



Members of 702 tank battalion: seated left, Jimmy Blanton, John Shortell; standing, Jim Ridenhour and Bill McNally.

Former tank division's D-Day reunion sparks WWII memories

By John Fox
Staff Writer

Last Thursday was D-Day.

Forty-one years after their Normandy landing the men of the 702nd tank group were in reunion at Pigeon Forge's Red Carpet Inn.

The spins of the universe and the explosions of war have taken their tolls. The men are grey. Some are without their lower limbs. Yet their affection for one another is undented.

With a spirit of brotherhood they traced their tracks from the Normandy landing to the edge of the Rhine River.

They gathered in Jim Ridenhour's room. He's from Cooleemee N.C., just a way station on the road to Winston-Salem. John Shortell of Staten Island N.Y., rolled his wheelchair through the door. He lost his legs in the war, but he's still a proud man with a grin as wide as a Tennessee pumpkin.

Bill McNally of Pittsburg Pa. sat quietly on the edge of the bed. He's waiting for the Pittsburgh Steelers to make a comeback.

A family of brothers had assembled in the room. There were misty eyes as they painted a picture of their landing on Normandy. "We were 'aken ashore by LSDs,'" explains Ridenhour, who served as first sergeant in his unit.

"Once we were in an assembly area our first job was to make contact with the paratroopers who had landed."

It was during that time terrible storms hit Nor-

mandy beaches. "We lost a lot of equipment to the storms. But we recovered quickly. We had to because we had been ordered to check on German positions" said Ridenhour.

Attached to the 2nd Armored Division, they climbed into their tanks to serve as a spearhead for the advancing troops of 1st Army.

"We were the first unit into Belgium," said Shortell, who recalled an occasion when the Belgium government stopped their advance toward the Sigfred line long enough to pin on decorations of valor.

"It was at the Sigfred line that the 702nd took part in, one of the largest tank battles of World War II. Then they were assigned to the 9th Army at the Battle of The Bulge," he continued.

Once that barrier was broken, the tanks roared within 30 miles of Berlin. "The day we reached the river we got the news that President Roosevelt had died," said McNally.

With the Russians just over the horizon the tanks came to a pause in the shadows of Berlin.

The terror of war had lost its sting. The Potsdam conference was arranged. President Harry S. Truman was there to meet with Allied leaders.

Guess who was selected to serve as Truman's honor guard?

No less than the 2nd armored division, a group of men who can't wait until their 1986 reunion, a time when "real buddies" show what the brotherhood of man is all about.