

# Senior Times

## Russell Pickett

*The Last-Known  
Survivor of Legendary  
Company A*



AUGUST 2019 [seniortimesmagazine.com](http://seniortimesmagazine.com)

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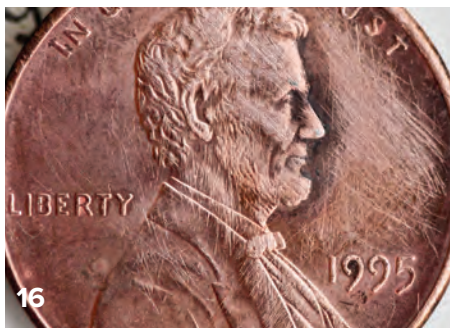




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# Veteran Russell Pickett

Infantryman Recently Recognized by  
the President is Last from Omaha Beach's  
"Suicide Wave" Company A

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL STONE

**C**apt. Taylor Fellers stood before his 200-man Company A, planned to be the first infantry unit to hit Omaha Beach, and described the dire challenge ahead.

Some of you are going to lose legs, Fellers said, some arms, some eyesight, and many of you won't be coming back at all. The captain then made an offer: Any man can remove himself without penalty or shame.

"Didn't have a one go up. None of us went," recalled Russell Pickett, then a 19-year-old private in the famed company (of the 1st Battalion in the 29th Division's 116th Infantry Regiment) and today, at 94, its only known survivor from the D-Day landings. "Course, we was all enthused, excited, and I don't know how to tell you what we felt like."

By the end of June 6, 1944, the severity of Fellers' forecast had come true: The attack on heavily defended Omaha, the deadliest of the five D-Day beachheads, resulted in 2,400 killed, wounded, or missing U.S. troops.

Official casualty figures don't get more specific, but a detailed account of the first wave from *The Atlantic* magazine in 1960 estimates Company A's dead at two-thirds within the first 30 minutes — killed mostly by artillery; machine-gun fire, which in at least one case mowed down the men inside a

landing craft as soon as its ramp dropped; and drowning.

Such devastation earned that initial attack the nickname "the suicide wave," depicted in the 1998 movie "Saving Private Ryan."

Among the Company A dead were 19 men all from the small town of Bedford, Virginia, and Fellers. "He didn't get out of the water on D-Day," Pickett said. "They got him."

On surviving himself, Pickett remembered once telling a TV interviewer, "I have a praying momma and two praying aunts, and that's what got me out' — and I still believe that same way."

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**L**IKE MANY ACROSS THE WORLD, I BECAME AWARE OF PICKETT when President Trump recognized him among the veterans on stage at the 75th anniversary ceremony for D-Day in France.

"Russell Pickett is the last-known survivor of the legendary Company A," Trump told the thousands gathered at the Normandy American Cemetery, just down from Omaha Beach. "And today, believe it or not, he has returned once more to these shores to be with his comrades. Private Pickett, you honor us all with your presence."

The crowd then cheered for Pickett as he stood from his wheelchair — with the help of others, including French President Emmanuel Macron — and hugged Trump.

D-Day veteran Russell Pickett, 94, stands in front of his Soddy-Daisy, Tennessee, home, where he has lived since 1955. "Like I tell them all the time, 'Give out, but don't give up. When you give up, you're gone.'"





Pickett and his wife, Marilyn, hold a sign from when he was welcomed home to Tennessee following his June trip to France for the 75th anniversary of D-Day. (Top right) Pickett when he was a teenage private in the Army. “They don’t go away,” he said of his wartime injuries. “They stay with you. I don’t know if they’ll leave me when they bury me or not.”

“Tough guy,” Trump joked upon returning to the microphone.

On a whim, as I watched the ceremony on TV, I searched Pickett’s name and discovered that, by sheer coincidence, he’s from my hometown of Soddy-Daisy, outside Chattanooga — less than 10 minutes from where I sat while visiting my mom’s house.

I gave him several days to get back from Europe and settled in, called his number from the phonebook, and through his kind wife, Marilyn, we worked to get an interview scheduled.

Seated in his kitchen, occasionally shifting his body in pain, Pickett explained that he was initially hesitant about making the 10-day trip — his third back — because he had been getting through some ailments.

