War poster produced by Office for Emergency Management, War Production Board, after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Poster courtesy of the National Archives, Washington, D.C.
Emporia’s Company B, 137th Infantry, Thirty-Fifth Infantry Division, was called into active duty in December 1940 and with varying membership served throughout World War II, first in the United States and then, after the invasion of Normandy, in Western Europe. After the end of hostilities in 1945, its members formed the Company B Association, which held annual reunions in Emporia into the late 1990s. It was through the activities of the association that November 11 was changed from Armistice Day, commemorating the end of World War I, to the present Veterans Day, honoring the veterans of all America’s wars. In 2003 Congress declared Emporia the Founding City of Veterans Day.

Walter Hobson Crockett, who wrote the memoir that follows, was born near Burlington, Kansas, and was raised by middle-class parents in Emporia, where he graduated from high school in 1938 and attended Kansas State Teachers College. He joined Company B in 1937, at the age of sixteen. He remained with the company until 1942, when he transferred into the Army Air Corps and saw service during the war in the China-Burma-India theater. He attended the first Company B Association reunion in 1946 and then left Kansas for most of the next twenty-five years. He returned to the state as a professor of social psychology at the University of Kansas and once back in Kansas frequently attended the company’s reunions into the 1990s. He and his wife Helen are now retired and residing in Lawrence.

The veterans of World War II have been described as America’s “Greatest Generation.” While Professor Crockett does not directly discuss this issue in his memoir, he suggests that in spite of the fact that the men of Company B grew up in the hardship years of the Great Depression, they were not the greatest generation when they were called to active duty, nor did they become so during their year of peacetime service. They became great in the press of war, and the values and attitudes they took on in wartime continued with them for the rest of their lives.
Whenever I watch a military group present the colors before a football game, my memory returns to the year 1940, when the United States was beginning to mobilize for World War II. That year, as part of a contingent from Emporia’s Company B, 137th Infantry, of the Kansas National Guard, I marched onto the field with the flag before home football games at Kansas State Teachers College. The nation would soon enter World War II and the National Guard was about to be mobilized. I had joined that company in 1937, when I was sixteen, stretching my age by two years so they would let me in, and I spent much of my adolescence, from sixteen to twenty-one, with those men. Now that most of them have passed on, I want to describe for you those times and those comrades.

Let’s begin with a description of adolescence in Emporia, Kansas, in the 1930s. In some ways it was profoundly different from today, but in the most important ways it was remarkably similar to what adolescence is now and has always been. First, the differences. The most important—far more important than the absence of television, air travel, and similar developments—was the Great Depression. It affected all parts of our lives. It produced radical changes in the intellectual, economic, and political assumptions in our country. Jobs were scarce and money was hard to come by. Most of us had joined the National Guard for the money. We drilled once a week for two hours and went to a training camp, usually at Fort Riley, for two weeks every summer.

We privates were paid $1.25 for every weekly drill we attended and $18.25 for the summer camp. That seems a pittance now, but it wasn’t bad given the prices at the time. Arrow shirts sold for $1.25. A quart of beer cost twenty-five cents. My friend John Atchison earned his undergraduate education in installments. He would attend college for a semester, then drop out to make some money, and return to build up more credits. The $5.00 a month he received from drilling weekly with the National Guard paid his room rent.3 With entertainment, food, and clothing so cheap, those paychecks helped those of us in our late teens to indulge in most of the amusements and vices, except for hard drugs, that young people engage in today.

And was there no patriotism in joining? Well, we would not have enlisted if we had not been patriotic. As my friend Jack Snow once said to me, “If you have to die, it would be an honor to die for your country.” At heart I agreed with him. And, a few years later, I remembered that remark when I learned that he was killed in the Aleutian Islands, a navigator-bombardier in the nose of a B-25 that was riddled by bullets from a Japanese fighter plane.4

3. Unless otherwise indicated, information in footnotes on individuals discussed in the text is taken from a document titled “Company ‘B,’ 137th Infantry, Los Angeles, California, APO #35: Roster of Personnel of Company ‘B,’ 137th Infantry as of December 23, 1940, and Duties as of August 1942,” Company B Records, Lyon County Historical Archives, Emporia, Kansas. The company was called to active duty on December 23, 1940. The document contains the names of seven officers, eight sergeants, ten corporals, twenty-one privates first class, and seventy-six privates, for a total of 122 men. John H. Atchison was mobilized as a private. By August 1942, he had left the company and was attending the U.S. Army Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia.

4. Jack T. Snow was a sergeant in Company B when the unit was mobilized in December 1940. By August of 1942 he was in training as a flying cadet bombardier, duty station not specified. Jack Snow is sometimes confused with another later member of Company B, Jack Frost.
But for all the difference between that time and today, in many essential respects living through adolescence was much the same then as it had been earlier—in the 1920s, say—and as it is now, in Emporia and throughout the country. We were no longer protected like children, but neither were we fully accepted as adults. Many of us cultivated a youthful cynicism about our world and its pettiness, hypocrisy, and absurdity.

