

# Born to wave the flag

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Retired Chief Master Sgt. Blaine Yelton displays a photo of his crew, Nov. 12, 2014, at Joint Base Charleston, S.C. Yelton, now 99 years old, served in the Army Air Corps during World War II and in the Air Force during the wars in Korea and Vietnam. (U.S. Air Force photo/Eric Sesit)



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**JOINT BASE CHARLESTON, S.C. (AFNS)** -- *(This feature is part of the ["Through Airmen's Eyes"](#) series on AF.mil. These stories focus on a single Airman, highlighting their Air Force story.)*

Blaine Yelton was born Aug. 12, 1915, when World War I was in its second bloody year.

If he could have had his way, and if the Army could have found a uniform small enough to fit him, baby Blaine probably would have jumped out of his crib and fought in that war, too.

After all, this now 99-year-old veteran fought in World War II, Korea and Vietnam and probably would still be in uniform today if he could get an age-limit waiver.

"I wouldn't be able to drive though," Yelton said. "They took my driver's license away from me a few years back. Even though I'm a good driver and never had a problem, they still say I shouldn't drive. "

That wasn't always the case though. He's the product of a lifetime of hard, back-breaking work.

Born in Rutherford County, North Carolina, about 20 miles from the nearest town, Yelton is the second oldest of 11 children. His father worked hard to support his family in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, but it was always tough making ends meet.

"It was hard to make a living in that part of the country," Yelton said. "We didn't have electricity. Our running water was the creek out back and school was a two mile walk ... or run through muddy roads."

In order to help his family financially, Yelton left school at 15 and went to work at a logging camp. He didn't stop working for decades.

"I worked in a mine, a saw mill, drove a logging truck and even a feed truck in Miami, stacking 100-pound bags higher than myself," Yelton said. "Money was tight; it was the beginning of the depression so I would find work where I could and was always sending money home to help the family."

And then came Dec. 7, 1941, and with it, a draft notice.

"When I got my draft notice, I was 25. I tried to join the Navy, but they turned me down because of my eyesight," Yelton said. "I had traveled all night on the railroad and I was tired and bleary-eyed when I took the eye exam. I tried to explain that to the docs, but they didn't want to hear it. So I said you (can keep your Navy), and that turned out to be the best day of my life. I went into the Army and then right into the Army Air Corps."

He trained at Great Falls, Texas, and became a gunner on a B-24, based in Guadalcanal. From there, the 10 men assigned to his aircraft flew 55 missions against the Japanese.

"In Europe, the crews flew 25 missions before they could go home," Yelton said. "In the Pacific, our tour of duty was one full year. So we just kept flying. I knew the dangers ... I knew the risks we were taking, but for some reason, it didn't worry me one bit."

Amazingly, his entire crew survived all 55 missions with only one injury; Yelton himself was hit by a 20 mm round from a Japanese Zero, a wound he doesn't talk about much, and that didn't slow him down.

When World War II ended, Yelton decided to stay in the Army, and in 1947, transitioned over to the newly formed Air Force.

"I liked the work. I liked to shoot, I liked the aircraft and I liked flying. And, depending on the crew and the mission, occasionally I even got to sit at the controls and fly," Yelton smiled.

He would see more action in Korea. As a crew chief on a C-47, he would transport wounded soldiers to Japan, drop supplies to the Marines on the ground and haul ammunition and barbed wire.

When the fighting in Korea ended, then-Tech. Sgt. Yelton found himself performing maintenance on the "Big Shakies," C-124 cargo planes at Hunter Field near Savannah, Georgia.

He met his wife, Louise, in West Palm Beach, Florida. "We just clicked," Yelton said.

Yelton, now a seasoned veteran of two wars, settled down a bit to raise a family. "I'm really proud of my two girls," he said. He also continued to do what he did best; work on airplanes and take care of his troops.

One of his favorite stories is about the time his squadron at Rhein-Main Air Base, Germany, had five aircraft out of commission. A nose gear bearing needed to be repaired, but the repair required welding torches to remove the old part, a process at that time forbidden by Air Force Instruction.

"Those planes had been grounded for more than two months. I told my commander I could put those airplanes in commission," Yelton said.

"But he insisted I couldn't weld on the aircraft. So I told him, 'Sir, I'm not welding on the aircraft, I'm welding a steel bar on a nut on the aircraft. It will heat the part and I can bang it off with a sledge hammer.' The commander thought about that for a second and said, 'Well that makes sense. Do it.' I had two planes ready to fly by the end of the day!"

It wasn't long before another country on the other side of the world was getting attention from the American people: Vietnam. Then-Chief Master Sgt. Yelton would once again serve in harm's way, this time maintaining his squadron's 16 C-47s, ensuring they were ready and able to meet all missions.

"We only lost one," Yelton said.

From Vietnam, Yelton returned to the U.S., eventually landing at Charleston Air Force Base, South Carolina, where he spent the last two years of his career working on C-141s as part of the 437th Airlift Wing.

"That was a fine airplane," Yelton said. "It didn't require half the maintenance some of the older planes did."

Time eventually caught up with the old chief master sergeant and it was time to retire. But in typical Blaine Yelton fashion, retirement from the

military only meant he could go find something else to do.

"I worked for five years hauling fuel. Then I went back to North Carolina, where I had bought over 400 acres and raised cattle for seven or eight years," Yelton said. "Now that was hard work."

Yelton credits his life of hard work with his longevity.

"I'm a happy man," he said. "I never smoked and I never drank anything other than a little wine once in a while. I go very light on fats and heavy on fruit and salads. I've also been lucky that I've never been overweight.

"Looking back, I would have to say I take the most pride in making those airplanes fly and supervising the maintainers, making sure they are all ready to go," Yelton said. "And I wouldn't change anything. I would do it better if I could, but other than that, I wouldn't change a thing."

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