



Branding Iron

► by **Eric Grant**, general manager

January thaw

John White fought his way across Europe in 1945, then came home to western Colorado where he spent the rest of his life loving cows but hating winter.

A heavy load

As an infantryman, he had packed a 50-caliber machine gun — affectionately called “Ma Deuce” by U.S. soldiers — across Belgium and Germany. It was a heavy, lethal piece of equipment, something that could reshape the battlefield with just a few bursts.

German soldiers quickly learned the necessity of targeting and destroying the gun before it could be deployed, something that shortened the life expectancy of the men who manned it.

For this, John knew he was lucky. He had survived not only Nazi bullets and shelling, but one of the worst winters in memory. Foxholes offered no comfort. He could not build a fire for warmth, so his feet and hands froze from exposure.

The nights must have been endless.

“Enjoy your life while you’re young,” said John, who worked for our family’s ranch for three decades.

Battle scars

As the war slipped into memory, the

cold continued to stab at his fingers. It was difficult for him to buck bales or twist wire, a constant reminder of the worst months of his life.

One morning, as our pickup creaked and groaned across the frozen pasture, the cows slowly emerged from the cottonwoods and onto the feeding grounds.

Once the hay was fed, John and I walked together to the creek to see if the cows could still find water. We had punched a half dozen holes through the ice the night before, and to our surprise we could hear the gurgling of water even before we got there.

For good measure, John took a few swings with his axe, chopping away the ice and broadening the holes for the cows.

Then he paused. All was quiet.

The sun had just crested over Campbell Mountain, and the snow around our feet glimmered in the light.

I still wonder if he returned — for just a moment — to a winter, somewhere, some place, that wasn’t scarred by the punctuating memory of war.

Was he a kid again, able to see the beauty and wonder of winter?

I’ll never know, because I didn’t ask him. Nothing needed to be said.

Like so many in his generation, John had much taken from him — mostly his chance to live a life without viewing it through the prism of the battlefield.

For me, hardly a winter day goes by when I don’t think about John. I try my best to take his advice and to enjoy it while it lasts, to remind myself of the importance of peace, and the blessings of a snowstorm.

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