

## WWII POW: Always cold, always hungry

By **Chip Womick**  
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**ASHEBORO** — As he toured the National World War II Museum in New Orleans recently, a young soldier was pushing Robert Cheatham Jr. in a wheelchair.

Cheatham asked the man if he had served in Iraq.

"Yes, two tours," the soldier said.

"I oughta be pushing you instead of you pushing me, for gosh sakes," Cheatham replied.

Such is the patriotism of this old soldier.

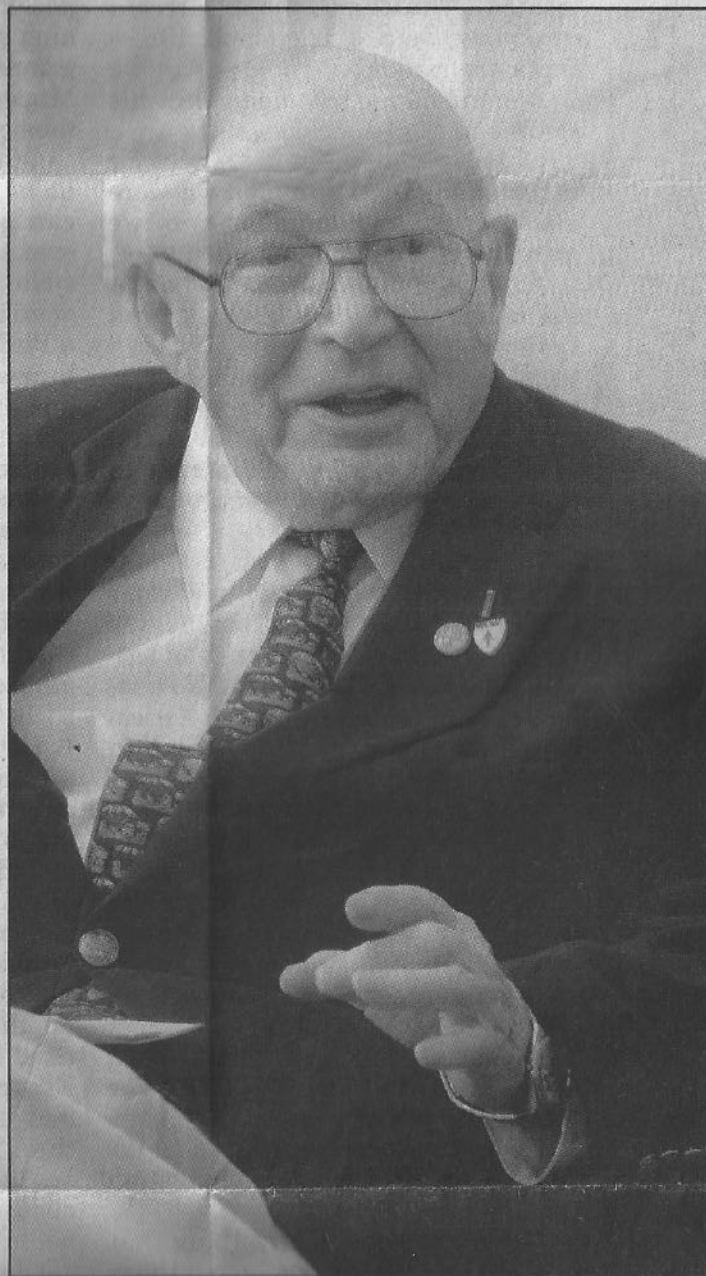
If the young soldier had asked, Cheatham who is 85, might have told him that he, too, had served his country overseas, earning a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star during World War II.

He was a second lieutenant in the 26th Infantry Regiment of the 1st Infantry Division when German soldiers under the command of Field General Erwin Rommel, also known as "the Desert Fox," overran his unit in the Kasserine Pass in the mountains of central Tunisia.

Cheatham, who was 22 at the time, had arrived in North Africa the day after Christmas 1942. He was captured on Feb. 20, 1943.

"That is when America lost its innocence in World War II," Cheatham said. "We really got our butts beat. We got our butts beat but we slowed Rommel down enough so he could not accomplish his goal of reaching the coast and cutting off a bunch of Americans."

