

Veteran Tilden Counts Booth

A Plumber at UF and in WWII, Gainesville Man Keepin' on as Centenarian

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL STONE

In his Gainesville home, Tilden Counts Booth rocks in a living-room chair as he walks through his 10 decades on Earth.

Behind him on the kitchen bar is a dispenser for his go-to candy, M&Ms, and tacked above are cards from his 100th birthday celebration in August.

As he details his life's resume, two things stand out most: serving in World War II from right after the attack on Pearl Harbor to his discharge in early '46, and his career-long employment at the University of Florida.

In fact, he had been working as a plumber at UF before the U.S.'s entry into the war. "What do you do?" the supervisor who interviewed him for the job in 1939 asked. "I said, 'Well, I think I'd do anything anybody showed me.' He said, 'Well, I like your attitude.'"

Then when he got back in 1946, he received a call from the university within the week. "I hear you're home, Count." And back to work he went.

Booth really has never been a stranger to getting to work, and no time was that more true than when he was a Navy Seabee construction worker building and repairing under the tropical sun in the South Pacific during the war.

And it has all paid off in the form of a nice home and loving family and friends.

But things certainly started off rough. His mother died in his birth in Rockledge, Florida, in 1916. He then came under the care of his grandparents, who moved about occasionally with Booth along for the ride.

During his high school years, though, he finally became stationary, arriving in Gainesville and, except for his military service, remaining ever since. He graduated from Gainesville High School in 1934, when it was on West University Avenue.

Overall, Booth said, much of the town was vastly different compared to today.

"Train used to come right down Main Street," he said. "Depot was right there where that bank is now by the funeral home on Main Street. ... And university was just a boys school — all boys."

Two years into working at UF, the Japanese struck Pearl Harbor, and within the month,

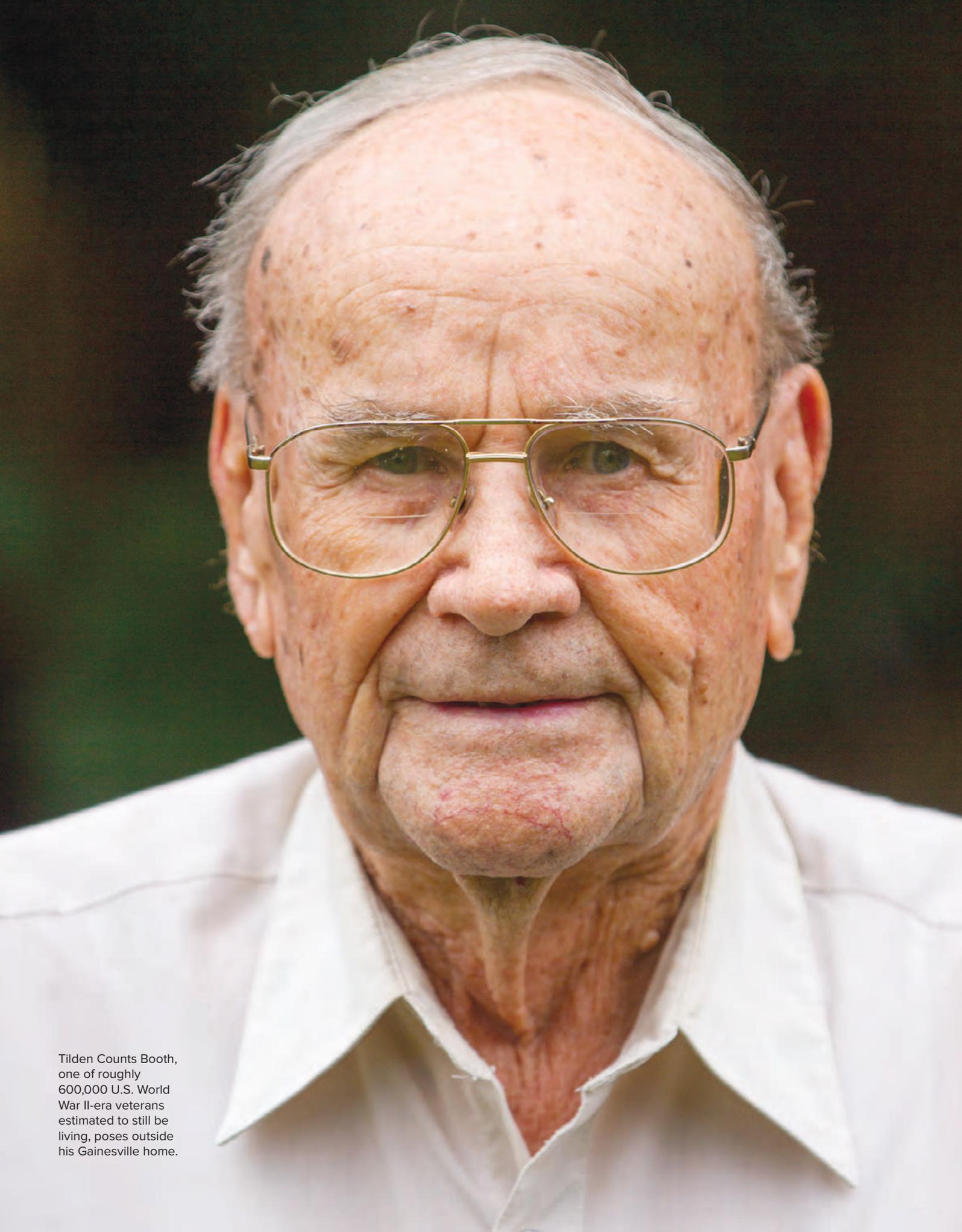
Booth took it upon himself to join the Navy, preferring that to being drafted into the Army.

