

Ralph Mullendore Garrett

*Headquarters Company, 424th Regiment
106th Infantry Division*

Larue Barnes: So much to learn



Ralph Mullendore Garrett was born in Bethany, W.V., on Christmas Day in 1923 — the same day his great-grandmother celebrated her 96th birthday.

From the beginning, family has been the center of his life.

“I was the oldest of four children,” he said. “Our father, Ralph W. Garrett, was a college professor, and our mother, Lella, was an accomplished art teacher. I felt at a very early age that they had hopes that I would become a minister.”

He admitted that such a choice could not be made by a parent for a child.

The family lived in Bethany until he was 11. He loved to read and sensed that he was very good at it.

“I read Harvard classics when I was quite young and thought I understood them. Later, I saw that I didn’t grasp their full meaning. I was sick a lot as a child and missed a great deal of school. I got behind in math and never seemed to catch up.”

When the family moved to Cisco, Ralph played basketball and softball, but never football.

“My mother wouldn’t let me. She was afraid I would get injured, and we didn’t have the money to pay a doctor.”

He recalled getting into trouble at school only once, when he was paddled for eating a worm in front of girls and upsetting them.

His father suffered from asthma and his health got worse. Suspecting that he might have tuberculosis, he isolated himself upstairs in their home. Ralph became the man of the house.

“I guess that’s when I began to learn how to do things with my hands. My mother had taught me from an early age how to appreciate art and create things. I remember making linoleum block-cut prints on Christmas cards. Now I had to take real responsibility. When I was 13, we made plans to move to my maternal grandparents’ farm in Indiana. I knew we had to have a trailer to move our things, so I went to work to make one.

“When it came time to think about the cover for the wagon, I drove Mother to the general store — I had my driver’s license — where we bought some metal wagon sideboard pockets designed to hold wagon bows — like a Conestoga wagon. Then, I measured and

my mother sewed a canvas cover.”

He said they knew it would have to be waterproofed, so they mixed hot paraffin into gasoline and kept it in near-boiling water to keep it liquefied while painting it onto the canvas.

“The gasoline evaporated and we had a cover that would be protected from the rain. I drove most of the way on the trip.”

He has memories of spending time in New York City while his father worked on his doctorate at Columbia University. The Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., fascinated him. There was so much to see, study and learn.

His freshman and sophomore years in high school were spent at Franklin High School, where he made the first team in softball and basketball.

In 1939, the family moved to Fort Worth, where Ralph’s father joined the faculty as a history professor at Texas Christian University. Ralph attended Paschal High School.

“It was great for me. I made first team again in softball and basketball. I became friends with the children of very influential Fort Worth citizens — the Leonards, the Bairds, the Edwards.

“While I was in high school I worked at Leonard Bros. as a grocery sacker. I carried groceries out to cars, making 11 cents an hour. After a 10-hour day, I took home \$1.10 and thought I was rich. You worked all day on a farm for 50 cents back then.”

After graduation from Paschal High in 1941, Garrett enrolled in TCU.

“While I was there I had the opportunity to attend a national seminar as a business administration student, and was chosen sheriff of TCU’s Ranch Week, leading a downtown parade with the Tarrant County Sheriff.”

After one semester, he took a 532-class-hour mechanical drafting course at Technical High School taught by an engineer at Convair. He was employed by Texas Electric as a draftsman, but another kind of draft called him into World War II.

He and other draftees reported to the bus station in Fort Worth to be transported to Camp Fort Wolters in Mineral Wells.

“I was assigned to Camp Wallace, a coast artillery base near Texas City. I finished basic training and was being trained as chief of section on 40 mm anti-aircraft artillery. I decided I would rather fly than walk and received permission from the commanding officer to take an Air Corps cadet test.”

Garrett passed the test and was sent to Central Washington College of Education where he took many classes and learned to fly in primary training. At Santa Anna Air Force Base he said he “washed out” as only 20 percent of the cadets were chosen for further training.

