

By SAM HATCHER

Three local men missed by only days the event at Cumberland University Tuesday in which World War II veterans who trained here for deployments to Europe were presented Honorary Master's degrees in Military Arts.

Harry Snodgrass, Louis Perner and Homer Burke, all three veterans from Wilson County, died only days before they could be presented their diplomas but were represented at the ceremony by family members.

The most recent of the three to die, Mr. Burke, died on Monday.

Besides a veteran of World War II, Mr. Burke and his late brother Efford were likely best known locally for discovering the Bluegrass duo Flatt and Scruggs while traveling as salesmen in East Tennessee for Martha White Flour.

But he should also be recognized as his brother as a member of the greatest generation serving in the U.S. Army and fighting for our freedom.

He, as some 850,000 others, learned about military preparedness in anticipation of being placed on the front lines in Europe right here in Middle Tennessee.

Mr. Snodgrass died some four weeks ago.

He was among American liberators as they drove into the Germans' Buchenwald concentration camp in April 1945.

Describing the horror of this event he is quoted on the Tennessee Holocaust Commission website as saying, "Inmates everywhere. Some dead and some alive under the dead . . . just lying there. I couldn't think. No thoughts came to my head. Only horror. I had never seen anything like this before."

Mr. Snodgrass remembered that when he toured the camp with a Lithuanian inmate who spoke broken English that "It was in the commander's office. There were lampshades made from the skin of Jews. In the crematorium they used the ashes of the inmates to fertilize the fields-the ashes of dead people. After an hour, it just became too much. I was stunned...just stunned. We don't even treat dogs like this."

For Mr. Snodgrass the moments he spent at Buchenwald were transformed into more than six decades of nightmares.

Mr. Perner, as so many others who trained in Middle Tennessee during the maneuvers, was not from Tennessee. In fact he was not from the South.

Mr. Perner came to Lebanon from the Bronx in New York.

But like thousands of fellow soldiers he fell in love with Middle Tennessee and more specifically with a young lady who would become his wife for 50 years, Frances Chambers Perner.

Mr. Perner died in March, but his daughter was at Cumberland to receive his degree.

His wartime deployment to Europe carried him to battlefields at Normandy, Northern France and Germany.

After the war he returned to Lebanon, raised a family and eventually retired fulfilling a career with the U.S. Postal Service.

These are just three individual stories about three individuals who trained here for war 70 years ago.

There's an element of sadness about each of these because they missed their special recognition at Cumberland by only a few days.

And there is also a reminder in this for all of us.

This very special generation, known as "the greatest," is passing.