In our day, pettiness, hypocrisy, and absurdity came in many forms. The state prohibited selling and consuming alcohol but everyone knew where it could be bought, who was buying it, and where to go to drink it without being arrested. We observed in important people around us a pious commitment to democracy, equality, justice, and humaneness; and the absence of that commitment in many of their public or private actions. And when you add the elevation of petty rules into absolute standards of right living, you have the basis for considerable adolescent rebellion.

On December 23, 1940, when the war in Europe was going poorly for our eventual allies, our infantry company of 122 men was inducted into federal service. We were scheduled to spend one year in training. For a week or two we were housed in the YMCA in Emporia; then we entrained for Camp Robinson, Arkansas, just north of Little Rock. There we were joined by a set of draftees, mostly from Kansas, who brought our unit up to its authorized size. We were mobilized because the nation was in an abysmal state of preparation for the war that we seemed certain to enter. We arrived at Camp Robinson in the middle of winter to find no barracks waiting to house us, but only eight-man canvas tents, erected on wooden platforms, with gas space heaters in the center. Our machine gun squad had no machine guns; our mortar squad had no mortars; and our rifle platoons carried World War I bolt-action Springfield rifles. Machine guns, mortars, and the new automatic Garand rifles only arrived after we had been mobilized for six months or more; meanwhile, we marched and trained with what we had.

What were we like? In social status, we ranged downward from the middle class. We were mostly of English, Irish, Scottish, or German descent. About half of us were college students; most of the rest had gone to work directly from high school, commonly in blue-collar jobs. The majority had joined the company a year or more before 1940; others joined when they learned we were about to be mobilized, thinking that a year in the army might be an amusing adventure.5

If we had rebelled against pettiness, hypocrisy, and absurdity in civilian life, we found that those qualities reached unimagined levels in the army. We had to undergo inspections, our clothing and equipment laid out to conform precisely to strict regulations. We stood guard, two hours on and four hours off, over territory that no enemy knew existed or would have coveted if

The men of Company B were not the “Greatest Generation” when they were called to active duty. They became great in the press of war, and the values and attitudes they took on in wartime continued with them for the rest of their lives. President Franklin D. Roosevelt urged the whole country to adopt such values and attitudes in an address to the nation on December 9, 1941, two days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, excerpted on this poster produced by the Office for Emergency Management, Office of War Information, courtesy of the National Archives, Washington, D.C.

5. The author might have added that several of the late-joining members of Company B probably joined the unit to avoid the draft, which went into effect in September 1940. For a general look at the mobilization of the Kansas National Guard see Christopher Lovett, “Dear, I’ll Be Back in a Year: The Mobilization of the Thirty-Fifth Infantry Division in 1940,” Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains Archives, Washington, D.C.
they had known about it. We had to touch our forelocks to any commissioned officer we met, some of whom we had known and hadn’t particularly respected in civilian life. We had no reasonable access to the company of women. We could not leave the post without passes. On the post we were subject to curfews and bed checks. Noncommissioned officers could berate us loudly and publicly as often as they liked and we had to stand and listen until they finished. And the only way out of that situation had consequences much worse than remaining in it.

We reacted to all of this, of course, by doing no more than was required. We sympathized with and supported one another. On days when we were to conduct platoon maneuvers, we marched briskly out of camp into the woods where we split up into squads; there we sat down to play cards or talk or sleep until it was time to march briskly back into camp.

We cultivated indirect ways of disparaging our superiors. I can still hear Bob Corbett talking to Lieutenant Coffman one afternoon. We were guarding a nondescript crossroads during the Louisiana Maneuvers, waiting to be told to move somewhere else, sitting around lying to each other about the women we had met. In his most sincere manner Corbett said, “Lieutenant, I’m worried about you. You don’t seem to have much luck meeting women. How would you like for us to fix you up with a date tonight with one of these girls we have met? I know you would enjoy it. We would be glad to help you out.”

The lieutenant stuttered and faltered, composing a reasonable reply, and one by one the rest of us took up the theme. With which woman should he be better paired? (Never mind that they were fictitious.) Where should he go? What would be his best approach? All of this was delivered with surface seriousness and sincerity; inside, we chortled.

And we turned to athletics and to music. Our company’s basketball team won the division championship. Tom Tholen, who had played piano in the best dance band in college, was the center of a quartet, modeled on the Modernaires, in which several of us performed in the camp and, also, here and there around the state of Arkansas. When our regiment held a field day, we won all the athletic contests, lost all the military contests, took second place, and won a weekend trip to Hot Springs as our prize.

6. Robert Corbett was a private in Company B when the unit was mobilized. As of August 1942 he was a corporal and still a member of the company. “Lieutenant Coffman” was not a member of Company B at the time of mobilization, and just when he joined the unit is unknown.

7. This is not surprising; several members of the Company B team had played college basketball at Kansas State Teachers College before being mobilized.

8. Thomas E. Tholen was a private first class in Company B when the unit was mobilized. By August 1942 he was a sergeant in the company. After the war Tholen was for years the driving force in the Company B Association and frequently talked with the editor of this article about the company and its association. Tholen also was a well-known Emporia pianist. The Modernaires were a nationally known musical group of the day.
Most of all, we relied on each other for friendship and support. But the support was not unrestricted. We developed norms of our own and those who violated them—the hotshot infantryman, the childish kid, the squeamish moralist, the obvious bootlicker, even the total malingerer—came under a heavy barrage of ridicule and scorn.