“At Lowry Field near Denver a general order was issued that all personnel from the ground forces not actively in pilot training would be returned to the ground forces. I was shipped to Jefferson Barracks, Mo., a replacement depot facility.”

While assigned to the 106th Infantry Division in training at [Camp Atterbury](#), Ind., he found himself near relatives, including his brother, who was running their parents' farm.

"I was assigned to [Headquarters Company 424 Regiment, on kitchen patrol](#) my first day there. I had a talk with the mess sergeant and told him I could cook. He got it OK'd by my commanding officer, and I was in."

He grinned, "Cooks had the best deal in the company: three days on duty, two days off, and a permanent Class A pass with a semi-private room."

Garrett had no idea he would soon drop his pots and pans and shoot a bazooka from a foxhole.

They shipped out in Boston Harbor on one of the three largest English ships — the Aquatania. Landing at Gourock, Scotland, Garrett went by train to Banbury, England.

He found that preparing a Thanksgiving meal for troops was an enormous job.

"Our stoves wouldn't handle all of the turkeys and pumpkin pies, so we used a large community bakery during off hours after the English were through with their work there."

After shipping out of Liverpool in many small boats, the soldiers reached a landing at Le Havre, France. Spending a rainy night in a large waterlogged field, they were then loaded on trucks to go to the front lines near St. Vith, Belgium.

Military history would be made there.

"I was unfortunate to be placed on an open truck, [one of only a few with no cover]. Our barracks bags and all other gear were in trailers behind the trucks. Everything got wet, then frozen, before we got there."

The 422nd and the 423rd regiments were placed on the front lines while Garrett's 424th was behind in reserve.

"We had only been at the front for six days when the Germans broke through the lines on Dec. 16, 1944. The Battle of the Bulge was the largest, most deadly battle in the European theater. The 422nd and 423rd regiments were all captured, wounded or killed."

In "The History of the 106th Infantry Division" by Maj. Gen. Donald A. Stroh, he wrote of Garrett's regiment, "The 424th pulled back to St. Vith. The Nazis were headed for St. Vith. There, cooks and clerks, truck drivers and mechanics shouldered weapons and took to the foxholes.

"... The physical hardships endured, the constant exposure to rain, sleet and snow in freezing temperatures and on terrain over which it was considered impossible to wage effective warfare, have, so far as I know, rarely if ever been demanded of soldiers of any nations."

In an International News Service "News of the Day," Pfc. Ralph Garrett was written up as a survivor of the 106th Division's massacre.

It read, "Pfc. Garrett was a cook in Headquarters Company in the 424th Infantry, 106th Division and was surrounded [by Nazis] for eight days at St. Vith, before being relieved by the U.S. 7th Army. Garrett had frozen feet, one of only 800 soldiers out of 14,000 in the division who escaped death, injury or being taken prisoner."

The Battle of the Bulge was the last major German offensive battle on the Western front in World War II.

Garrett was awarded the Bronze Star with three battle stars and was offered an opportunity to attend Officer Candidate School, but chose to be discharged and came home Dec. 20, 1945.

By Jan. 1, 1946, he was happily working on his family's Hood County farm. Housing there was primitive — but luxurious compared to a foxhole.

"The farm was historical in that it was originally a land grant awarded to Elizabeth Crockett. I raised 900 turkeys there — killed and dressed them — delivered them. I delivered one to some friends in Fort Worth. Their daughter, Gloria Echols, was home from Lawton, Okla., where she was executive director of Camp Fire Girls. On our first date I learned that she had graduated from TSCW [now Texas Women's University] and had been editor of the annual her senior year and had majored in journalism.

"Gloria had spent her summers during college as counselor at YWCA camps at Wimberly. She was outdoor-oriented and adventurous. She would fit on a farm — or anywhere."

That was Thanksgiving 1950. After their marriage on March 4, 1951, Gloria moved onto the Hood County ranch with a pioneer spirit. They lived there for six months with no modern conveniences. Ralph soon established his own drafting service and they bought a farm at Sand Flat.

