Photo courtesy of Georgia House of Representatives

How did the horrors of war and the Holocaust affect the life of a World War II veteran?

JOHN P. YATES

John P. Yates was born on Thanksgiving Day, November 21, 1921, in Griffin, Georgia. He was raised on a farm in Spalding County, Georgia during the Great Depression. At that time, Georgia's economy still relied heavily on agriculture. Boll weevil damage to the cotton fields and a three-year drought had crippled Georgia's economy.

Photo courtesy of Georgia Public Broadcasting

After his high school graduation, John Yates married Annie Harris. In 1941 they were living in Los Angeles, California. That year, on December 7, the Japanese carried out a surprise military strike against the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. The attack on Pearl Harbor led to the United States' entry into World War II. John Yates was drafted and selected for officer candidate school. He signed up to be a liaison pilot. He chose an outfit he thought likely to go to Europe – the 35th Infantry Division.

In late 1944, after the Allies' D-Day invasion of Normandy, France, it seemed as if World War II would soon be over. However, on December 16, 1944, the German Army launched an attack --one of the bloodiest battles American soldiers ever fought -- the Battle of the Bulge. During the battle, John flew his Piper Cub airplane, providing air cover for ground troops and destroying German targets.

In the spring of 1945, John was sent as a military observer during the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp in Germany. Almost 200,000 victims were imprisoned there between 1933

and 1945. The horrors John saw had a profound effect on him. He believed that Holocaust education in the state of Georgia could prevent such a tragedy from ever happening again.

For his courage in flying over 200 missions near or over enemy lines, John was awarded six air medals and four battle stars. Three of John's four brothers also served; one was hospitalized and two were prisoners of war but, miraculously, all survived.

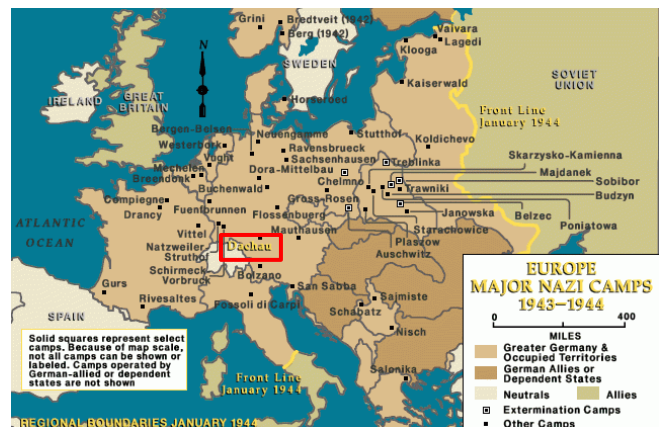*Photo courtesy of Atlanta Journal Constitution*

After returning to Georgia, John completed his studies at Georgia State University. He served in the Georgia House of Representatives for over twenty years and chaired the Defense and Veterans Affairs Committee. In 2013 John Yates was inducted into the Georgia Military Veterans' Hall of Fame, honored for his service to our nation. John was the last World War II veteran to serve in the Georgia General Assembly.

"John Yates was a public servant and a patriot — a hero in the truest sense of the word," Georgia House Speaker David Ralston said. "He understood better than most the meaning of sacrifice."

Photo courtesy of Georgia Public Broadcasting

John Yates and his wife of 66 years, Annie, had three children, eight grandchildren and six great-grandchildren. John Yates passed away in 2017.

Map courtesy of US Holocaust Memorial Museum