We also adopted, to some degree, a pattern that W. J. Cash, in his book *The Mind of the South*, described among poor Southern whites:

To stand on his head in a bar, to toss down a pint of raw whiskey at a gulp, to fiddle and dance all night, to bite off the nose or gouge out the eye of a favorite enemy, to fight harder and love harder than the next man, to be known eventually far and wide as a hell of a fellow—such would be his focus.9

Of course, we never stood on our heads in bars, or drank a pint of whiskey at a gulp, or bit off noses and gouged out eyes, or danced all night, or loved hard in that single-sexed world, but the general sense of that description, the role of “Hell of a Fellow,” could be seen on all sides in Company B. I suppose most of us adopted the role at one time or another; a few played it most of the time; and many of the stories we told later when we got together were about the exploits of the latter group.

One more point: for me, at any rate, that experience in Company B had a profoundly democratizing effect. I found myself at close quarters with a far wider range of people than I had known before and I came to like and respect almost all of them. I will mention just two of those men, though I could describe a dozen more.

Howard Hillis was a short man with a yellowish-brown complexion, small teeth, and straight hair. His father earned a precarious living by contracting with stores to deliver groceries in his broken-down truck. Hillis was very bright. He was a lightning calculator. He could add a series of four- or five-digit numbers in his head faster than the rest of us could add them using paper and pencil. He had a remarkable talent with words. He had lived on the south side of town, where many of his childhood companions were from Emporia’s black community, and he spoke in jive language. He would threaten to introduce you to his five of clubs—his fist—or
to meet you down at Knuckle Junction where he would duke you up, even though he would obviously have been inept as a fighter. He expressed dread of winding up in "the Crossbar Hotel"; that is, in jail.10

When we were on maneuvers in Louisiana during the summer of 1941, we once marched all night long, more than twenty miles, and arrived at our new assignment guarding Barksdale Field, near Shreveport, early the next morning. As we approached our new position, Hillis dropped the butt of his rifle to the ground, dragged it along by the barrel, and exclaimed, “I’m not carrying this damned gun one more step!” Two new medics, on detachment to our company from regimental headquarters, clucked disapproval at his unmilitary manner, but the rest of us were delighted, for his actions mirrored the emotions all of us were feeling but hadn’t the guts to express. So as we straggled onto the field, we picked up his rifle and shouldered his pack.

When his girlfriend told him she was marrying someone else and asked him to be best man at her wedding, Hillis told her, “Man, I know there’s not but one best man at any wedding and it’s not going to be me.”

One night he and Shorty Johnson were walking through a residential section of town when they met a civilian man in the company of two young women.11 Hillis and Shorty made a suggestion that was probably improper; the man took offense. The next thing they knew, Hillis was running full-speed down the street; Shorty was pelting after him; the man giving chase, pausing every so often to throw rocks at him, and the women were standing on the corner watching.

Shorty shouted, “Wait, Hillis! There are two of us and only one of him. Let’s stop and duke him up.”

“I wasn’t studyin’ any damned dukin’ up,” Hillis told me later. “Man, I was pickin’ ‘em up and layin’ ‘em down.”

After war was declared and the company had been sent to California, Hillis and I often shared night guard duty on the waterfront in San Francisco. We talked with each other about our lives and hopes and I came to know him well. Bright as he was, he did not think well of himself.

He told me of his dialogues with Wood Bloxom, who


10. Howard K. Hillis was a private in Company B when the company was mobilized. As of August 1942 he was serving with the 164th Infantry in New Caledonia. Four other members of the original 122 men mobilized in December 1940 were in New Caledonia with the 164th Regiment of the newly formed Americal Division in August 1942. They were Privates Raymond D. Arnold, Vernon H. Buck, Robert H. Hughes, and Robert B. Timmerman.

11. “Shorty” [first name unknown] Johnson was not a member of Company B when the company was mobilized. He probably joined the unit at Camp Robinson, Arkansas, or after it moved to the West Coast.
was a basketball coach in our high school and also taught mathematics, and who enjoyed engaging in exchanges with his students. I’m sure Hillis gave as good as he got in those encounters, but he told me how Mr. Bloxom always used to end them: “Hillis,” he would say, “You’re never going to amount to anything, you know that, don’t you?”

It was the kind of remark Bloxom was accustomed to making. I’m sure he didn’t mean it seriously but I think Hillis believed it. At any rate, he had modest goals. By implication, if not directly, he made it clear that he expected to be on the short side of any unequal relationship. His goal in the army, and in life in general, was not “success,” as those of us from the middle class understand that term, but achieving a reasonable amount of comfort in a hostile world. I came to like him very much.

