

# A TIME FOR REMEMBRANCE



Wake Weekly/BETH TATUM

Bob Cheatham thumbs through a scrapbook that contains pictures and clippings of the time he spent overseas during World War II.

## World War II veteran recalls battles, friends and history

► Youngsville resident Bob Cheatham remembers the joys and sorrows of a 22-year-old who went overseas to participate in a part of American history.

By Beth Tatum  
Wake Weekly Staff Writer

Bob Cheatham flipped through a scrapbook filled with pictures, notices, maps and write-ups from 50 years ago.

He pointed to a black and white photo of American soldiers on a tank riding through a happy throng.

"We participated in a parade through Paris the day after they pushed the Germans out," the World War II veteran explained. "They were still fighting on the outskirts, but we were parading. (Later that night) we spent the night in a big park scared to death."

As he flipped through the pages a week before Veteran's Day, other memories of his time overseas — from June 3, 1944, to Aug. 30, 1945 — came back to him. In the beginning, his time in the military started as simple training in 1940.

"We didn't have any idea we were going to have a war when we went to Ft. Jackson, S.C.," he said. "We went for a year's training. They (the government) knew, but they didn't tell us. They knew that things were going to happen, but we were all young fellas at that time."

Because no one had any idea America was ever going to go to war, many young men volunteered for the armed services but were later in for a surprise.

"When we left Youngsville, we had 70 men, mostly from this county as a national guard," he said. "Most of the young boys signed up for one year, volunteer. All of us were volunteers except for the ones who were already in the guard. All of the guys that served a year got out in September, and I think every one of them was redrafted after December 7 (1941)."

Cheatham was one of those already in the national guard. Instead of leaving the service, he was placed with the 113th battery which was later reorganized in 1941 to create the 630th Tank Destroyer Battalion. On June 3, 1944, he was sent overseas.

He said his most frightening moment came when

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# Cheatham

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he stepped on the Dutch liner that would take him from New York to England. "I stayed scared until we got back," he added. "We had a lot of frightening times."

From England, Cheatham's battalion traveled to France, landed on Omaha Beach and journeyed to St. Lo where they encountered the Germans for the first time.

"At St. Lo we spent the first night," Cheatham recalled. "We pushed all the Germans out that night."

All total, Cheatham participated in five campaigns. The most memorable conflict was the Battle of the Bulge which started on Dec. 16, 1944.

In that battle, the Nazis drove a bulge 60 miles wide and 45 miles deep into the American lines before they were stopped in January.

For Cheatham's division, it was particularly destructive.

"We lost about all of our equipment," he recalled. "Our hands were kind-of tied."

"The men, some were captured, and some stayed behind the lines several days and worked their way back to our unit. There was so much confusion, it was hard to realize what was happening."

Eventually, the unit was pulled back and refitted with new equipment.

Earlier in the battle, bombs fell on one area that was particularly disheartening to the young American soldiers.

"They blew our kitchen out," he said. "That was about 4 or 5 days after the Battle of the Bulge started. We were already mad, you can imagine how mad we were when they messed up our kitchen."

Yet, despite all the skirmishes Cheatham was involved in, he was never wounded.

"They called me the mole because I stayed in the ground," he said. "I dug in a lot. That didn't help when they were shooting — they called them airbursts — with a time fuse on them that would burst

in the air and the (shrapnel) would come down."

Others were not as lucky.

"My company lost one local boy — Hendricks, Julius P. Hendricks," he said. "He was captured, and I think he died in captivity. He was the first one I know of. We had a few others that were killed. That was one of my jobs over there, picking up the corpses."

But most did make it back. Some of the local men who went overseas with Cheatham include Robert Cooper of Wake Forest, Frank Hendrick of Louisville, Melvin J. Young of Zebulon, Charles H. Cyrus of Lake Royale and Clarence E. Hendrick and Elbert C. Pearce, both of Raleigh.

As Cheatham continued to flip through the pages of his scrapbook, he ran across a picture of a German soldier striding out of a concrete shelter.

"That was a German pillbox," Cheatham said, referring to the shelter which housed soldiers and guns. "It had been there so long the trees had grown up (around it). This guy is coming out on the back end. On the front end it has peepholes and things. Those things were all over."

On another page, Cheatham found his W4 promotion in the National Guard. This was years after the war ended in Sept. 1945.

Reflecting on the end of the war, he said he was discharged before it was officially over.

"They could see that it was closing down. They sent me back to Fort Bragg and discharged me. That was August 30, I believe."

Because he came home early, he had none of the post-war activities, he said. No parades, no celebrations, no job. "I had a wife and child though," he said. "I had to find a job in a hurry."

Cheatham found a job at King Drug Company where he worked for five years. In 1947, he reenlisted with the National Guard, and 1951 he was given a full-time job. He remained with the National Guard until 1975.

In thinking about the war, Cheatham had mixed feelings. "We had a lot of good things to happen and a lot of bad things," he said.

The best things? "The guys I served with," he said. "They were loyal and brave."