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Photos by Clifton Hughes / The Courier-Tribune

**DEDICATED SERVICEMAN** — Robert Cheatham Jr. of Asheboro, left, was a prisoner of war for more than two years during World War II. The photograph above features a picture of Cheatham from his U.S. Army days as a second lieutenant, the Purple Heart and Bronze Star he earned for his service. Cheatham has been active in Asheboro's American Legion Post 45 since moving to town in the 1970s, having served as a vice commander for several years. He is a member of the Randolph County Honor Guard and the Randolph County Veterans Council.

# Cheatham

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He remained a prisoner for the duration of the war, until Patton's 3rd Army arrived on April 29, 1945, to knock down the prison gates.

"I would say that I was never mistreated," Cheatham said in a recent interview. "I made friends for life — fantastic friends."

But that does not mean that his confinement was a cakewalk.

"Number one," he said, "except for the middle of the summer, we were always cold and, number two, we were always hungry."

A native of Abbeville, S.C., Cheatham graduated in 1942 from Clemson College with a bachelor's degree in textile chemistry. At the time, Clemson was an all-male military school.

"The day I graduated," Cheatham said, "they gave me a diploma in one hand and orders to report to the Army in the other."

He went to Camp Croft, S.C., for what he calls "a six-week refresher course" in June of 1942. Then he was assigned to an infantry training battalion for basic training. By November, he was bound for North Africa. He and his fellow soldiers arrived in Tunisia the day after Christmas.

After his capture, he and his fellow soldiers were paraded in front of jeering Arabs through a little town named Gafsa. Then they headed to Sfax, a small town on the Mediterranean Sea, before going to Tunis. Then were flown to Sicily, then traveled to Capua, Italy, near Naples, before boarding a train — and packed in boxcars like cattle — bound for Germany.

For about three months, Cheatham was in a prison camp for British soldiers near Munich

bers that a pair of Red Cross women showed up, too, attracting a lot of attention from the men.

The liberated soldiers remained in the camp for several more days before heading for France where they had to wait for ships to take them home. So Cheatham and a buddy hitchhiked to Paris to do a little sightseeing.

"We did everything you were supposed to do — and everything you ain't supposed to do," Cheatham said, grinning at memories of the Louvrve Museum, the famed Folies Bergere music hall, and more.

Oflag 64 was guarded by the Germans, but operated by senior American officers. Cheatham has joked over the years that while incarcerated he earned a B.S. in the card games of cribbage, Hearts and pinochle and a PhD. in bridge. The camp had a library with several thousand books and a small hospital, staffed by captured medical officers. There were a couple of dentists, too.

The prisoners published a newspaper, called The Oflag 64 Item, of goings-on at the camp. Frank Diggs, who had worked at The Washington Post before the war, was the editor. Cheatham covered sports — camp games of baseball, basketball and such, for the publication.

He also helped dispose of dirt from a tunnel fellow prisoners were digging to escape — and helped draw maps for the effort. The dirt was stored in boxes and hidden in an attic or scattered around the compound.

"Those tunnels were works of art," he said.

But a thwarted escape attempt at another camp — which was dramatized in the 1963 hit film "The Great Escape," starring Steve McQueen and James Garner — resulted in just three men escaping and 50 organizers being shot. In the wake of news about that tragedy, the Oflag 64 tun-

State program, an annual summer training session for high schoolers. He was at the VA Hospital in Salisbury several years ago when someone mentioned that he might like to volunteer some time at the facility.

The next Sunday, he went to help at the chapel service. Now, he leads a contingent of local folks, including local high school JROTC members, who go to the service one Sunday every month.

From 1991 until last May, Cheatham also made the hour-long drive to the VA Hospital every Thursday to help veterans fill out claims paperwork. He's proud that he was able to help many veterans through the sometimes confusing maze of requirements to receive benefits.

An original member of the Randolph County Honor Guard, Cheatham helped provide a salute at the funerals of veterans until he fell and injured a shoulder. A past commander of the Randolph County Veterans Council, Cheatham is also proud of the Randolph County Veterans Monument on Worth Street.

He's an active member of First Presbyterian Church in Asheboro, organizing and promoting the Memorial Day service there for several years. He is a member and past president of the Golden K Kiwanis Club and particularly enjoys one club project — reading to children in the Head Start program. Club members also coach the youngsters in learning the Pledge of Allegiance.

Initially, he was reluctant to read aloud since he'd never spent much time around children. (He and his wife had no children.) So, he bought gingerbread cookies and passed them out instead of reading.