Then there was John Cooper, a man in his middle twenties, somewhat older than many of us. We called him “John Bull” because he looked like Winston Churchill. He was an orphan, raised by a woman the company came to call “Mom King.” He dropped out of school

12. John Eugene Cooper was a private in Company B when the unit was mobilized in 1940. By August 1942 he was a private first class in Company B. He was with Company B when it landed in Normandy in July 1944 and was wounded in action, but recovered and returned to duty with the company. He was killed in action in December 1944. Information from the editor’s informal conversation with Cooper’s nephew, Lawrence Eugene Crisp, at his home near Madison, Kansas, June 23, 2008; see also “An Unlikely Hero: Veterans Day founded on an uncle’s love,” (Emporia State University) Bulletin, November 10, 2011, available online at esubulletin.com/2011/11/10/9474.
and worked in a local shoe-repair shop before we were mobilized.\(^\text{13}\) One night someone in Little Rock found a khaki uniform on the banks of the Arkansas River and called the police to report a suspected suicide. They were about to organize a search of the river when John Bull Cooper, somewhat in his cups, waded ashore from a swim, ready to put on his uniform. He was returned to the base and cautioned not to do it again. That escapade aside, John Cooper was no raging alcoholic. Instead, he was a warm, bubbly, ingenuous man, liked by everyone in the company.\(^\text{14}\)

Hillis, Cooper, and dozens of others were from a part of Emporia I had not known earlier. Knowing them, sympathizing with them, coming to like and even admire them had an effect on my beliefs and attitudes that has lasted all my life.

When we were mobilized we thought we had bargained to spend just one year in military service. We were mightily indignant halfway through that year when President Roosevelt called on Congress to extend our enlistment indefinitely. We did not care that Germany and Italy were winning the war, we wanted out of the army! More than half of us wrote our congressman asking him to vote against extending our tour. To our surprise, he reported our letters to the regimental commander, who reported them to our captain, who had words with us about writing to congressmen. And our letters did no good. The bill passed in the House of Representatives.

\(^\text{13}\) “Mom King” was actually Cooper’s grandmother. The shoe-repair shop in which Cooper worked was owned by his uncle, Alvin King. It was because of John Cooper’s death that his uncle suggested that November 11, which had been celebrated as Armistice Day honoring the veterans of all America’s wars. In 1953, while the rest of the country still observed Armistice Day, Emporia observed the nation’s first Veterans Day. The next year, by congressional action and the approval of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the nation observed its first national Veterans Day on November 11, 1954, and in 2003 Emporia was declared the Founding City of Veterans Day. *Hutchinson (Kans.) News-Herald*, June 2 and November 11, 1954; *Great Bend (Kans.) Daily Tribune*, November 11, 1954; *Emporia Gazette*, November 11, 1953; November 11 and 12, 1954; and U.S. Congress, 108th Cong., 1st sess., 2003, H. Rep. 108–96, “Declaring Emporia, Kansas, to be the Founding City of the Veterans Day Holiday,” July 10, 2003, available online at thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/cpquery/R?cp108:FLD010:@1%28hr196%29.

\(^\text{14}\) When some twenty Emporia members of Company B came home on leave as a group before embarking for Europe in late 1943, they “elected” officers and enlisted leaders for their leave time. Private First Class Cooper was elected the group’s first sergeant. Company B Records, newspaper clippings, undated clipping from the *Emporia Gazette*, Lyon County Historical Archives, Emporia, Kansas.

I think by just one vote, and we were doomed to an indefinite term in the U.S. Army.

Then, on December 7, 1941, sixteen days before our year would have been up anyway, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and the whole picture changed. Within weeks we were on a troop train headed for California. Faced with the prospect of spending a long, difficult war as foot soldiers in the infantry, quite a few members of the company transferred out. I transferred into the Air Corps, like many others, and entered flying training. Others went to Officer Candidate School to receive commissions and to be assigned to other units. A few, like Howard Hillis, were part of a cadre that became the core of a new division, and went off to war in the Pacific. In all, half or more of our original members left the company.\(^\text{15}\)

Those who remained received additional training in the United States and were sent to England late in 1943. On July 4, 1944, one month after D-Day, they entered the battle for Normandy. Subsequently, they fought in all the major battles in Northern Europe, across France and into Germany. Eventually they spent several months in the occupation of Germany.\(^\text{16}\) Some of them were genuine heroes and I want to say a few words about them and about heroism.

We tend to think of heroes as daredevils who scorn fear, face danger eagerly, and live or die in glorious action. I suppose some war heroes are like that. But more often, I think, they are scared almost to death. They would prefer to be almost anywhere other than where they are. They remain at their posts because, when people associate with each other over time, they develop beliefs about what is proper and honorable and what is improper and dishonorable. And then, in peacetime as well as in war, when situations arise in which they must perform a duty that they simply feel honor bound to carry out, they perform that duty because their values and the demands of the situation leave them no honorable alternative.

Consider Deacon Lawton. Before the war, he and I belonged to the same fraternity at Emporia State. He was called “Deacon” because when he was in his cups he preached long and eloquent sermons; not burlesques, but honest-to-God, hellfire-spouting sermons. When the
Germans attacked at the Battle of the Bulge, Deacon was safe in a field hospital recovering from the wound that brought him his first Purple Heart. He walked out of the hospital and made his way through the cold and snow back to the company, where he took up his rifle and began to fight again.  