During boot camp in Norfolk, Virginia, an opportunity presented itself that would direct Booth's path in the war.

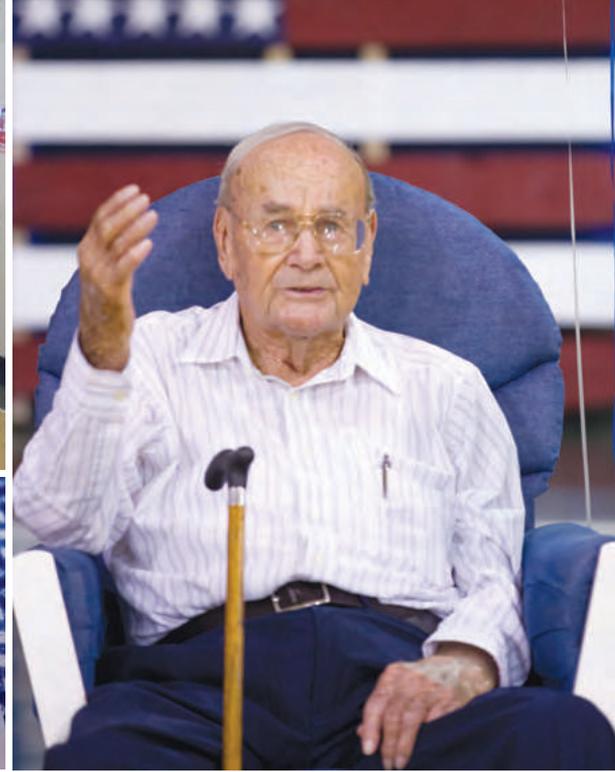
"The captain came out one morning, and he says, 'I got something I want to tell you fellas.' He says, 'I need volunteers.' Well you know, servicemen don't volunteer much."

But Booth did, and so he was among the first Navy Seabees





Tilden Counts Booth, one of roughly 600,000 U.S. World War II-era veterans estimated to still be living, poses outside his Gainesville home.



