

LIONS IN SPRING

Gary R. Mormino

“When shall we three meet again/In thunder, lightning, or in rain?
When the hurlyburly’s done, When the battle’s lost and won.”

Thus begins Shakespeare’s “Macbeth,” as sisters divine the fate of 17th-century Scotland.

In words eerily prophetic, the witches warn, “Fair is foul, and foul is fair: Hover through the fog and filthy air.”

Americans reading “Macbeth” in 1941 must have wondered if the world had been poisoned by a witches’ curse. World War II, however, would not be won by incantations and prophecy. The crusade tested American values and will. Could a democratic society and its citizen soldiers endure when pitted against the Empires of Japan and Nazi Germany?

The United States recruited armed forces numbering 16 million men and women. Sam Gibbons, John Germany, and Fred Karl were three citizen soldiers. Their lives in combat and peace provide stirring stories of patriotism and service.

In the 1920s, they were Huckleberry Fins, young boys exploring the back alleys and bayous of a more innocent Florida.

Sam M. Gibbons, the oldest of the trio, was born in 1920 at the Tampa Bay Hotel hospital. “That’s where my mother’s obstetrician stayed!” he explained. The Gibbons resided nearby, at Plant Avenue and later on Morrison Avenue. His father and grandfather were lawyers.

In the 1930s and early 1940s, the University of Florida was the state’s only four-year public university for white males. Incubator and springboard, the University of Florida’s red-brick campus was home to a few thousand young men, many of whom sped westward every Friday to meet females at Tallahassee’s Florida State College for Women.

“I started out taking ROTC at Gainesville as a lark,” recalled Gibbons. When he turned 21, the Army awarded the young student with a commission, even though he had not graduated, and introduced him to military life at Camp Clebourne in Louisiana.

On Sunday afternoon, December 7, Gibbons was enjoying a movie in the small town of Alexandria, Louisiana, when the manager informed the audience of Pearl Harbor. “At first I didn’t believe it,” remembered Gibbons, “I thought, ‘There goes Orson Welles again!’” in reference to the devilish prank played by the “boy

director” on Halloween Eve 1938 when the young actor staged a Martian invasion of Planet Earth on the radio.

“Remember Pearl Harbor”

John Germany was coming out of a Gainesville movie theater on December 7 when he heard about Pearl Harbor.

Born in rural Alabama in 1922, Germany moved with his parents to Plant City when he was a baby. The Florida real estate crash in 1926 wiped out the Germany’s investments, and the family moved to the southside of Plant City. “It was a wonderful childhood,” he reminisced. “I started supporting my family at age 12. I delivered grocery flyers. In tenth grade, I took a job delivering the Tampa Tribune.”

The University of Florida allowed and encouraged young men to dream. But even dreamers needed cash. Germany borrowed his brother’s suit coat, worked two jobs, and began classes. “I was called up in June of ’43,” he recounted. Following training at Fort Bragg, N.C., the Army sent Germany back to Gainesville to graduate.

In 1944, Germany was sent to Fort Knox, Kentucky, for tank training.

“Where’s Pearl Harbor?”

Frederick B. Karl was born in 1924 in Daytona Beach. A student at Seabreeze High, Karl worked as an usher at the local Empire Theatre. He, too, was at the movies on December 7, when “the manager announced that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. Frankly, I didn’t know where Pearl Harbor was located, but I knew the attack meant the war we had been discussing at home and in school was actually upon us.”

Karl added, “Nothing has been the same since that day.”

Karl attended the University of Florida for one semester before enlisting. At Gainesville, he was studying Sherman’s March to the Sea; at Fort Knox, he was learning about the Sherman tank. He was commissioned at age 18, arriving in Great Britain in May 1944.

Destiny touched Gibbons, Germany, and Karl. They participated in one of the great adventures in history, the liberation of Europe. “For the duration,” school, marriage, and careers were put on hold.

Neither William Shakespeare nor Orson Welles could have imagined the fate of the Free World resting upon the shoulders and harnesses of young Americans.

“Somewhere in France”

On July 1, 1944, the Tampa Tribune headline read, “TAMPAN AMONG FIRST PARATROOPERS IN FRANCE.” Gibbons, a 24-year-old captain in the 101st Airborne Division, wrote a letter to his anxious parents a few days after D-Day. The letter was published in the paper.

“I don’t know if this next will get past the censor, but I will try anyway...I’m still living in my parachute tent...So far I’ve not taken a bath...My outfit was the spearhead of the invasion...My feet touched the ground about 1:26 a.m. on the 6th of June...I know that we will win.”

As the American and British forces established a bridgehead in France, the Allied armies attempted a breakout.

Fred Karl was assigned to the First Army, and later Ninth Army, which fought through Holland and Belgium while pursuing a northern arc into Germany. At age 20, he commanded five Sherman tanks.

Karl recalls the moment when the Americans were attacking the Germans on the Ruhr River. An 88 shell from a Panzer tank blasted his tank’s turret completely away. “Not before I shot the German tank twice,” he insisted.

John Germany was a tank commander under Gen. Patton’s Third Army. Today, he quickly dashes any glory assigned to his task in 1944. “I was a replacement officer. That’s about the lowest position you can imagine. I was replacing someone who had been killed.”

At the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944, Gibbons, Karl, and Germany almost met.

When Germany surrendered in May 1945, the trio prepared for the worst: an invasion of Japan. An atomic bomb dropped by a Floridian, Paul Tibbets Jr., altered the calculus of victory.

On August 14, 1945, Japan surrendered. Karl was driving a tank on the German Autobahn; Gibbons was camped at Bar du Hoc. V-J Day meant victory, but to Gibbons, Germany, and Karl, it meant they had survived. They were also in a hurry to get married, finish school, and have families.

With their GI Bill, Gibbons returned to the University of Florida, Germany attended Harvard Law School., and Karl earned his undergraduate and law school degree at Stetson University in three years.

The trio would be reunited in 1957 as key figures in the Florida Legislature.

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