"After a while the cookies got so expensive I had to read."

Now he relishes the chance to read. At his suggestion, the children

"That was the luckiest thing that ever happened to me," Cheatham said. "The Limeys taught us how to be prisoners of war."

Lessons included tunnel-digging and map-making.

Next he moved to Oflag 64 in Poland, a camp for American Army officers, where he lived from June 1943 until Jan. 21, 1945. Between those dates, the population at Oflag 64 grew to more than 1,500, including many captured during the D-Day invasion of Normandy. One of the POWs was Lt. Col. John Waters, son-in-law of U.S. Gen. George S. Patton.

When word that the Russians were coming arrived in January of 1945, Germans forced the men of Oflag 64 to take a 350-mile westward march through snow and ice to a stalag at Hammelburg, Germany. (He earned his Purple Heart for the frozen feet he suffered during this forced march in sub-zero temperatures.) Cheatham said there was no food; prisoners slept in barns along the way.

While Cheatham was at Hammelburg, an American task force was sent to strike at the camp in an attempt to free the POWs. Cheatham was one of the prisoners who escaped through a breach in the barbed wire fence.

"I took off across the woods, but I was picked up in about three hours," he said.

The raid failed and most of the POWs who escaped were recaptured.

Cheatham and his fellow prisoners were taken to a stalag at Nurnberg for a few days, then many of the POWs were made to take to the road again. This time, they marched about 90 miles to a camp at Moosburg. Allied bombing was constant in the region at this time. Cheatham remembers the marching men being strafed along the way by a pair of P-51 Mustangs — American fighter planes.

Soldiers from Patton's Third Army arrived to liberate the camp on April 29, 1945. Patton himself arrived soon and spoke to the former POWs. Sixty years later, Cheatham still remem-

nel project was shut down.

Cheatham received CARE packages from home. He remembers getting some sacharine in one shipment, a valuable commodity among prisoners. He also recalls trading his ration of coffee, another hot item, because he did not drink coffee.

When he wrote home, Cheatham tried to be upbeat.

"You weren't untruthful, but you did your best to write in a manner to keep them from worrying so much," he said.

An excerpt from one letter, written on July 25, 1943, illustrates:

*Dear Folks,*

*I just finished dinner but it wasn't much like the dinners I had at home. If I were at home I'd listen to Sammy Kaye. Does he still come on? Does he still play 'Dear Mom'? Here I ate soup — or hot water with a little fat in it. Will I ever have those fried chicken and fresh string beans for dinner? I will but not soon. I wish I could pull a Rip Van Winkle and sleep for a couple years. This afternoon I'll lay out in the sun (not as hot as home because we wear jackets all the time & sleep under a blanket). I'll eat supper at 5:30, be counted at nine, listen to a translation of the news, and go to sleep at 10:30 when the lights are out. Every days the same except when we eat a chocolate bar on Monday out of the Red Cross boxes. What an existence! ...*

The only time Cheatham remembers being downhearted was when he learned of a failed attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler in 1944.

"I never gave up. I always believed we would win the war and I would go home."

After the war, in 1949, Cheatham married Frances Parker. (She died in 1998.) They did not have any children. He worked for a succession of large companies, including Celanese and Uniroyal, before moving to Randolph County in 1973 to take a position with Rampon (now ETI).

Cheatham joined the American Legion after moving to Asheboro. He served as vice commander for several years and worked with the Boys

to call him "Old Man Don."

"It's a real fun thing to do," he said. "We always say we get more out of it that the children do."

Shortly after the war, an annual reunion was started of the 1,500 soldiers who were prisoners of war in Oflag 64 or at Hammelburg. Cheatham did not attend until sometime in the 1980s. He's been to most of them, held in various cities around the country, since then. He recently returned from this year's reunion in New Orleans where he toured the D-Day Museum.

Only 124 of his 1,500 fellow POWs are still living.

"It could be that this is our last reunion," he said.

He has enjoyed the camaraderie but one thing he will not miss is the annual memorial service at which the names of those who have died in the past year are read.

One year, Cheatham led the local Veterans Day parade, which will be held at 2 p.m. today in downtown Asheboro. When his health stopped him from walking in the procession, he started showing up just to watch.

"I have gotten there early enough to watch it go by, and man, that is great," he said.

Spoken like a true old soldier, one who deserves a salute any day, but particularly on Veterans Day.

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