By 1956, Ralph and Gloria and their three little girls, Judy, Jill and Sybil, enjoyed country living. Gloria taught at Friendship School for two years.

Then disaster struck. They lost everything when their home burned.

"Well, not everything," he explained with a grin. "We were okay and we still had our land — plus, we still had the diapers on the line."

They bought a home on North Robinson Street in Cleburne. In 1959, Gloria began teaching at Adams Elementary School, (to retire in 1986.) Ralph studied real estate appraisal and real estate construction management at TCU's night school, and studied real estate law at the University of Texas at Arlington.

"I purchased old homes and remodeled them for 20 years. My parents bought some and carried the notes with all profits, interest, etc., going into an education trust fund for their grandchildren. The most I had at one time was 11 — I did 95 percent of the remodeling work by myself."

Ralph bought houses from the state highway department when they were clearing land for freeways. They were moved to lots he had purchased.

"My main real estate appraisal clients were Texas Power & Light, Johnson County for

farm-to-market [road] right-of-way, Employee Transfer Corp. for Santa Fe Railroad employee transfer purposes and district-court assigned cases.”

After being certified to teach drafting by East Texas State University, Garrett was drafting, architectural and mechanical drawing instructor at Cleburne High School's Career Center from 1977 through 1984, taking many students to state competition.

“The last year I taught only a half-day, just so that the juniors I had instructed the year before could finish the course their senior year. I didn't retire — I've never retired from anything.”

In 1984, he drew plans for a new country home where their first one had burned. Ralph and his son Ralph Jr., who needed an internship for his Texas State Technical Institute building construction major, built a new one — by themselves.

He became interested in rock work and did that until his shop burned in 1991.

Garrett gave up his real estate license in 1992. Always eager to read, observe and learn, he became intrigued with pictographs, images painted on rocks and cave walls, and petroglyph sites, where images are incised in rock, usually by prehistoric people, as he and Gloria began traveling in New Mexico, Arizona and Utah.

“I was fascinated with everything related to various American Indian cultures. While looking through a Time-Life book with pictures of antique kachinas, carved wooden spirit dolls, I told myself I could do that. I bought several books about them and about kachina carvers, and I was hooked.”

Garrett said he has carved 28 kachinas so far, always from cottonwood root wood. He joined the Texas Woodcarving Guild in 1995 and began to take lessons at every opportunity. He looks forward to the third week of August to go to Santa Fe, N.M., to view Indian artwork at a prestigious juried show there.

“I've always wanted to learn all of the many types of woodcarving. I've converted part of my garage as a carving sanctuary and invite anyone interested to attend each Wednesday from 9 to noon. I have many carving patterns — all of which I have carved so that I am able to furnish a 'go-by' to anyone. I teach only if I am asked and am able to suggest easier or better methods and techniques from time to time. I've studied with many outstanding instructors. I expect I've done at least 130 carvings in my lifetime.”

Garrett was diagnosed with diabetes 46 years ago. Recently fitted with an insulin pump that automatically takes the place of multiple insulin shots a day, he insists the disease has never slowed him down — even making outdoor excursions to sites inaccessible by helicopter. Self-disciplined, he has continuously studied about his condition and its treatment.

Garrett is a member of Cleburne Wood Chippers and the Johnson County Art Guild. Recently some of his carved landscapes were on display at the Layland Museum. He and Gloria have four children: Judy McMahon of Cameron, Jill Goodgion of Cleburne, Sybil Fisher of Flint, and Ralph Garrett Jr. of Burleson. There are 11 grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren.

From the time he was 13, Garrett knew he could build. A rugged outdoorsman who

enjoys poignant poetry readings, he thinks deeply. One wonders: Of all his interests and accomplishments, what one thing has brought him the most satisfaction?

Without hesitation he smiled and said, "Children and grandchildren."

Family is still most important.

Larue Barnes, Cleburne Times-Review - Cleburne, TX, USA



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James D. West

www.IndianaMilitary.org

jimdwest@centurylink.net