He eventually decided, though, he’d be able to go, and once there, among the meals and ceremonies and hundreds of autographs and being waited on, he felt like royalty.

On being personally recognized by the president, which came as a complete surprise, Pickett said, “To think that I’d been kidding with some of them about being a Tennessee hillbilly, and here I am shaking hands with the president. ... I might’ve backed out had I [known] because, you know, that’s not ever been me: to seek glory for anything.”

After my interview with her husband, Marilyn Pickett added, “It was amazing to see him be blessed that way. When I saw him and when President Trump hugged him, that just — it just broke my heart because I was proud for him.”

**R**USSELL PICKETT WAS BORN IN 1925 in the Daisy community (Soddy and Daisy didn't join together until 1969). His dad died when he was only 11.

So early on, he and his oldest brother had to take on odd jobs — on a farm, at a coal mine, wherever — to help care for the family, which included another brother with a crippled leg, three sisters, and their mom.

Eventually, as conflict was heating up abroad and then Pearl Harbor attacked in 1941, the oldest brother joined the Army.

“When he went in, I kind of idolized him since he was the oldest brother [and with my] father gone,” Pickett said. “So my big desire was to get on in” the military. But he hadn't yet reached 18, and his mom wouldn't give the parental consent for him to join early.

So when he was filling out his draft questionnaire, he marked himself as unemployed — even though he was

***“The infantry didn't have any breaks at all in combat, you know. We're just there to live or die.”***

working in sheet metal — “so I knew they'd take me right quick.” Sure enough, soon after turning 18 in April 1943, he was drafted and sworn into the Army by June.

He took his basic training in Alabama and had more in the Northeast, and by January 1944, he had made it to Plymouth, England, as part of the buildup for the invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe.

Training in southern England was filled with rigor and included a 20-mile march wearing maybe 65 pounds of equipment. “That was making us train for what we was going to reach in com-

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(Left) Pickett's aunt called him "the sweetest 18 yr. old boy in the whole wide world" in a 1943 letter. (Just above and top right) Photos from Pickett's 1994 trip to France for D-Day's 50th anniversary. (Top middle) Cards identify him as a PFC, or private first class. "When you hit combat, you're automatically a PFC," he said of being promoted from private.

bat," Pickett said. "The infantry didn't have any breaks at all in combat, you know. We're just there to live or die."

Pickett's job on D-Day was to be a flamethrower. During a training exercise soon before, he was running forward with the fuel and pressure tanks on his back, and a fellow soldier was to use Bangalore torpedoes to blow open a ditch. But twice the amount of explosive was used, and something hit Pickett under his chin, knocking him out.

"When I came to, the lieutenant was hollering, 'Where's my flamethrower?'" Even though he was hurt and bleeding, he still managed to get through ditch and complete the training. "I said, 'Well, I think I can make the rest of it.'"

This was only the first of four injuries, the other three coming during combat.

**A**FTER SEEMINGLY REAL TRAINING SCENARIOS THAT TOOK him out over the waters of the English Channel, Pickett knew the actual D-Day was coming because of the equipment that was being loaded aboard ship and then especially after Gen. Dwight Eisenhower's speech, heard over the ship's intercom.

"Let us all beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking," Eisenhower said in conclusion on the morning of June 6, according to the speech's transcript.

Pickett's Company A crossed the channel aboard the British ship *Empire Javelin*, and close to 6:30 a.m., they loaded into their landing craft amid heavy seas. His tanks on his back, his assistant flamethrower seated next to him, Pickett stayed especially low so a bullet wouldn't strike a tank and blow up the boat.

Surviving  
Re...



Water had come over the sides and was swashing over the floor with vomit from the men. Some used their helmets to bail out the water because the boat's pumps weren't working.

But that would soon prove to be among the least of their worries.

The Allied aerial and naval bombardment beforehand hadn't hit the German defenses right at the beach, and only two of 29 U.S. tanks had made it through the rough seas to shore. So Company A's seven 30-man landing craft were heading into the meat grinder almost by themselves.

Pickett's job was to use his flamethrower to take out the Germans within a specific concrete gun emplacement. And then he and his assistant, who was carrying an extra fuel tank, were to scale a hill and take out a much bigger emplacement — "a suicide job," he said of being a flamethrower.

