

Spending more than eight hours with Robert Sweatt, I walked away with the formidable task of portraying his story in text [See "A Gunner's Tale," Page 34]. Driving my way south from his hometown of Burton, Texas, I despised the thought that most people have no insight into the encounters of American troops who fought to defeat the Axis powers in Europe and the Pacific.

Suddenly, a sign on the side of the road that read "Texas Independence Trail" caught my eyes. My thoughts instantly flashed back to the early 1800s as battles raged across the Texas landscape and Gen. Sam Houston with his group of volunteers fought Gen. Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna for independence from Mexico.

Clouds of smoke from roaring cannons covered the ground like fog as men charged the enemy on the backs of their horses.

My mind hurdled time as I compared it to clouds of black smoke from exploding flak polluting the sky as airmen flew into the face of danger onboard their planes during World War II.

My thoughts jumped back and forth from the two distinct battles — battles where people sacrificed their lives for freedom and liberty.

How ironic it was that I was traveling along the Texas Independence Trail after interviewing a man who had literally carved his own trail over the landscape of Europe so others could be liberated from Nazi Germany. Sgt. Robert Sweatt is just one of millions who fought for independence during battles within and outside this nation.

As an American, Texan and airman, I came to the realization

that I hail from a lineage that prides itself on the tradition of fighting for what's right — independence.

Now being a Texas resident for the past five years might make me a citizen of the state, but it hardly qualifies me as a true Texan. Nonetheless, the aura of the state has a unique way of seeping into my soul. There's a sense of pride that can simply overcome you

like a cowboy sliding off his horse, grabbing the bull by the horns and snapping its head

back causing it to fall to the ground in submission. By the time you get up to walk away, you respect everything that makes Texas what it is.

The same can be said about America. The same can be said about Robert Sweatt.

He is a cowboy himself. Retiring after 26 years as a teacher, he moved to his ranch in 1981. The generosity and hospitality he and his wife showed me during my visit is unmatched in my 12-year Air Force career.

Drafted into the Army in 1942, he served four years. His trail of independence stretched from England, deep into Germany, across France and back. Some missions led him into Portugal and Africa. He and his squadron were

in one of three 8th Air Force B-24 Liberator groups that took part in the Ploesti mission — one of the war's most daring heavy bomber raids of oil fields in Romania. Of the 177 planes and 1,726 men who took off on the mission, 54 planes and 532 men failed to return.

His stories are unlike many others. They grab you and snap your head back with amazement as your mind shakes in disbelief. When you walk away from the experience, the man has captured every ounce of your respect and admiration. Anyone who has a chance to listen to him tell his stories will be so inspired that instead of stopping at a coffee shop on the way home, they'd find themselves standing in front of a recruiter signing up for their own tour of duty.

"The Lord was with me," is his simple response to his unbelievable tales. His modesty is genuine because he truly doesn't believe he did anything special. But I believe fighting for the liberation of people in another country is special. Anyone who doesn't need to be grabbed by the horns and wrestled to the ground.

— 2nd Lt. Chuck Widener

American troops of the 28th Infantry Division

march down the Champs Elysees, in Paris, in the "Victory" parade on Aug. 29, 1944. More than 400,000 American troops paid the ultimate sacrifice while fighting to liberate France from Nazi Germany. Another 139,709 troops were listed as captured or missing during the war that the United States was involved in for more than three years.

Trail of Independence

by Champ Poinsett