Or consider George Gibson, who piloted an airplane in the raid on the oilfields at Ploesti, Romania. When something prevented his bombs from dropping in his first pass over the target, instead of jettisoning them or dropping them on an alternative target, Gibson flew back through the hellish anti-aircraft fire to drop them properly. His plane was hit on the second pass and he and his crew were killed.  

And there was Lewis Martin, the sergeant in charge of the mortar squad. Deacon Lawton told me after the war that, in battle, Lewis served as his own forward observer, going up to a lookout post to observe where his unit’s shells were landing, scurrying back to correct the setting of the mortars, then returning to the observation post to make sure he had aimed the shells correctly.  

Jack Frost was another hero. In 1940 he had been barely eighteen, one of the youngest men in the company. He was a xylophonist and a drummer. He belonged originally to a National Guard band, based in Emporia, that was part of our division. After we were mobilized he transferred from the band into Company B where many of us were already his friends. He was an ebullient, enthusiastic man and a terrific jazz musician. He joined Tom Tholen, our pianist, in wonderful improvised four-handed jazz piano performances. As the company made its way through Europe, Frost received a battlefield commission, was decorated for bravery, and received the Purple Heart. If you had known him only after the war, after he earned a degree in pharmacy and operated a corner drug store in Emporia, you would never have guessed his war record. When Frost died in 1990, Tom Tholen delivered the eulogy at his memorial. Almost as if he expected not to be believed, Tom began by saying, “Jack Frost was a brave man,” and went on to describe his bravery and his honors.

What I am trying to say is that bravery commonly arises not out of derring-do but out of the natural

17. Donald B. “Deacon” Lawton was a private in Company B when the unit was mobilized. In August 1942 he was a sergeant in the company.  

18. George W. Gibson, Jr., was a corporal in Company B when the unit was mobilized. By August 1942 he had transferred to the Army Air Force and was a flying cadet pilot.  

19. Lewis Lyman Martin was a private first class in Company B when the unit was mobilized; by August 1942 he was a sergeant in the company. Martin is believed to be the only one of the Company B members at the time of mobilization who served with the company throughout the war and is still alive. After the war he had a long civilian career with the Bureau of Indian Affairs and at this writing is retired and living in Pretty Prairie, Kansas. See Lewis Lyman Martin, interview by Loren Pennington, November 11, 2005, World War II Oral Histories Project, State Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka, available online at kansasmemory.org/item/211413.  

20. On mobilization day Jack Frost was a member of the second Emporia National Guard unit, the 161st Field Artillery Band. He transferred from the band to Company B in 1941 at Camp Robinson, Arkansas. See Jack Frost, interview by Dorothy Milsap, December 11, 1980, Flint Hills Oral History Project, Lyon County Historical Society Archives, Emporia, Kansas; also in World War II Oral Histories Project, State Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka, available online at kansasmemory.org/item/216353.
response of reasonably ordinary people who have come to accept a set of standards and feel honor-bound to abide by them. It is no less bravery, for all that. Nobody has compelled them to act that way. Deacon Lawton could have remained in the hospital instead of returning to the front; I’m sure some soldiers did. George Gibson could have jettisoned his bombs instead of making another pass over the target; many pilots in that situation did. Lewis Martin could have assigned the dangerous duty of acting as forward observer to some private; most weapons sergeants did. A person doesn’t need to have a personality like John Wayne’s to be brave. In fact, anyone who takes on a hellishly distasteful task out of a sense of honor, or loyalty to friends, or responsibility to humanity is doubtless a braver person than the one who does it for the thrills.

And after people have acted, they commonly reflect about what they have done and, if they have a chance, they trace out the consequences of their actions. Consider my friend Tommy Sutton, a tall, slow-spoken, blond, quiet, but humorous man. At Camp Robinson he and I once served as honor guard at a funeral, in Texarkana, of a United States senator who had been head of the Armed Services Committee. As we hurried from the railroad station to the church, we heard for the first time in our lives the slow, poignant, dolorous strains of Chopin’s “Funeral March,” played by the military band that was escorting the casket to the church. During the service one of us stood at the head of the casket, the other at the foot, and we stared with awe at General George C. Marshall, commanding general of the Army, who had come from Washington to attend the funeral.21

21. Thomas R. Sutton was a private in Company B at the time of mobilization. As of August 1942 he was a corporal in the company. The funeral was no doubt that of Democratic Senator Morris Sheppard of Texas, who served in the Senate from 1913–1941 and was at the time of his death on April 9, 1941, chair of the Committee on Military Affairs, the predecessor of the Committee on Armed Services, which was created in 1946. The senator was buried in the Hillcrest Cemetery at Texarkana. Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=S000337; and “John Morris Sheppard,” The Handbook of Texas Online, Texas State Historical Association, tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fsh24.
Three years later, when our army was advancing across Europe, Tom Sutton and other members of the company found themselves perched on the back of a tank that was moving into action. Out of the corner of his eye Tom saw a German soldier rise to his knees and prepare to lob a hand grenade onto the tank. Sutton swung his body to WKH0HIWDQGÀUHGKLVULÁHIURPWKHKLS+LVEXOOHWKLWWKH German; the hand grenade dropped to the ground and exploded; and Tom, the tank, and the rest of the unit were spared.