But right as Pickett's landing craft was about to hit the beach, an artillery explosion knocked it out. At the shoreline, his assistant and another man worked to get his tanks off him, the assistant later told him at a reunion.

Pickett doesn't remember if he was unconscious, but it was certainly a haze after the explosion. When he started to get his bearings, he saw a dead body maybe 12 feet from him. "I like to think that he helped with me" surviving after the explosion.

Now totally on sand, he was having trouble getting his legs to work and could hardly crawl. Weapons fire was going off around him, and all he had was his combat knife and .45 pistol, which he "couldn't hit the side of a barn with."

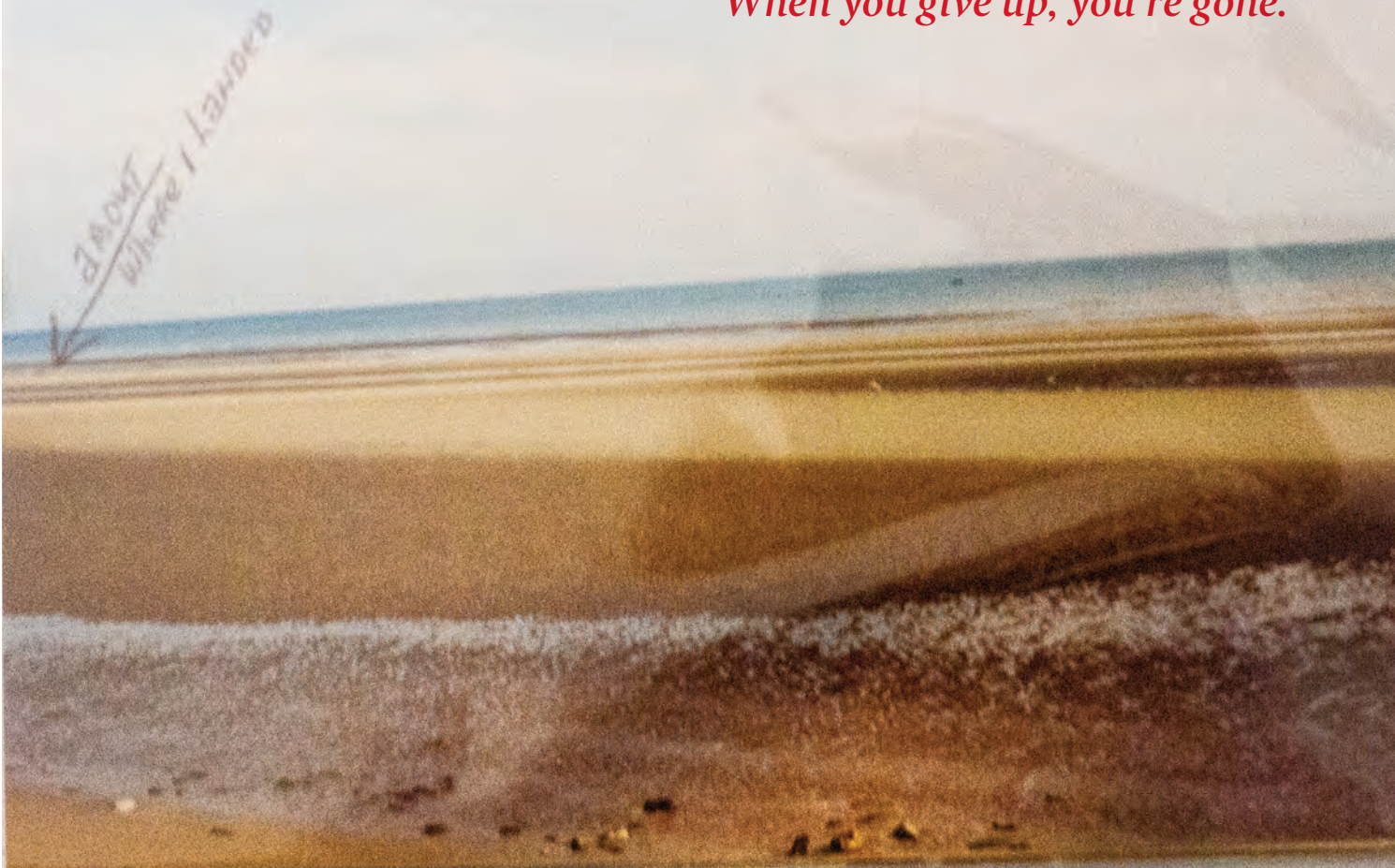
As landing craft carried in more troops, Pickett was able to get in one and head back to Empire Javelin with five other wounded, including one whose shoulder and arm had been mutilated by a direct shell hit and died on the way.

