“American Legion”

Salisbury Titus, an emigrant from England, grew up in Ripley, and started this farm, probably building the barn in the late 1800s. Kristel, my barn scout, told me that two farmhouses existed before 1913, the year Kristel’s grandfather bought the farm. Her dad was born on the farm five years later.

Her father, like mine, fought in WWII, qualifying him to be in “the greatest generation,” and, after the war, he returned to work the farm and raise Kristel and her three siblings. Time passed and, after her dad died, Kristel became the third generation to own this farm.

When I visited, I could hardly see the barn, partially hidden by large hardwood trees and their shade, but I couldn’t help noticing a bus parked to one side, one that appealed to the artist inside me. The blue had faded into a soft, warm color and “American Legion Post 72” was painted on the top of the back and on the side. It begged to be included.

And, the barn begged as well – its missing and warped boards, interior hand-hewn beams, all under the shelter of a strong gambrel roof. Did it have something in common with this bus? The legion, a federally chartered corporation, formed by veterans of the American Expeditionary Forces, was launched in Paris on March 16, 1919, three years after Kristel’s grandfather bought the farm and one year after her father was born. Its membership is limited to honorably discharged U.S. military who served on active duty during specific war times. Having served during the Vietnam years, I am eligible join, something I discovered when I wrote this essay. After all, I’d be in the company of the likes of General George Patton, Humphrey Bogart, Clark Gable, and Sergeant Alvin York, who won the Medal of Honor for leading a charge in WWI. And what a charge it was.

This is part of York’s report: “The Germans got us, and they got us right smart. They just stopped us dead in our tracks. Their machine guns were up there on the heights overlooking us and well hidden, and we couldn't tell for certain where the terrible heavy fire was coming from ... And I'm telling you they were shooting straight. Our boys just went down like the long grass before the mowing machine at home. Our attack just faded out ... And there we were, lying down, about halfway across [the valley] and those German machine guns and big shells getting us hard.”

He was ordered, with 17 other troops, to infiltrate the German lines and stop their fire. It was a suicide mission. But, then-corporal York, he born in a log cabin in Tennessee, wasn’t going to refuse an order. York and his fellow soldiers crept behind the Germans, surprised them, and took control of a large number of prisoners – when hidden machine guns began firing, taking out nine Americans. Now in charge of the remaining seven, Corporal York ordered his men to guard the prisoners while he, singlehandedly, decided to take out the machine gun nest.

He recalled the moment: “And those machine guns were spitting fire and cutting down the undergrowth all around me something awful. And the Germans were yelling orders. You never heard such a racket in all of your life. I didn't have time to dodge behind a tree or dive into the brush ... As soon as the machine guns opened fire on me, I began to exchange shots with them. There were over thirty of them in continuous action, and all I could do was touch the Germans off just as fast as I could. I was sharp shooting ... All the time I kept yelling at them to come down. I didn't want to kill any more than I had to. But it was they or I. And I was giving them the best I had.” In the end, York and his crew had taken out 32 German machine guns, killed 20 Germans, and captured 132 more. The moral of the story: don’t mess with a Tennessee sharp shooter. Maybe I’ll join the Legion, after all.