

Tank mechanic uses ingenuity in WWII

By SARAH HUDGINS

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Ninety-eight-year-old World War II veteran John McCain of Wharton is the son of Joe and Sally Pearl McCain and a graduate of Wharton High School.

After graduation, McCain went to work for HL&P bringing lines to the rural communities of Wharton County using a shovel and a spade, but soon enrolled in a one-year diesel mechanic school in California.

Returning to Wharton, he worked for a county commissioner as a heavy equipment operator. War was raging in Europe and with the Nazi advancements, there were rumors the U.S. would enter the war.

"Some of my co-workers had been soldiers in the trenches in WWI," McCain said. "They kept advising me to enlist in the Army, either tanks or artillery, to avoid being drafted into the infantry. I took their advice and joined the 36th Tank Company of the Texas National Guard in 1940.

"My adventure in the military began by driving tanks (and) ended five years later in Czechoslovakia. When anyone asks me what I did in WWII, I always tell them, I slept through it and missed the whole war," laughs McCain. "But the reality is, I loved being in the Army. The men I served with were the best of the best, and if I could have kept all those men with me, I would never have left the Army. We were family."

On Jan. 2, 1941, McCain's National Guard Company became part of 193rd Tank Battalion, Second Armored Division under Gen. George Patton.

McCain attended Tank Mechanic School in Fort Knox then onto maneuvers in Tennessee and Carolina heading to San Francisco. From there, the battalion went to Hawaii for training.

After the Battle of Midway, McCain was sent back to the Camp Chaffee, Ark., to establish a cadre for the new 16th Ar-



John McCain in Hawaii circa World War II

mored Division with Sherman tanks. Nicknamed Armadillo, the 16th activated July 15, 1943.

"We had city Yankee draftees, who did not even know how to drive a car, trying to learn how to drive tanks and trucks. You can imagine it was a little hectic for a while, but they finally learned to drive their assigned vehicle.

"D-Day came and we were still in the U.S. December 1944, myself and most of my maintenance crew shipped out for La Havre, France; heading to the European Theatre. When we arrived, the area was secured, but we had to wait a few days for our tanks.

"The most important person to have on your team is your parts man and we had the best! We called him Scrounger. Scrounger could find anything. We would chip in money to help him negotiate what we needed.

"We became very inventive. Germans would string piano wire between the trees and if anyone drove their jeeps through, the piano wire (nearly invisible) would cut their heads off. We came up with a way to convert our jeeps to have wire cutters at the front to cut through the wire.

"I devised a rail around the turret of the tank so our infantry men riding on the outside of the tank had something to hang on to. We did this to all 75 of our tanks. When the Colonel saw what I did, he came down hard and started chewing on me saying 'I was ruining the integrity of the tanks'. I guess it did not ruin it too much as today all tanks have a rail around the turret.

"In order to make sure our tanks would start during the freezing winters, we had to keep one running at all times to charge the others. Our hands got so cold we had Scrounger find German heaters ... to keep us warm.

A fighting neared an end in Europe, the final German stronghold was found in Czechoslovakia, estimated 141,000 German troops. It was decided U.S. forces would help Soviets in the attack.

As the V Corps attacked Pilsen, Czechoslovakia, with the 16th AD moved towards Prague, where the German commander was waiting to surrender. The unit was recalled to Pilsen, however, before that could take place.

"When we got to Czechoslovakia, we met the Russians. Many German soldiers were

in Prague and wanted to ... be taken prisoner by Americans verses Russians ... We had approximately 10,000 German prisoners. We put them in a field surrounded by our tanks. Interrogators would interview each soldier to determine who was a member of the dreaded SS and who was not; non-SS soldiers were given a food ration and turned loose to walk home; SS held captive.

"I thank God we were able to liberate Europe and come home in one piece.

"When I returned to United States, I was discharged in Jefferson Barracks, Mo. I rode a train to Houston and arrived in the early morning hours. I slept in the depot waiting room until the train left for Wharton about 11 a.m. Sunday morning.

"I grabbed my duffel bag and walked down Caney Street to the Presbyterian Church where I knew my mother would be. The preacher was in the middle of his sermon about the return of the prodigal son when I walked in the door. His eyes lit up and he hollered 'Our prayers have been answered! The prodigal son has indeed returned!' He ran down the aisle and grabbed me. I had people hugging me, crying and laughing. I am fortunate my mother did not faint. Wharton was (and is) a wonderful place to come back to."

Commentary: June 6 is celebrated as D-Day - a day that brought hope to all who lost everything; to those forced into concentration camps, to those that were in hiding, and to those living in fear. Our brave men gave their lives to bring freedom and liberation to people they did not know because, we are All One Nation, Under God!

God Bless and thank you Mr. McCain for all you gave and still give to our country and wish you many more years with friends and family in your hometown of Wharton.