

## Getting to Know . . .

### Gilbert K. Gil Alford, Jr. AAFA #0019

*In the previous issue Pam Thompson introduced this idea for getting to know our members. Several of us concluded we ought to get to know one another better before we are working with their obituaries and In Remembrance or Memorial articles! To help set the example, and continue from Pam's start, Gil is following with his history in this issue. It is expected that most of you will follow suit and submit your article soon and that each subsequent issue will have one or more member biographical sketches. It is not that difficult to do. Begin by breaking your life in to small segments like childhood and school, college, military if applicable, career or working years, retirement years, etc. and then lace that with subjects such as religion and hobbies. Try it it is both fun and therapeutic.*

I was born in North, Orangeburg Co., SC on January 1, 1926. No, ours is not a South Carolina family. That was where my father could get work when he graduated from Louisiana State University (LSU) in 1925, with a degree in agriculture. He and his brother Lora W. Alford went to South Carolina to accept jobs as county agents. We stayed there only a couple of years before Dad got a job as the county agent in Calhoun Co., AR. We moved to Hampton where we lived for five years. My first memories are of starting to school there. After five years in Hampton Dad got a similar job in Grant County so we moved to Sheridan. All this time he was trying to work his way back to Louisiana with a job in the agricultural field. Finally in 1938 he got a job teaching vocational agriculture in the high school in Columbia, Caldwell Parish, LA. I attended the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades there from 1938 to 1940. Teaching was not really my Dad's cup of tea so in 1940 we moved from Columbia to Ferriday, Concordia Parish, LA, where he had a job with the Farm Security Administration. I attended grades 10 and 11 and graduated from there in 1942 (only 11 years to graduate in those days).

It was in Ferriday that I met a good looking brunette with big bright blue eyes who you will hear more about later. When I graduated I was only 15 and far too young to be going to college. Besides the country was at war and I thought my place was in the service but at that age no chance. I entered LSU in Baton Rouge, LA, in the fall of 1942 at age 15 and immediately engaged in funology and girls. I was taking just basic freshman courses but the only thing I enjoyed was ROTC. With the war on they had a special extra-curricular thing one could sign up for that was supposed to be like commando or ranger training. As I remember now we spent most of our night training (it was all at night) crawling around on our bellies between cow piles in the university dairy cow pasture. I got into a lot of trouble with my fun-loving ways so had to work off demerits by cleaning and greasing 105 howitzers on the weekends. In the spring of 1943 I was failing miserably

and dying to get into the US Marine Corps. By mail and phone I convinced my parents to sign papers to allow me to join up. A college friend and I went down to New Orleans to the USMC recruiting station and got the necessary papers for my parents to sign. Then in March my Dad came down to LSU to get me and my trunk to take me home. He later told me that was the most difficult task of his lifetime. When I got home my mother had chickened out having read in the news about some military action and a bunch of guys getting killed.

I sure was not about to go back to college. When I was in high school I had worked delivering papers and clerking in a grocery and market. That kind of work did not pay enough for the situation I found myself in at the time. Help was scarce so it took little time for me to find a job rough necking on an oil drilling rig. The first job did not last long because the night crew had an accident and burned everything up. I got a job on a different rig with a different company but quit after having to climb the derrick in an ice storm and then later hearing the tool pusher tell the driller that he didn't care if blood was six inches deep on the rig floor, he did not want any more stuck drill pipe. I quickly had a job working with a seismograph crew exploring for oil. Basically we dug holes in the ground and stuffed them full of dynamite and exploded it. We worked all along the Mississippi River flood plain in Adams County out of Natchez, MS. Most of our work was in John boats in backwater. We finished there and the crew was sent to Wewa whitchika, Gulf County, FL. I stayed there until I got homesick for my blue-eyed brunette. I quit and went back to Ferriday. I immediately got a job working for a consulting engineering firm that had a contract with the REA (Rural Electrification Administration) staking out power lines to take electricity to the farmers in the country. In those days they were still using kerosene lamps. I was quickly promoted from chain carrier to running the transit. We worked over much of Concordia Parish and some surrounding Parishes before we finished and were

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transferred to Bossier City near Shreveport, Caddo Parish, LA. We worked out of Bossier City in several areas of North East Louisiana but we resided in the Inn Hotel in Shreveport. While there I saw my first paratroopers and their great-looking jump suits and their shiny boots.