"I fault myself a whole lot" for not making it to the gun emplacements, he said.





*“I never was one to give up. I still don’t give up,” he said. “And like I tell them all the time, ‘Give out, but don’t give up. When you give up, you’re gone.’”*



**D**ESPITE THE INJURY PRIMARILY TO HIS RIGHT LEG, THE NOW private first class rejoined his decimated company eight days after D-Day, when only a little more than a mile inland had been taken by the Allies.

Armed now with a rifle, he began to march through France on the front lines, encountering Germans “three times a day, I guess,” he laughed.

“When we got to overpowering them, they backed up to the next [hedgerow], then we had to take that one,” he said. “So every one of them was a battle royal all through there for the first weeks.”

Sometimes, he added, “you come eyeball to eyeball. Sometimes you had bayonets on and all this kind of stuff.”

Pickett didn’t stop himself from discussing just about anything, but he made clear his line is specific enemy casualties.

“Let me tell you something: that people think it’s fun to the guy that takes a life,” he said. “At that moment, it is; two hours later, get down [when the solemnity hits you]. We’re bound to

have to do that because it’s him or me, see.

“So that’s what they do to the young men that goes in there. That’s what they make out of them: fighters. ... By the time I got there into combat, well, I was just a combat soldier, and if I see a man, I shot at him, hoping he didn’t see me.”

On July 2, holding position outside the French city of Saint-Lô, Pickett and four other troops spotted a combat patrol of 20 or 30 Germans coming over a hedgerow.

“They didn’t know we’s there, so we was first to open fire on them, and we had a pretty good battle,” he said. In it, though, he took a blast from a German grenade and was again put out of action, mostly from extreme blood loss.

Yet after 21 days of recovering, he returned, in time to help take an important hill at Vire, France, for which his battalion earned its second presidential citation (the first was for D-Day).

By the time Pickett was finally taken out of the war for good — from an artillery blast outside Brest, France — Company A



(Left) Writing on a photo of Omaha Beach from Pickett's 1994 trip to France shows the area at which his landing craft approached. It would've been around there that the craft was knocked out by an artillery explosion, putting Pickett out of the battle. (Top right) An arrow on another 1994 photo points to the position of one of two German emplacements Pickett was supposed to attack with his flamethrower.



had been “wiped out three times,” he said, and it was mostly if not almost all replacements.

When he woke up from the artillery injury 12 days later in a hospital in England, the staff thought him to be in worse shape than he thought, and he figured he’d again be rejoining the fight. He was still 19.

“I never was one to give up. I still don’t give up,” he said. “And like I tell them all the time, ‘Give out, but don’t give up. When you give up, you’re gone.’”

**P**ICKETT SPENT WEEKS RECOVERING IN ENGLAND AND THEN served as an orderly in another hospital there through the German surrender in May 1945 and until June, when he returned to the U.S. and, about six months later, was discharged.

For years, he worked primarily in construction, but his wartime injuries, mainly to his back, were proving too much. So he trained in electronics and opened Pickett’s Television Service in Soddy-Daisy with a cousin and operated it for 29

years, retiring in 1989.

He’s dad to two children and two stepchildren all from his wife who died many years ago, and granddad to he doesn’t know how many grandkids, great-grandkids, and great-great-grandkids.

“Yes, what he did in 1944 and ‘45 is amazing — not just D-Day, but the month after,” said Josh Roe, an anchor for Chattanooga’s ABC affiliate, who has interviewed hundreds of veterans for his “Price of Freedom” series, including recently Pickett around his trip to France.

“But one thing that I’ve gotten to experience is talking to his family. ... The amount of just love and respect they have for that man, it’s impressive to see.”

Family-oriented, faith-driven, welcoming — but perhaps the characteristic that most defines Pickett is humble.

“I don’t know that it changes anything, really,” he said of being the last from Company A. “I believe in the Lord, and I just believe it’s blessings from him that I’m even here now.” ■