

# Sun Lifestyle

## Over There...

### Lake City Resident Thomas Hays Remembers Fighting Fascism Forty-Six Years Ago

By LEE KOLB

At dawn on Nov. 8, 1942, U.S. Army Air Corps Staff Sgt. Thomas B. Hays climbed from the troop transport *Elizabeth C. Stanton* into a landing craft seven miles from the North African coast.

Several transports in Hays' convoy had already been sent swirling to the bottom, victims of U-boat torpedos, and ahead lay a dark coastline and an uncertain reception.

It was hoped that the Americans would be welcomed as liberators by the Free French troops looking out over the waves from their sandy machine-gun nests. Two years before, at Oran in Algeria, the British Royal Navy had sunk the French Fleet, with great loss of life, in part to keep it from Nazi hands. Much animosity existed between the two nations and *Operation Torch*, as the American amphibious operation was known, in addition to opening a second front in the west was meant to draw the discontented French under the Allied banner.

**DESPITE THE STARS AND STRIPES DISPLAYED** conspicuously in the vanguard, "they hit us with everything they had," the 69-year-old Lake City resident recalled.

Hays remembers seeing Gen. George S. Patton helping soldiers push boats ashore during the landings.

"Patton had a good heart," said Hays.

"On that beach, a soldier had been shot and killed and his best buddy was scratching out a shallow, temporary grave, kneeling down in the sand and crying over him. General Patton came over, saw what was happening, knelt down and shed tears also, just like that soldier was."

Patton's tough image was simply "the war face he put on around his troops," said Hays. "He wanted the respect of his men, which he got."

Storming the beaches with Company B, 7th Regiment of the Third Division of the United States Army, Hays began a 44-month odyssey that took him from the baking North African desert to the ice-locked mountains of northern Italy, across the grateful French countryside via St. Tropez and into the conquered Nazi heartland itself.

"I felt like the heart of America was beating for us, that the eyes of the world were watching us, that the freedom of mankind, not just Americans, depended on our victory," said Hays.

"That war changed the history of the world."

It changed Hays, also.

**HAYS SAID HE BECAME A CHRISTIAN ABOARD** a Mitchell B-25 twin-engine bomber.

Returning from a run against Nazi targets, radio-operator Hays and the crew watched as oil streamed from a flaming engine. Hays opened his pocket Bible to Acts 2:21: "Whoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." Hays called upon the Lord and the aircraft landed intact.

That Bible remains one of his most cherished possessions. Now yellowed and brittle, the book rode in Hays' pocket throughout his European travels, and was soaked through in various amphibious assaults. "I had to leave it out to dry many times," he said.

For ten months, the Third Division battled Field Marshall Erwin Rommel's famed Afrika Corps in the desert. "It was hot in the daytime, and cold at night, with sand everywhere," said Hays.

In Feb. 1943, Rommel, squeezed in Tunisia between the Americans advancing from the west and the British Eighth Army moving out of Egypt, launched an initially successful attack against the green American troops, driving them back 50 miles from their lines to the Kasserine Pass.

"That was the worst battle for us," said Hays. "They pushed us back."

Allied soldiers eventually regained the Kasserine Pass -- North Africa eventually fell also -- and Hays transferred from the Air Corps to the infantry and sailed to Sicily with Gen. Patton's Seventh Army.

**FOR MANY MONTHS THE ALLIED ARMIES STRUGGLED** against stiff German resistance as they drove the lines north up the Italian peninsula.

"One night during the Rome-Arno battle, a German plane came in real low, right over our heads," said Hays. "I heard him when he



### Stories To Tell

Lake City resident Thomas B. Hays won the American Defense Service Medal, the American Campaign Medal, the European-African Eastern Campaign Medal with two bronze stars and a silver star (representing five battles) and an arrowhead (meaning he was in a leading battalion), the Good Conduct Medal, the Victory Medal and the German Occupation Medal during his service in World War Two. On his knee rests the Bible that traveled with him throughout the war.

cut his engines down to idle, and you could hear the wind whistling off his wings. What he was after was Gen. Mark Clark's Fifth Army Headquarters. He went right over my little pup tent and dropped his bombs about three seconds later. If he had dropped three seconds earlier it would have blown me and a lot of others to kingdom come. It shook the ground like an earthquake. The bombs missed everything, thank goodness."