I got my greetings from the President while in Shreveport and was told to report to the reception center at Camp Beauregard, LA. What a shock that army food was. From there I was sent to the 1262<sup>nd</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion at Camp Shelby, MS where I was to take basic training. As that was coming to an end a recruiting team from The Parachute School at Ft. Benning, GA, came by looking for volunteers. I figured the paratroops was about as close as one could get to the Marine Corps in the army. Besides the base pay for a ground pounder was \$50 per month and in the paratroops folks got an additional \$50 per month jump pay. I saw a quick way to double my pay and get a better job. I finished jump school in September 1944 after making five exits from a plane in flight. We were all given furloughs and I just knew I'd be bound for Germany as soon as that was over. That bright blue-eyed brunette, Mary Louise Newkirk, and I were married in September 1944. As luck would have it I did not get sent to Germany immediately.

There was more training at Fort Benning so Mary joined me and we set up house-keeping in one room with a kerosene stove and shared an ice box on the back porch with other renters. What an experience. Fortunately we were not there long and I was shipped to Camp Mackall, NC where I thought I'd be joining a unit to go overseas. Not so. I was assigned to the 161<sup>st</sup> Airborne Engineer Battalion that was training and conducting demonstrations for visiting dignitaries. Again Mary joined me and we had another one room arrangement with the Baxley family in Rockingham, NC. We had a potbelly coal stove to heat the room and no kitchen privileges or cooking arrangement. I took most of my meals at the mess hall at camp and when I could I stuck stuff in my field jacket pocket to take home to Mary. Sometimes Mrs. Baxley would feel sorry for her and invite her for a cup of coffee. On Friday nights we went out to eat.

Finally in the spring of 1945 I got word I was being shipped to Germany. I was part of a group of unassigned engineer troops that were going over as replacements. We

crossed the Atlantic on the Ile de France in April of that year. That ship was so fast we did not have to have a convoy or escort. It is easy to remember because President Roosevelt died while we were at sea. We landed in Edinburgh, Scotland, and took a train to Southampton, England, and in a few days took a boat across the English Channel to Le Havre, France. It was a slow move up through a replacement depot in Verviers, Belgium to Mulheim, Germany and Company C 139<sup>th</sup> Airborne

Engineer Battalion, 17<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division. The war was over before I got there but not long before they had jumped and glided in across the Rhine River at Wesel, Germany. The job of our squad in the outfit was to maintain a floating pontoon bridge across the Rhine River and to assist the crossing refugees as we could. We were not there long before the unit was pulled back and quartered in the Splendid Hotel in Vittel, France. Before the war it was a resort area but it was just a concrete hulk in 1945. A point system was set up to rotate fellows home. Since I had no points I was not going home but instead was destined to go to the Pacific to fight the Japanese. A group of engineers, field artillerymen and medics were selected for their low points and set up to return to the United States where they would join an infantry regiment to constitute a parachute regimental combat team to deploy to the Pacific. After only about four months in Europe we returned on a slow boat USS James Jackson. While we were at sea the Japanese surrendered. When we got back to the United States they were not sure what to do with us so we were sent to Camp Mackall, NC where we waited. After a short while we were assigned to the 129<sup>th</sup> Airborne Engineer Battalion of the 13<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, NC. Not long after that the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division returned from Europe and the 13<sup>th</sup> was amalgamated with the 82<sup>nd</sup> Division. I remained with the 307<sup>th</sup> Airborne Engineer Battalion of the 82<sup>nd</sup> and was promoted from pfc through the ranks to master sergeant over a period of about three years. In June 1950 I accepted an appointment as a Warrant Officer and in the same month the war in Korea broke

out. It was about that same time that I also received a direct commission as an engineer officer in the U.S. Army reserves. About two months later I was assigned to the Engineer Section, V Corps at Fort Bragg and a couple months later had orders to join the Engineer Section of the 21<sup>st</sup> Transportation Port Headquarters in Brooklyn, NY. My orders said this was a permanent change of station and made no mention of overseas. Mary and I put our furniture



