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WWII Vet Visits American History Class

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Poplar Bluff, Missouri - World War II veteran Cloyd Cook, a recipient of four Bronze Star Medals, spoke to advanced American history students about some of his early involvement in helping to stop Nazi Germany and Japan over 70 years ago.

Among less than a million remaining who served the greatest generation, Cook was featured last month in the Daily American Republic in advance of his 95th birthday celebration. Poplar Bluff High School students read the article and inquired whether he can be a guest lecturer, since they were studying the Allies and the Axis powers. Social studies instructor Paul Conover was able to make the arrangements since he happens to attend Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church with Cook.

Cook was greeted on Thursday, March 9, by JROTC students, who stood at attention lining the hallway of the High School. "I wish I had a chance to go through school because what you miss, you miss all your life," said Cook, who did not enroll in high school because of the Great Depression.

Born in Stoddard County, Cook moved to Butler County when he was 9 years old. As a young man, he spent a couple years in Caledonia, Miss., serving the Civilian Conservation Corps as part of Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. When work dried up, Cook decided he would join the U.S. Army, but failed to pass a physical in St. Louis, so he returned home.

Shortly thereafter, Cook said he heard about Japan bombing Pearl Harbor. The following day he went to a neighbor's house to listen to Roosevelt declare war over a dry cell radio, he said.

“It wasn't very long before I got a letter saying, ‘We want you,’” Cook stated. “They drafted me, and put me in charge of 17 other men! I made some friends on that trip, but they didn't all come home.”

Upon completing training—basic and advanced—Cook was assigned to the 94th Infantry Division. In 1944, he headed to the British Isles by way of New York aboard the Queen Elizabeth, along with 15,000 passengers and an 825-person crew to run the troopship, he said. He noted that it was an armored outfit with yet an additional 2,500 troops to protect from enemy attacks in the English Channel.

After zigzagging across the North Atlantic for several days, soldiers landed near Glasgow and headed to Southern England, some on a duty train while others walked, he recalled. Cook's first assignment was to guard 60,000 German prisoners of war. Later the 94th joined Gen. George Patton's Third Army when Cook first stepped foot on German soil.

Cook served a total of 209 days on the front lines before the war ended on Sept. 2, 1945, according to a letter signed by Pres. Harry S. Truman that he read to students. He said he passed on many of his military artifacts to his grandchildren, and sold other items when he later fell upon hard times in Rombauer. He showed students a scrapbook, which included a remaining set of dog tags, a letter of recommendation after being honorably discharged, along with various black and white photos. He generously gave a shoulder patch from the 94th Division to one of the students in attendance, freshman Gaelan White.

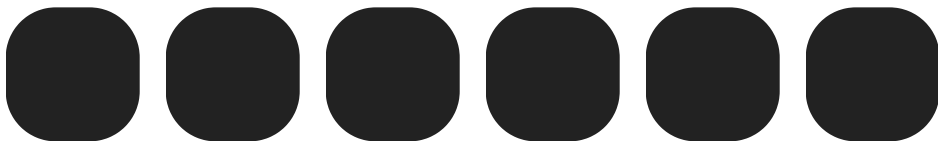
As a very small token of appreciation, students presented Cook a signed painting of an American flag, which he said he will display in his living room. “I'm no hero,” said Cook, as the class gave him an ovation. “I just done what they asked me to do to the best of my knowledge.”

Pictured: Social studies instructor Paul Conover holds a scrapbook, while Cloyd Cook explains some of the items from his time serving the country.

Photo and article submitted by Tim Krakowiak, Communications/Marketing Director, Poplar Bluff R-I School District

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