

It was just a rusty spike

*Lt. Col. Robert Hefner
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FAYETTEVILLE, N.C. – We were staying at a hotel just outside Fort Bragg when a friend of mine asked me to walk to dinner with him, which seemed reasonable.

Along the way he stopped at an old abandoned section of railroad track and started working at something I couldn't see.

As I got closer he stood up and handed me an old rusty spike, twisted out of the rotting railroad tie.

I asked him what I should do with it and he told me to look at it – to see it for what it was, not just a piece of steel but a symbol.

It was just a rusty spike, twisted from the rotting wood that had been its home for who knows how long.

It was nothing special, nothing remarkable, and nothing worth writing about – just a worn out railroad spike from the corner of Bragg Road, from an abandoned stretch of track no longer used and no longer relevant.

But oh, the things it had seen.

In the summer of 1918 it had been fresh, new, and shiny as it was minted from an unnamed Pennsylvania steel mill and shipped to the crews working in the North Carolina sun.

Just like a million of its kin, it was taken unceremoniously and driven into the fresh wood of the railroad, the railroad that linked what was then Camp Bragg to the rest of the world.

It was one in a million, but it was there, it mattered, it was important.

That one rusted piece of steel saw the trains full of Soldiers coming and going as the United States returned from the European battlefields of World War I.

It supported the trains that moved mountains of ammunition from the factories to training grounds, food, water, and every other imaginable necessity to the tired Soldiers recovering from war.

It carried the dunnage of war, the mangled equipment and surplus cannon back from those same battlefields of Europe.

One metal spike was one small part of that effort as this nation celebrated victory, licked its wounds, and looked forward to peace.

The “War to End All Wars” was over.

Camp Bragg continued to grow, eventually becoming Fort Bragg.

As a training center, its mission has always been the same – to take America's sons and daughters and turn them into America's Warriors.

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– Lt. Col. Robert Hefner
75th Training Division, G-3/5/7

Warriors who fight tirelessly for an idea, for a concept of freedom for everyone, everywhere.

That is the American way.

The myth of the “War to End All Wars” ended.

As this nation prepared for another great war, diesel trains thundered past, carrying wide-eyed recruits, the sons of that previous generation, to fight again.

This time America had been attacked

and was fighting back on many fronts, from Anzio and El Alemein to Corregidor and Wake Island.

The heroes of that generation passed over that same piece of steel and it held steadfast, solid and strong in its support.

A few short years later the inbound trains full of starry-eyed recruits were replaced by the trains full of dead-eyed veterans, men who had seen too much, experienced too much in their freedom quest.

The Great War part two had ended, the peace dividend was a reality, and still that one iron spike held fast, never wavering.

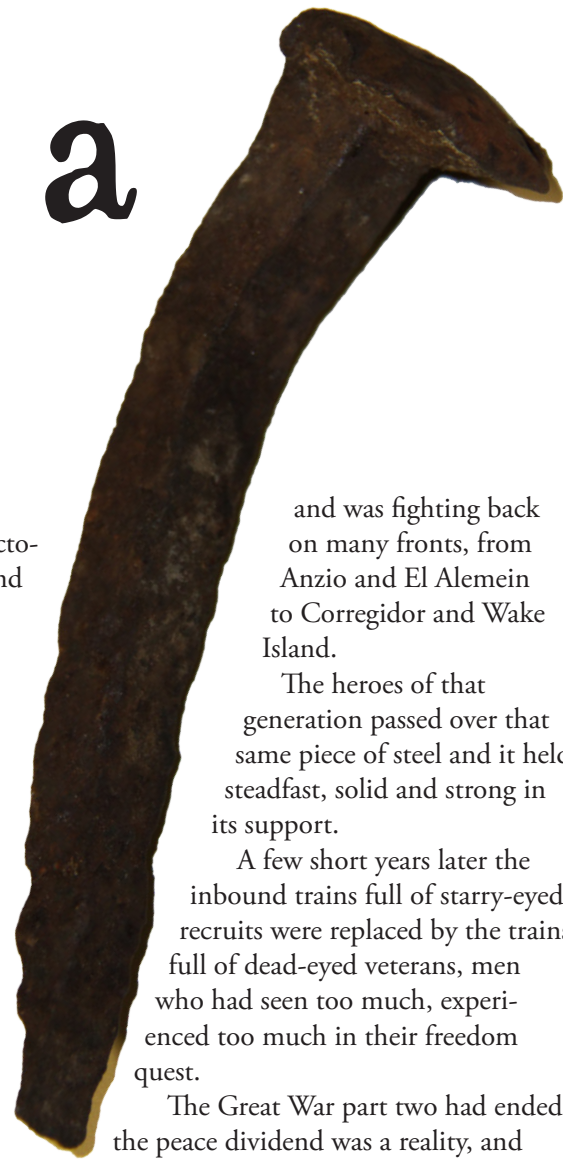
Again the wars came and the trains ran full, this time with the Communist Hordes in Korea populating their passengers' nightmares.

Back and forth, from post to port, from city to post, the trains ran endlessly and those steel spikes held their ground.

Those bloody battlefields of Korea demanded even more Soldiers, more grit for the mill, and the rails pushed them forward, endlessly serving the wars that men make.

Just a few years later, another crop of war bound recruits rode the rails to Fort Bragg, preparing for the jungle battlefields of Vietnam and other places unnamed and unknown.

Roads were taking precedence and rails were less important but still needed to supply the war machine, that martial factory that for generations had taken fresh faced kids from the streets of Anytown, U.S.A. and turned them into Warriors.





Lt. Col. Robert Hefner, with the 75th Training Division, G-3/5/7, examines an old railroad spike found along an section of track in Fayetteville, N.C. earlier this year. (Courtesy photo)

That one lonely iron spike watched them all come and go, it saw the change in their faces from recruit to Warrior to hardened veteran. It never failed.

The rails became less important and were eventually abandoned. They sit still today, unused and ignored, only sections remaining.

But the hard reality that held those rails together, that supported so many generations of Warriors, still stand firm.

Rusted, yes. Worn and bent, without a doubt, but just like the ideas that sustains the veterans of yesterday and the recruits of tomorrow, those few remaining rusty spikes stand resolute, unchanged in their determination, un-swayed by politics or weather or time.

They have seen history. They are history.

Just a rusty iron railroad spike? Yes, but so much more.

Just as a flag is nothing more than a piece of cloth, those little pieces of history are nothing more than the Pennsylvania Steel from which they were created.

Alone they have no meaning, no context, no purpose.

Together they have always been a part of this “Great American Experiment”, this grandiose idea of “Freedom For All.”

Just as so many Soldiers have given their full measure as nothing more than a cog in the great machine of America, so too have these small pieces of iron.

Less important than the men who drove them with unforgiving steel hammers, less important than the men who rode those rails to fulfill their small parts in this Nation’s destiny, but none the less an essential piece of America.

It’s not just a piece of steel.

It is a piece of history.



DOUBLE EAGLE

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Deadline for submission is the 20th of each month

