

Leroy James—Veteran Y member

Leroy James is one of those quiet World War II heroes. A proud member of the Army, he served honorably in New Guinea and the Philippines, and then came home to resume his life-- just like so many others in that "Greatest Generation."

James, who grew up around Franklinton, graduated from Franklinton High School when he was 16, and then went to LSU for three semesters. Once he turned 18, he was drafted in late summer, 1943, sailing over on an Italian luxury liner, turned into a troop ship. Calling himself a replacement, he was one of 10,000 soldiers and 1,800 sailors crammed into the ship with no more than a small bunk as his only space. Meals were served at 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. and the cuisine is not something James will ever forget. "We had navy beans for the morning meal and wieners and sauerkraut for the evening meal," he said. "The next day, it would be more of the same, only the order was reversed. When I came home, I never wanted that food in any meal."

It took the troop ship 25 days to reach its destination because they were darting around enemy ships and submarines. Once at their destination in New Guinea, James became an anti-aircraft gunner in the Sixth Army, guarding the base. He remembers the toll that malaria took on the troops, more than combat. "The Japanese forces had captured the island with the quinine trees, limiting our use to treat the disease," he says. "Taking the quinine prevented us from getting the disease."

Several stark and sobering reminders of the war stick out in James' mind, particularly the sadness he felt at watching a burial at sea and the uncanny effect of "Tokyo Rose," who always seemed to know exactly where the troops were! "Tokyo Rose" was the name given to all female English-speaking radio broadcasters of Japanese propaganda. The final image may have been the one that set him on his eventual career path.

"It just devastated me to see the little kids wandering around looking for their parents, trying to find them," he said. "I don't know if that made me want to work with children."

Returning home in January 1946, James tried to resume his studies at LSU but there was no room at the proverbial inn. “With all the returning veterans they had run out of dorm rooms and you were bused to campus from different locations,” he said. James decided that wasn’t for him so he enrolled at Southeastern Louisiana University as an agricultural biology major and then got a job with a program called Vets on the Farm that taught veterans about agriculture.

In 1950, James married his wartime pen pal and they recently celebrated 69 years of marriage. He says with a chuckle, “God had a plan for us and we managed not to mess it up.” A few years later, he went back to school at the University of Southern Mississippi and got his masters degree, while his wife finished her undergraduate degree. He continued his teaching career, retiring as the principal of Madisonville Junior High. His wife is a retired St. Tammany school system librarian.

James first began working out at the West St. Tammany YMCA in 1999 after a heart attack and quintuple bypass surgery, but didn’t stick with it. After completing the cardiac rehab program the YMCA has with St. Tammany Parish Hospital, he started coming to the Y. Since 2003, he’s at the Y when the doors open, working out for nearly an hour. His routine consists of going to the WST Y every morning at 5:30 a.m., except on Wednesdays. He begins by riding the stationary bike for 35 minutes and then using two weight machines.

Active in his church for many years, James has taught a weekly Bible class at the St. Tammany Parish jail for the last 60 years.

So the next time you might be inclined to skip your workout, just think of 94 year-old Leroy James and his 5:30 a.m. routine. You can easily spot him--proudly wearing his red World War II veteran’s hat!