

Wreaths Across America – New Bern National Cemetery on Dec 16, 2017

I'm an American. Yes, I am. By Ross H. Schwalm

The Wreaths Across America 2017 Theme is: I'm an American. Yes, I am. I volunteered for the United States Marine Corps Officer program in 1979 to serve my country. I was commissioned a 2nd Lt in 1981 and became an Artillery man like my relatives before me. My first assignment was Alpha Battery, 1st Bn, 10th Marines, 2nd Marine Division at Camp Lejeune. I lived in New Bern as a roommate of a family friend, Mr. Ken Dimpsey, a US Navy veteran. He took care of my car and bills during my first deployment to Europe in 1982. He is an American. Yes, he is. I thank him for his service to his country, to his American Legion Post and for his leadership in support of Wreaths Across America here in New Bern. < Turn and Salute Ken>

Why did I volunteer? Why did I serve 20 years and two tours of combat? Why do I still serve today as a Legionnaire, a Son of the Union Veterans of the Civil War, as a historian for my family's historical association, and as a docent at a museum dedicated to telling the history of the American Revolution? Because I'm an American. Yes, I am and I also descend from a long line of American Veterans that reaches all the way back to 1776.

As I go backwards through history, I start with my brother, Ben Edward Schwalm - US Army, drafted in March 1968. He was an American. Yes, he was. He became a Rocket and Missile Technician at Redstone Arsenal at the height of the Space Race. He became the Adjutant of the Tower City, PA American Legion and needed a speaker for the Memorial Day Ceremony in 1986. He sent a letter to my battalion commander at Camp Lejeune and I was "voluntold". The American Legion hat I wear today was present and accounted for on a beautiful spring day proudly worn by my uncle, Ross Albert Thompson.

My Uncle Ross was an American. Yes, he was. Drafted in May 1943 at age 30, he became a US Army mechanic in the 278th Field Artillery Battalion. He deployed to Europe and landed across Normandy Beach in August 1944. His unit was part of General George S. Patton's 3rd Army. He was severely wounded in the leg on October 5, 1944 and spent the rest of the war rehabilitating until discharged in 1946. He walked with a cane when discharged but mustered the strength to march with hundreds of his fellow veterans in his home town Welcome Parade in August 1946. Uncle Ross instilled in me the values of the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Disabled Veterans of America and to raise a flag every day at his gas station.

My father, Ben Lebo Schwalm - US Army, was drafted in April 1943. He was an American. Yes, he was. His prewar occupation listed on his service record was "Beer Distributor". The Army figured he knew something about "medicine" distribution and made him a medic. He served in the 656th Medical Clearing Company (Separate) in New Guinea, Mindanao in the Philippine Islands and as part of the occupation army in Japan. He was discharged in January 1946 and joined the American Legion. He instilled in me the values of community service and honoring veterans. I spent countless hours with him at the American Legion.

Three of my Great Grandfathers were veterans of the Union Army in the Civil War. John P. Kessler, 48th PA Infantry, fought in the Battle of New Bern in March 1862. William Wallace Thompson served in the 39th PA Militia in 1863 during the Gettysburg Campaign. John Lebo served in the 210th PA Infantry during 1864 – 1865 near Petersburg, VA during the final battles that ended at Appomattox. They were Americans. Yes, they were. My fourth Great Grandfather, Peter Schwalm, did not serve in the Civil War because he had two older brothers and a brother in law who all served in Pennsylvania

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Regiments. Peter did support the war effort by helping his sister in law run her absent husband's farm and he paid his taxes on his grist mill and his own farm. He was an American. Yes, he was.

Going back further in family history, my 3 times Great Grandfather George Lebo served in the War of 1812. His father, Adam Lebo, was a Continental Militiaman in 1779 during the American Revolution. These soldiers helped secure the freedom of the United States from England. They were Americans. Yes, they were.

My 3 times Great Grandfather, Johannes Schwalm, was a Hessian soldier captured at the Battle of Trenton in 1776. Although he was a German, he became an American. Yes he did.

Today, we are joined together to Remember the Fallen, Honor the Veterans and Teach our children the values of freedom like my family taught me. As you place wreaths today, mention the name of the veteran at your feet just as I have lifted up my family veterans over the past 241 years. I thank you for your donations to make this program a tremendous success with over 5300 wreaths purchased for New Bern National Cemetery as well as your willingness to give up your time to place these wreaths. You are Americans. Yes, you are.