Many years later Tom told me what he did after the advance had halted and his unit had dug in for the night. He made his way back to the scene of the incident. I am told that there is something eerie about a battlefield when the clanking of the tanks, the explosion of artillery shells, the crackle of small-arms fire, and the other sounds of battle have ended, and when the almost unbearable anxiety and tension has passed away. The emptiness, the stillness, the sounds of birds beginning to sing, are almost frightening. But, on that empty battlefield, Tom found the German soldier and he was still alive. He was just a kid, Tom said, and he was horribly wounded. Tom gave him water to drink from his canteen, washed and bandaged his wounds as best he could, then went to find an army medic who could take the German to a field hospital. And when that was done, Tom shouldered his rifle and sloped back off to the company to fight another day.

Almost everybody who stayed with the company through the war was shot up in some degree. Twenty of our original group were killed in the war, one man in six. Among them were four of the five starters on our Thirty-Fifth Division-championship basketball team. Members of our company died all over the place: Jack Snow in Alaska, George Gibson in Romania, someone else at Anzio, a great many in France and Germany. Jack Buckman, the best athlete I ever knew personally, was killed by “friendly fire,” when a mortar barrage from our battalion’s heavy weapons company fell short.22 John Bull Cooper died in the Battle of the Bulge from an air burst. Though he was dug in, a German shell hit the limb of a nearby tree, exploded, and the shrapnel killed Cooper in his slit trench.23

Eventually the war ended, most of us returned, and there began a series of annual reunions of Company B. I attended the first one, in 1946. It was an emotional, joyous, raucous, tempestuous gathering where alcohol

22. John J. Buckman was a private in Company B on mobilization day. As of August 1942, he was a corporal in the company.
23. The statement is not quite accurate. Cooper was killed on the same day the Battle of the Bulge began, but in another sector. Company B was transferred to the Bulge fighting a day or two later.
flowed freely and the mixture of alcohol with emotion produced three or four intense altercations, all of them followed by contrition and boozy reconciliation.

I did not attend another reunion for many years. Helen and I moved from place to place and I was largely out of contact with those friends. Finally, in 1971, after I had come back to teach at KU, I went to my first reunion in twenty-five years.

I felt some apprehensiveness about returning. At that reunion in 1946 I had talked briefly to Sammy McComb, who was an acerbic, iconoclastic man who joined us as a draftee from a small town in Kansas. Sam said that it was probably best for John Bull Cooper to have died in the war. “Cooper would have come back to this town and they would have dumped on him,” he said. “It’s better that he died among his friends, when he believed the world was fair, rather than to have to face the things this town would have put him through.”

That is a terrible judgment, but in the back of my mind I always suspected it might be true. As I approached that 1971 reunion, I wondered how the less-privileged members of our group had fared. I also wondered how a set of conservative veterans would react to a dyed-in-the-wool liberal like me.

I am pleased to tell you that I need not have worried. The one clearly untoward incident did not involve me. In a gesture of intergenerational solidarity, Earl Morray’s wife had made a centerpiece for the banquet.

With some chicken wire and colored napkins, she had constructed a representation of the American flag and superimposed the peace symbol on top of it. I think almost everybody in the company accepted it without comment; all of us liked her and respected her intentions. But two or three former colonels from our regiment had been invited to the reunion and they could not abide it.

Hershel Shepherd was president of the association that year and I heard him try to defuse the conflict. He asked one of them, “You mean you have a problem with the ecology sign?”

“Ecology sign, hell!” the colonel sputtered. “It’s a damned hippie symbol and it’s a desecration of the American flag.”

So the centerpiece was removed and the banquet proceeded in patriotic amity. Other than that, the evening went smoothly. Political or philosophical disagreements were referred to only discretely. Lawrence Chalmers, who was chancellor of the University of Kansas at the time, was a controversial figure in the state for permitting protests on campus against the Vietnam War. People asked me what I thought of him. I said he had done a remarkable job of holding the place together when the students were up in arms against our government’s policies. My comrades allowed that he was too permissive for their tastes. Leroy Hughes added that it seemed like whenever a clean-cut young man from his home town went to the University of Kansas, he came back a bum.

But we left it at that. Mostly, we talked about old times, reminded each other of things we had done together, brought ourselves up to date on what we had been doing, laughed, sang, and reaffirmed our respect and affection for each other.

It was especially interesting to see how people had developed in that quarter of a century. Jack Frost, as I have said, was a pharmacist; Tom Tholen, our jazz pianist, went into insurance; Johnny Atchison got a law degree and joined an abstracting firm; Tommy Sutton and Bob Corbett became mail carriers; Hershel Shepherd went into banking and the oil-distributing business. Some of the men owned small businesses, some were teachers, a few were farmers, a good many were blue-collar workers. About a third of the company, it seemed, had moved to California; so many, in fact, that they held an occasional mini-reunion in San Diego.

Deacon Lawton was among the Californians. When his wife came into money, he took early retirement, bought an electronic keyboard instrument, and made the rounds of V[eterans] A[dministration] hospitals in California entertaining patients. In the evening, he would enter a likely looking tavern, set up his electronic keyboard, and spend an hour or two drinking beer and engaging the clientele in a sing-along.

