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Camp Croft veterans come back home

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A dozen veterans who trained at Camp Croft, an Army Infantry Replacement Center during World War II, along with a civilian dental worker who spent time at the camp, took part in a Camp Croft Roundtable Sunday at the Spartanburg County Public Headquarters downtown.

Ron Crawley and Jim Crocker, who also run the Camp Croft Veterans reunion each summer, organized the event. Crawley also operates the campcroft.org Web site.

Crocker explained the event was planned for Veterans Day because it seemed an appropriate time. He also noted the initial plan called for the vets to be in Spartanburg's Veterans Day parade but those plans were revised so the veterans could watch the parade from the balcony of the library, a sort of reviewing stand of honor for them.

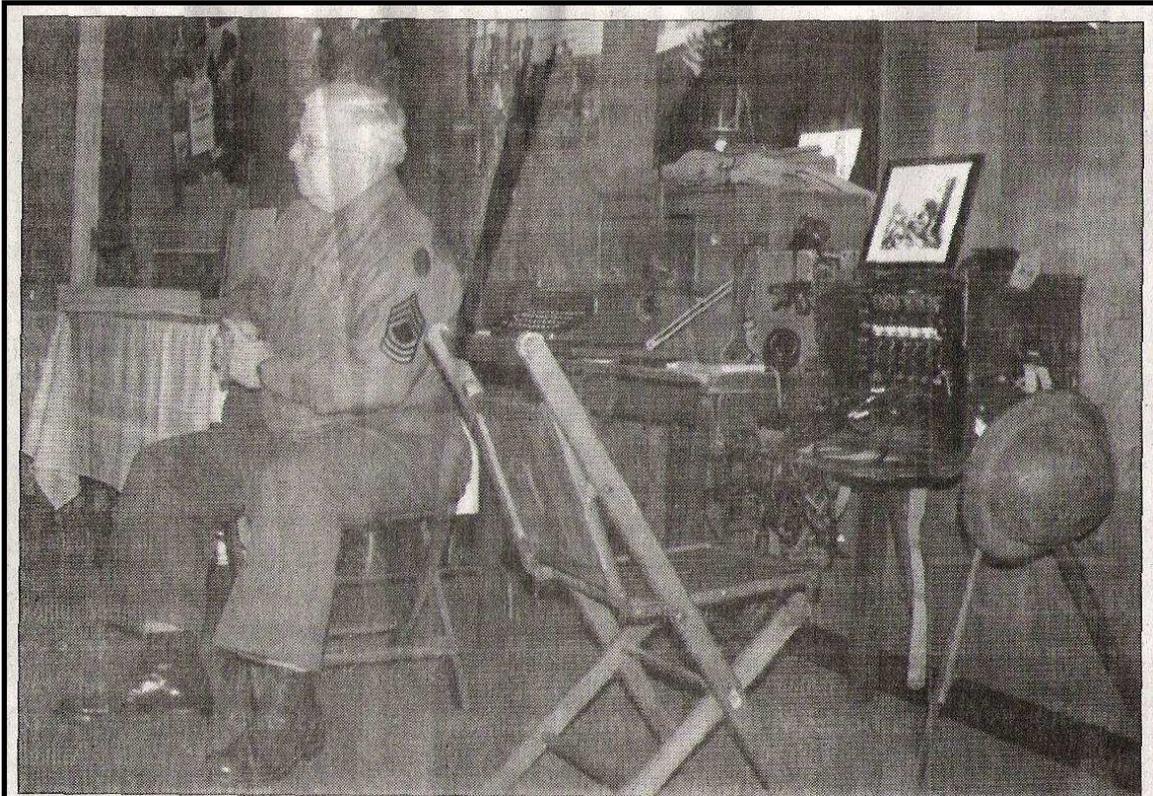


PHOTO BY LEON G. RUSS
Mark Burfete of Green Creek, N.C., sits amidst old World War II era equipment on display at the Camp Croft Round table on Sunday at the Spartanburg County Public Library Headquarters.

Veterans came from as far away as Maine and Crawley noted the panel was as diverse as he could make it. The six panel members included an African-American, Dr. Aubrey Escoffery, and a woman, Ola Kirby of Pacolet, who was the only civilian on the panel.

Dr. Escoffery may have had the most interesting story because he was a black man from the north coming to South Carolina for the first time.

When hearing he would be sent to Camp Croft, he said his heart fell. He explained, "Coming here, it was really a culture shock. We were isolated. We didn't interact with the white troops at all. We had a separate PX, separate service club, chapel and even a movie theater." It was a far different experience than he was used to in New Haven, Conn.

Frank Kreisel of Woodbridge, N.J., hadn't been back since leaving Camp Croft 64 years ago. He said he got drafted shortly after turning 18. "It was kind of an exciting thing," he said, "I mean I had just gotten a new BB gun a few weeks before and now I'm going to have a real gun."

Kreisel remembered, "The first few nights in the bunks the lights go out and in 10 to 15 minutes you hear some guy crying at one end of the barracks and then another guy at the other end. Everybody's tough until it gets dark because you're not home. You tough that out."

He recalled, "The people of Spartanburg were absolutely marvelous." He said he never saw one fight or any stealing when visiting downtown Spartanburg. He spied Spartanburg County Sheriff Chuck Wright in the audience and said, "Sheriff I'm sure you have an easy job because these are great people." To which Wright replied, "Times have changed, sir."

Kirby told stories of how she saw some of the biggest, strongest men at Camp Croft faint dead away when they saw the needle the camp dentist would produce before working on their teeth. She also pointed out civilian workers had to get the same shots the soldiers did and that the three strong fellows in front of her all fell out while getting their shots.

Camp Croft also was used to house German prisoners of war. She was struck when one of the soldiers presented her with a mini cedar chest he had made. She said she asked him, "Why are you so nice to us?" He replied, "These people are good to us."

It was then that she realized they were just like us. "These-are somebody's sons and our sons were fighting just like they were," she said. .

Other panel members included Glenn Philpott, Paul Grubb and Damon Clary of Cowpens.