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'Last surviving link' to World War I earns a fitting salute

By MATT CAMPBELL
The Kansas City Star

The last doughboy came home to Missouri to be honored on this Memorial Day for his service to his country.

Frank Woodruff Buckles, 107 years old and the only known remaining United States veteran of World War I, was celebrated Sunday at the Liberty Memorial as the "last surviving link" to the Great War, which ended 90 years ago.

He was awarded the Veterans of Foreign Wars' Gold Medal of Merit and sat for a photographic portrait that will hang in the National World War I Museum.

"I am quite pleased with the reception I have received as a representative of World War I," Buckles said to the invited audience that stood in respect for him. "And especially being here in Kansas City, because I am among my fellow Missourians."

Buckles was born in Harrison County in north-central Missouri. He said he had "a feeling of longevity ... but I didn't know I was going to be the number one."

Buckles will be the guest of honor at Memorial Day ceremonies that begin at 9:30 a.m. today at the memorial. Officials pressed 3,000 souvenir buttons to commemorate his visit that will be given to people attending the event. Vintage military vehicles will be on display on the memorial's southeast lawn until 3 p.m.

A delegation of French citizens, including an adviser to the minister of defense, is in Kansas City for Buckles' visit. Buckles' daughter, Susannah Flanagan, took the opportunity Sunday to ask them for a replacement for her father's French Legion of Honor badge, because the ribbon on the old one was coming loose. A member of the French delegation said he would replace the medal with pleasure.

"We are very proud to meet you," Jean-Pierre Turbergue, the president of an association called La Fayette, Nous Voila ("La Fayette, We Are Here"), told Buckles during a tour of the museum. "We would like to extend our gratitude and admiration for what you did."

Buckles was underage when he enlisted in the Army in 1917. He trained at Fort Riley, Kan., and was sent to France, where he drove an ambulance. He was one of more than 4.7 million Americans who served in the war.

"I was gung-ho," Buckles told *The Kansas City Star*. "No question about that."

He called it a "severe war," although he did not see the front.

"My job driving the ambulance was not very severe," he said. "You did what you were supposed to do. That was my main job."

Buckles described "the joy of the Armistice" that came on Nov. 11, 1918.

"You wouldn't see a British or Frenchman who did not have a black band on his arm for relatives who were deceased in the war," Buckles said.

After the war, Buckles was part of a unit that escorted German prisoners of war home. He was discharged from the Army in 1919.

Buckles said his memories of the war are still vivid because he didn't dwell on it afterward and his stories did not get mixed up or embellished with retellings.

"My memories haven't been confused as the stories of others because I didn't talk about it," he said. "So if I have any memories at all, they are quite accurate."

Buckles said he was impressed with the World War I Museum and was particularly interested in pictures of fellow Missourian Gen. John J. Pershing, who was commander in chief of the American Expeditionary Force in World War I.

"I think General Pershing was the most military figure I've ever seen," Buckles said.

He recalled meeting Pershing after the war at a reception in 1920 in Oklahoma City. Buckles, who achieved the rank of

corporal, said he caught Pershing's attention because he was holding his gloves in his hand the way the general did. The two struck an acquaintance when they discovered they were both from Missouri.

Buckles, who now lives in West Virginia, came to Kansas City on a private plane made possible by a donor. He uses a wheelchair but looks and sounds remarkably hale for his age. Flanagan said her father has some difficulty hearing, but he is an avid reader and recently finished a book about the Revolutionary War.

At the ceremony, Buckles placed his hand over his heart and recited the Pledge of Allegiance, which was led by Linda Sehrt of the Independence Pioneers Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. The chapter purchased a brick in Buckles' name for the memorial's Walk of Honor. It and others will be dedicated today.

Buckles' portrait was taken by photographer David DeJonge, whose portraits of the last nine surviving World War I veterans hang at the Pentagon. Buckles' new portrait shows him beneath a French biplane that hangs in the museum. He is smiling with a U.S. flag on his lap.

The Liberty Memorial, which this spring turned off the steam system that created the eternal flame effect atop the tower at night, turned it on for the Memorial Day weekend and in honor of Buckles' visit.

Pioneer Services, which offers financial products for military families, has donated \$5,000 toward keeping the "flame" burning through July Fourth and will match contributions up to \$22,500 to keep it burning all year. The steam system costs about \$45,000 a year to operate and was a victim of budget cuts.

The last known living Canadian veteran of World War I also is 107. John Babcock of Spokane, Wash., moved to the United States after the war and became a citizen in 1946. He recently was granted Canadian citizenship in time for his 108th birthday in July.

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HOW TO HELP

Donations to help keep the flame at the Liberty Memorial burning may be sent to the Liberty Memorial, 100 W. 26th St., Kansas City, MO 64108. Checks should be made payable to the National World War I Museum with "Save the flame" in the memo line.

@Go to **KansasCity.com** for a photo gallery and video on Memorial Day events.

TODAY'S EVENTS

- Memorial Day ceremonies at the Liberty Memorial begin at 9:30 a.m.
- The National World War I Museum at Liberty Memorial will open immediately after the ceremony, about 11 a.m.
- Free parking and a shuttle service is available from the lots at 27th Street and Grand Boulevard from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

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