Howard Hillis acquired some sort of tropical ailment while he was in the South Pacific and was in a military hospital at the end of the war. When he got out, he tried for a while to keep up with some of his more affluent friends.

24. “Helen” is the author’s wife, whom he married during the war. Today the couple resides in Lawrence, Kansas.
25. “Sammy” McComb, as indicated, was not a member of Company B at the time of mobilization, and when he became a member of the company is unknown. He was one of the many men who transferred into the company as replacements. A number of these replacements became long-standing members of the Company B Association.
26. Earl Morray was a private in Company B when the unit was mobilized. As of August 1942 he was a private first class in the company.
27. Robert Hershel Shepherd was a private in Company B when the company was mobilized. By August 1942 he was a sergeant in the company. After the war he became one of Emporia’s most prominent citizens and was noted for his philanthropic activities.
28. Leroy Hughes was a sergeant in Company B when the unit was mobilized. By August 1942 he was the company’s supply sergeant.
To finance his revelry, he passed several bad checks around town. He was caught, prosecuted, and spent a three-to-five year stretch in the big Crossbars Hotel in Lansing. Afterward, his health problem was classified as a service-connected disability. He was awarded a pension, married, moved to Topeka, developed severe arthritis, and stayed mostly in his home. He wrote a rather bitter letter to the 1971 reunion reporting that he would not be able to attend and complaining that the little dab the government paid its pensioners these days was barely enough for a man to get along on.

There were some astonishing outcomes. Pete Robinson, for example, had been an inveterate gambler, always ready to sit in on a game of poker or craps, playing for credit during the month and for cash on paydays, willing to bet every cent he had on the turn of a card. By midnight on paydays you would find him either flat broke and despondent or floating euphorically down the company street, money stuffed in every pocket. I was sure he would become, at best, a dealer in a Las Vegas casino. He became a certified public accountant in Phoenix, Arizona. I asked my friend Johnny Atchison, “Would you ever have predicted that Pete Robinson would become a certified public accountant?” He answered, “No, but then I’m not sure I would have predicted you would become a university professor.”

The plain truth is that a wide range of potentialities are represented in any young person. Which ones will finally be realized depends not only on what that person is like in childhood or even at age eighteen or nineteen or twenty, but in large part on the responsibilities, the opportunities, the demands, and, especially, the whims of fortune that life has presented him.

29. “Pete Robinson” is probably Clarence Robinson, who was a corporal when Company B was mobilized. By August 1942 he was second lieutenant with the Fifty-Eighth Division in Alaska.
At that 1971 reunion it became clear that many of our comrades had done battle with the drug of choice in our generation, alcohol. Mostly, they seemed to have won the fight, or at least to have reached a shaky truce, but a few clearly had lost. One of these was our former company commander. During the war he was the best officer I had anything to do with, a strong, wiry, quick-moving, intelligent, fair-minded man, liked and respected by everyone in the company. Twenty-five years later he was a lush.

One memorable experience at that reunion identified a source of distress that plagued the lives of almost all of us at one time or another: concern about our children. One of my old comrades, a man who had been a real “Hell of a Fellow” in his younger days, approached me for advice about his daughter. He had placed what he thought were sensible restrictions on her, in hopes he could protect her from some of the temptations he had met in his own life. She rebelled. They quarreled. He feared she was into heavy drugs; he was sure she was involved with soft drugs. At last he took her to a clinic and paid more money than he could afford for consultation and advice. The psychiatrist could not resolve the conflict between father and daughter, but he told the young woman that as long as she was living in her father’s house she had to abide by his rules. So she moved out and broke off all contact with him.

My friend felt vindicated and defeated at the same time. He was distraught. And he had a younger daughter in whom he thought he saw signs of the same attitude. He was at a loss for what to do about either of his children and he sought the advice of everyone at hand. I was not prepared to tell him what to do. But I realized that his experience, though more extreme, identified a pattern that, at one time or another, had plagued the relationships between almost all of us and our own children. Rebels in our youth, we faced rebellion in our offspring.

It seemed unfair. We had thought we were reacting against a set of petty rules that had been imposed on us by a conformist, outdated, basically hypocritical social order. Now we heard our own children leveling those charges against us. What had happened? Well, in the process of adapting to our world, we had discovered truth in some things we had thought untrue, we had come to tolerate other things that seemed not worth the trouble to change, and we had adopted a few absurdities and hypocrisies of our own. We may not have recognized this, but our children did. They defined themselves, in part, by their oppositions to our hypocrisies and they set out to demonstrate their own independence and their ability to construct a more reasonable, less hypocritical life than they considered ours to be.

I suspect this is a conflict that our children faced as their offspring, our grandchildren, moved through adolescence and assumed their part in the recurring cycle of rebellion and adaptation. I hope they suffered less from this than we did.

Well, in spite of the episode with the colonels and the tormented revelations of my friend, I enjoyed the 1971 reunion immensely. It was so satisfying that I continued, with Helen, to attend those annual reunions whenever we could. In a strange way, I was repeating a pattern that was set by my own father. He, too, had been a member of a Kansas National Guard company. His was activated in the First World War. After the war, his company also held annual reunions. My father attended every one until the day he died.