Booth celebrated his 100th birthday with friends and family in August at his church, the First Church of the Nazarene in Gainesville. For most of the picnic-style get-together, he sat at the front in a rocking chair, with many coming up to talk with him and pose for pictures.

(from the acronym “construction battalion”) — positions created within a month of Pearl Harbor in preparation for battle on the world’s various landscapes on which the military would need to build infrastructure.

With these jobs, the Navy placed less emphasis on physical ability and more on experience (which Booth, then 25, had as a plumber). So the average age for them early in the war was 37, according to a Seabee history from the Navy.

More than 325,000 Seabees would serve in the war.

After Seabee training in Manassas, Virginia, where Booth learned about equipment and building structures, like the military staple Quonset hut, he shipped out to Efate island in

the New Hebrides islands (today Vanuatu) east of Australia.

Never held by the Japanese in their conquests about the Pacific, the islands presented the Allies with a key staging area. So Booth and the other Seabees got to work, building a Quonset-hut hospital, runway, water-purification system, repair garage for themselves and other structures — all from the ground up.

Booth also remembers assembling military trucks shipped to the island in pieces because it was easier to get them across the ocean that way.

“It was hard work,” he recalled, “and it was just below the equator there. If it rained, you didn’t run out of the rain. You just stayed there ‘cause in a little while, you’d be dry anyway. ...



To avoid being drafted into the Army, 25-year-old Booth volunteered for the Navy shortly after Pearl Harbor. A skilled plumber, he then joined the Navy Seabees, who were touted for their experience rather than physical ability and thus at one point had an average age of 37.



The sun [would] just dry you right out.”

To help with sodium loss in the heat, the Seabees received salt tablets, but Booth got permission to stop taking his because they made him sick.

Though digging piping ditches with shovels wasn't the most fun, Booth considers the hospital his favorite project because the sinks and other water systems fell within his expertise.

Also, with Hawaii almost 3,500 miles away, the facility played the important role of providing a nearby place for treating troops.

“It was interesting, and it was frightening, too,” Booth said of witnessing hurt and dead soldiers being unloaded from ships, “cause it looked like sometimes about half of the guys didn't make it.”

Though the Seabees practiced siren-and-take-cover drills, the Japanese never attacked Efate, Booth said. So perhaps the most eventful day there was when the runway received its first group of bombers — which Booth described as the first bomber landing of the Pacific front.

“We heard that they were coming [and that] it would be late one afternoon,” he said. “And so when the boys heard them big engines, we all ran out” and cheered as the planes landed.

He remained stationed in New Hebrides for the majority of his service, from 1942 to 1945, before being allowed to return to the States for a few weeks. He then shipped out to Pearl Harbor en route to Leyte Gulf in the Philippines, where he awaited orders but didn't get them because the war came to a close.

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But aboard ship as he arrived at the Philippines, he did see one last war-related mishap: a U.S. fighter plane crashing into the water. The plane was all that was lost, though, because the pilot managed to eject and parachute down, with Booth's ship sending out a lifeboat to recover him.

“He was a mechanic that was checking out those planes when they come back in, and something went wrong with the plane and down he went,” Booth remembered. “He said he's had a couple of them do that to him.”

But even once the war ended, Booth didn't get to leave the Philippines for a couple more months. So with nothing to do outside of some guard duty with a rifle, boredom filled much of the time, he said.

One thing that sticks out in Booth's mind from when he actually did get to head home is how much equipment he saw the U.S. leave behind.



(Left) Friends pose with Booth at his 100th birthday party, which also included singing and a Q&A with him about his life experiences. (Below) A dispenser full of M&Ms, which Booth considers his headache medicine, sits on his kitchen counter.



It's not immediately clear how much U.S. materiel remained scattered about the world at the war's conclusion, but more recent conflicts reveal that it wasn't a one-time practice.