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in storage and loaded all the household goods we could carry into our car and moved to the big city. When we got there I found out I was assigned to a reserve unit that had been called to active duty for the specific purpose of going to Korea. A couple months later I was on a troop train headed for the west coast and Mary was headed to Louisiana with our household goods. On my birthday, January 1, 1951 I crossed the sea of Japan from Sasebo, Japan, to Pusan, Korea where our port outfit was setting up a base in Masan, Korea. Before long I was assigned to Pusan as the liaison officer for our unit primarily to make sure all of our equipment which came by ship (we were flown over) got through the port and to our unit. Everything in Korea was highly susceptible to theft. The unit later moved to Kunsan, Korea, where I rejoined them, and finally to Inchon. All told I spent 18 months there, finally going home in the fall of 1952. I think I learned more in that 18 months than during any other period of my life, but that's part of the bigger story.

Upon my return to the United States I was assigned to the Engineer Section, XVIII Airborne Corps at Fort Bragg, NC. It was here that our first child was born in 1954, and almost immediately I was assigned to the 521<sup>st</sup> Army Engineer Supply and Maintenance Group in Germany. I had two assignments there first as the accountable property officer running Engineer Supply Point #3 near Stuttgart, Germany. Mary and April, our baby daughter, joined me there and we lived in brand new government quarters in Ludwigsburg, Germany. From there we moved to Kaiserslautern, Germany where I was the storage officer at the Seventh Army Engineer Depot. In 1956 our second daughter was born near there at Landstuhl Air Force Hospital. It was in Kaiserslautern that I decided that it was in the best interest of our family for me to get out of the service and go back and finish what I'd done such a poor job of in 1942-43. I'd been taking college correspondence courses for the past couple years. When I left active duty I was then classed as a reserve officer and I planned to maintain that status to eventually get some retirement.

We moved to Gonzales, LA where my father owned a house and was kind enough to allow us to live in it. He had spent some time there as a County Agent. I entered LSU in the fall of 1956 on the GI Bill. While in school I had student employment in the College of Engineering Dean's Office. We lived on the GI Bill, the student pay and handouts. While there we were active in the local Baptist church where I taught a young people's Sunday School class and

was Sunday School superintendent. I graduated in January 1960 with a degree in Industrial Technology and had already been hired to work at the U. S. Army Engineer Supply Control Office (ESCO) in St. Louis, MO. We moved from Louisiana to Florissant, MO in early 1960. ESCO went through several name changes and moved a few times within the city but I stayed with them and retired as a senior executive in January 1981 nine days after I was eligible for early retirement. During this time I was active in the local Baptist church and taught men's Sunday School class, was the Training Union director, was a deacon, and chairman of the deacons.

There was one minor interruption to the 20-year stretch described above. That reserve commission I kept got me called back to active duty in 1961 for one full year. We went back to Fort Bragg, NC with the 204<sup>th</sup> Army Signal Supply and Maintenance Battalion. While there I was active in the local Baptist church and taught a Sunday School class. When our year was over I resigned the commission, but that's part of the bigger story.

Not too long after I retired I bought my first personal computer and a little later stumbled into genealogy.

Believe it or not I'd never even thought of a great-grandfather had no idea who he was. I asked my Dad if he remembered his grandfather. He did not know him, of course, but he did say he knew of him. He was John Seaborn Alford, a twin, his brother being Seaborn John Alford. He proudly told me that they had been born at sea on the way over from Ireland thus the Seaborn name. Did I ever bust his balloon when I later told him that they were born in the same area in which he was and that their name came from their mother Frances Seaborn. In 1983 I began publishing *About Alford's* and with the help of several subscribers it evolved into this Association, and as they say, the rest is history and they say, the rest is history and part of the

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Mary Louise Newkirk Alford, Mary Inella Alford (in back) April Louise Alford (in front) and Gilbert K. Alford, Jr. ca 1965