Like my father, I attended those reunions for the pleasure they brought. A bit of the tone of the gatherings is given by Vernon Buck’s minutes of the 1990 business meeting. They read, in part,

Co-President Glenn Martin lauded the efforts of Tom Tholen in organizing the reunion. Tom was given a standing ovation. . . . Co-President Glenn Martin then moved to the election of officers for the ensuing year. He appointed Vernon Buck to the office of Secretary. The Secretary-elect accepted. The appointment was approved by the members present. Jim King asked to be relieved from the duties of Treasurer, citing health reasons for the request.

30. Vernon Buck was a private in Company B when the unit was mobilized. By August of 1942 he was a corporal in the 164th Infantry in New Caledonia. After the war he continued in the reserves, and was recalled to active duty during the Vietnam conflict. See Vernon Howard Buck, interview by Loren Pennington, December 6, 2006, World War II Oral Histories Project, State Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka, available online at kansasmemory.org/item/211308; an earlier interview with Buck conducted by Dorothy Milsap, December 6, 1980, is part of the Flint Hills Oral History Project, Lyon County Historical Society Archives, Emporia, Kansas. Buck was for some years the last of the 122 men mobilized in 1940 living in Lyon County. He died August 26, 2012. At this writing only four of the 122 members of Company B in December 1940 are still alive: Walter Hobson Crockett and Lewis Lyman Martin in Kansas and Robert Allen Mott and Donald Eugene Sanders in California.

31. Glenn F. Martin was a private first class in Company B when the unit was mobilized. In August 1942 he was flying cadet training to be a pilot.

32. James R. King was a private in Company B when the unit was mobilized. In August 1942 he was a sergeant in the company.
Jim suggested a local member be elected to the office because the Treasurer would be required to be in frequent contact with Tom Tholen. Alvin Morris then nominated Warren Pyle for the office, whereupon Warren Pyle refused. VEHEMENTLY! After some lengthy consultation and counseling with Warren, he was elected by acclamation. Jim was given an ovation for his efficient discharge of the duties of Treasurer. At this point, Hobson Crockett was nominated to serve as Vice President. He, being absent, did not refuse the office and was elected by acclamation.

Only a handful of us were still around in 2008, so few that for years we had not bothered to hold our annual reunions. But I would like to describe what my comrades were like in the 1990s, those aging veterans who celebrated each year an association that was half a century old. They were dwindling in number; surrendering one by one to ill health and death. Our piano player, Tom Tholen, who died some years ago, still played musical gigs around Emporia; his jazz quartet included his own son on electronic bass. Tom also served as the principal director of the Company B Association; he kept track of where people were and the state of their health; and he planned and staged the yearly reunions.

Only forty or fifty individuals, half or more of them wives or widows, attended the reunions in the early 1990s. Almost all of them had resumed their loving and affectionate relations with their children. Most of them were watching their grandchildren enter the stormy years of adolescence.

They were a diverse group. They varied in religion, in economic status, in where they lived, in the things that interested them, in the work they had done. The variation in their political beliefs is illustrated by the organizations they belonged to. They ranged from the American Civil Liberties Union, on the left, to, on the right, the Military Order of the World Wars, which was described to me as “a patriotic organization of former commissioned officers.”

33. Alvin E. Morris was a corporal in Company B when the unit was mobilized. In August 1942 he was the company’s first sergeant.

34. Warren L. Pyle was a sergeant in Company B when the unit was mobilized. In August 1942 he was an officer (rank unspecified) in the Army Air Corps.

35. Loren Pennington was the main speaker at the 1990 reunion. He spoke in his Kansas Chautauqua character as President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

36. Among the many oral histories of World War II veterans available online are six more with members of Company B, not previously cited: John Kelly Goodwin, interview by Loren Pennington, May 26, 2006 (kansasmemory.org/item/211356); Robert Allen Mott, interview by Loren Pennington, September 30, 2006 (kansasmemory.org/item/211426); William J. Preston, interview by Loren Pennington, May 11, 2006 (kansasmemory.org/item/211439); Donald Eugene Sanders, interview by Loren Pennington, November 9, 2005 (kansasmemory.org/item/211452); George R. Seitz, interview by Loren Pennington, January 15, 2006 (kansasmemory.org/item/211459); and Allen J. Mauderly, interview by Dorothy Milsap, December 15, 1980 (kansasmemory.org/item/216819), World War II Oral Histories Project, State Archives Division, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka.
Those political differences did not impair the quality of our relationships. Members of the company kept track of each other, telephoned their comrades when they heard they were ill, drove to visit them when they were about to die, attended their funerals, encouraged their widows and families to continue their associations with the company. Sammy McComb was mistaken: This group would not have allowed John Bull Cooper to be rejected by his hometown. Indeed, Mom King, the woman who raised Cooper after he was orphaned, was made an honorary member of the company and attended all of its memorial services until she died.

And the concern of those men for each other was mirrored in their concern for their communities. Within the framework of their basic assumptions, within the limitations of their beliefs and prejudices, they tried, as best they could, to be responsible, productive, decent human beings. And that, I think, is as much as can be asked of any of us. [KH]