For example, in 2014, as the U.S. prepared to largely remove itself from combat roles in Afghanistan, Fox News put the worth of stuff that wouldn't make it back home at \$6 billion. And the "more than 4 million pieces of this and that" given to the Iraqi government as combat troops readied for withdrawal there in 2011 totaled \$580 million, according to the Washington Times.

"The equipment that we had, all that stuff that we had, and the boats and everything, put 'em up in a little ravine-like [area] and just left 'em there" at Leyte Gulf, Booth said. "They tell me that they more or less sold 'em, but they just wanted to give 'em away" to the natives.

He arrived in Jacksonville in early 1946 to be discharged — but not before the Navy threw one last offer (\$2,500) at him for reenlistment.

"I said, 'Where's the door?'" he joked. "Oh goodness, I was ready to come home."

By March, Booth had married Shelly Alma Murrhee, whom he had met through a church friend before entering the service.

They lived in Gainesville as he went back to work as a plumber for UF.

At the same time, the university became a veteran hub as service members started or continued their education on the G.I. Bill.

"They were happy 'cause the war was over and they was home and they [could] go to school," Booth said. "But yet it was sorrowful period of time in the middle [because] so many of them knew other fellas that weren't able to come back."

Among Booth's fondest memories of UF are his visits with university President John Tigert, who held the job from 1928 to 1947.

"He'd be coming across the campus, and, of course, I'd be workin' some-

where or another," Booth recalled. "If he saw me, he'd come over and talk to me, but he was the last one. The others, I think, thought they was too high above a worker."

Booth spent 40 years there, including years credited for his war service, before retiring in 1979.

In all that time, he never encountered something as severe as the ol' fireworks-in-the-toilet prank. But the wily students did have some other ideas.

"The biggest tricks they tried to play on ya is to cover up your valves, and then they'd go get a commode or somethin' runnin' and they'd call a plumber to come out [to] work on it and he couldn't find the valve, where you turn the water on and off outside," Booth remembered.

Specifically, he's talking about the night he got called in after someone clogged a toilet so that it overflowed and pulled up an azalea bush with which to hide the valve. "I picked up that thing and said, 'There's your valve.'"

In his many years of retirement,

Booth has kept himself busy, including through maintenance work at a camp in White Springs run by his church, the First Church of the Nazarene in Gainesville.

He also spends much time with his sizable family, which includes four daughters, six grandchildren and numerous great-grandchildren (Alma passed away in 2008), as well as reflect on his years in the service.

“World War II is remembered ... by many people like it was one of the worst wars that we’ve had,” Booth explained. “And I guess you could call it that, too, because of all the loss that we had. But I think we had to gain a lot from it because there were a lot of things we needed to do better ourselves.”

At his picnic-style birthday celebration in August at the Nazarene church, dozens of friends and family members gathered to eat, sing songs, share stories and take pictures with Booth, who sat at the front of the room in a rocking chair.

“I remember when my husband, Todd, and I first got married, my mother and dad would come and visit us,” daughter Marianne Webb told those gathered. “And he was always fixing things that I didn’t even know were broken.

“I’d get home from work in the afternoon, and he’d say, ‘Oh, I fixed such-and-such for you.’ And I’d say, ‘Well thank you, Daddy.’”

As Booth squeaked in his rocking chair, Webb also read a poem.

*I can see
Not as clearly as I did
But I can see my grandchildren smile
Or a sunset, or a pansy
I can hear
Not as keenly
But I can hear, ‘I love you’
The wind in the trees, and beautiful music
I can smell
Not as sharply
But I know when bread is baking
Coffee is perking, or honeysuckle is blooming
I can feel
With my hands, and my heart
And so I touch the ones I love
And things I care about
I can dream
Not the grand dreams of my youth
But, nonetheless, dreams
Thank you, God, for letting me keep these blessings
Through these many years.*

Oh, and Booth’s advice for today’s plumbers: “I would tell ‘em to do the best they could, do the best they could.” ■



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