signalman when an officer approached him and a fellow Marine about a job offering.

“He says, ‘I have one position of third class petty officer. Just one. I don’t know when I’ll get another,’” Johnson recalls.

The pair simply decided to flip a nickle. Johnson lost the coin toss and got the signalman position — a position that left him mostly exposed on the back of the boat with bullets ricocheting all around him. In fact, Johnson lived through several life-threatening events during his service, from his boat getting hung on barbed wire and nearly capsizing, to having to try to wade to shore over a bed of coral while watching several of his fellow soliders slip into holes and drown from the weight of their packs before they could be rescued.

However, Johnson survived his service and came back to Tennessee where he went through medical training, practiced medicine in Gainesboro for about 30 years and has now retired to Cookeville.

While putting together these two men’s stories, Keys also found three other men throughout the United States who fought in World War II who agreed to be interviewed for inclusion in his book.

There is Major Theodore “Dutch” Van Kirk of Georgia, a navigator on the Enola Gay; Lt. Gordon Bennett Robertson Jr. of California, a B-29 bomber pilot; and Lieutenant Kenneth Glisson of Chattanooga, a Naval pilot who earned the nickname “Nitro Glisson” for his flying. Key interviewed each one for his book, detailing how the young men reacted to Pearl Harbor, their extraordinary stories during the fighting, and how they returned home to try to settle into civilian life after the war was over.

Keys received help from his son, Ted Keys, in editing, writing the last chapter, and the technology involved in putting the book together, as well as help from Ted’s wife, Alision, with cover design.

“The Last Battles of World War II” is currently available at Amazon.com, and a book signing is being planned at Books-A-Million in January.

“(This book is) dedicated to the memory of all the men and women of the United States and their allies who gave their lives for the last battles of World War II, and for those who fought along with them and their families,” Keys writes in his book, “because of the grave injustice of Pearl Harbor, all of whom recognize that freedom is never free.”

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