Hays endured the winter stalemate of 1943-44 in the mountains of Italy.

"It was mud, water, wind, cold and snow," he recalled.

It was during this time that Field Marshall Albert Kesselring, commander of the German Forces in Italy, grudgingly hailed the Third Division as the best of the fighters the United States Army had to offer, according to Hays.

Hays' Third Division crossed over into southern France at St. Tropez in late 1944, part of the southern D-Day invasion of Hitler's *Fortress Europe*.

Working their way north to link up with troops moving east from the Normandy landings, the Americans found the French to be "wonderful people," according to Hays. "They couldn't be too nice to us. They wanted to hug you and give you wine. Americans always had more to eat than anyone else, more than any other army, so we were always liberal with what we had."

Hays said that in northern France, during the Battle of the Bulge -- Hitler's attempt to push approaching Allied armies back towards the sea, away from Germany -- he experienced his closest call of the war.

**RAPIDLY ADVANCING NAZI ARMORED DIVISIONS** had forced the Third Division into temporary retreat, back from the lines.

Hays and another soldier of the 927th Signal Battalion had been ordered to remain at the front to keep the lines of communication open. The two men had set up a radio in a house basement "when Tiger tanks rolled into the city," recalled Hays.

"You get German Tiger tanks a hundred yards from you, you're CLOSE to them," he said.

Neither side was taking very many prisoners at this point, he said. At Malmedy, in Belgium, German SS troops had recently executed scores of Americans rather than be burdened with prisoners. This had left a bitter taste in the mouths of Americans stationed in area, said Hays.

The two men shut down their radio and holed up for the night. "We were hidden in the basement. In the night I heard this soldier coming down the hallway toward us. Naturally, I thought it was an enemy soldier. It turned out to be an American, cut off from his mortar unit and looking for the lines," said Hays.

"I was standing there with the door cracked open, Thompson sub-machine gun waiting. He got real close to me, and I put my gun on him and told him to halt. He just dropped his rifle and surrendered."

"A lot of men, in a situation like that, would've just shot him, but I was willing to take a chance. If he had been a German I would have wanted to capture him, because if had starting firing my weapon, the Germans would have come in on us, and since there was just two of us, it would have been the end," said Hays.

Hays was saved by the timely arrival of American armor, which held the Nazis up long enough for the both of them to make an escape.

Hays cannot remember the exact place where he crossed the Rhine, but he said that at that time the Allied armies were exuberant with the sense of imminent victory, of the end of a long and grueling war.

"At the point, we knew it was the end for Germany," he said. "We were confident all along that we would be victorious, we just didn't how long it would take."

**INTO THE RHINELAND THROUGH THE ANCIENT** German cities -- which only a few years before had seen Hitler's torchlight parades and enormous Nazi Party rallies -- marched the Third Division.

Hays traveled through Kaiserslautern, Worms, Stuttgart, and finally Augsburg, where he heard of the German surrender.

Hays spent several months in Darmstadt with the occupying American forces before returning to the United States.

After his discharge from the military at Ft. McPherson -- he volunteered for duty there in 1940 -- Hays returned to Atlanta to work for Southern Bell. He retired after 38 years service. Since his return, he has resided in Hapeville and Lake City.

He has never returned to the scenes of his European experiences but admits "he would love to." Occasionally he meets up with other survivors of the Third Division. "The men are very close," he said.

Hays said his involvement in "this century's greatest upheaval did not sour his view of the human condition. "I realized then that it was a minority of people who wanted to cause war."

Hays said he was basically a kind-hearted person who "never got callous" to all the carnage he witnessed.

Seeing young men in the prime of life shot dead, Hays remembers thinking to himself, "why aren't civilized people willing to sit down and talk instead of fighting?"