

We Salute Those Who Served -

Special Tribute, Pages 6-7A



Suwannee Democrat

50 CENTS

Friday Edition — November 8, 2013

129th YEAR, NO. 8 | 2 SECTIONS, 24 PAGES

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VETERANS DAY

To Normandy and back again WWII vet recounts missions

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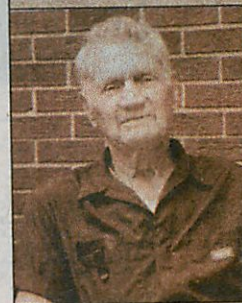
When he was 18, Johnny Thompson tried to join the United States Army, Navy and then the Marine Corps, but he was denied to all three because there were so many young men in line waiting to be drafted at the time. This was 1943.

"The Army told me I could sign a volunteer draft, that means to be called ahead of my scheduled time," said Thompson.

The now 89 year old Live Oak native entered the Army June of 1943. He was first sent to six weeks of basic training at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri. From there, Johnny went to Youngstown, Ohio for a few weeks then on to New Castle, New York.

"This was a stepping stone to get ready to go overseas," said Thompson. "I left New York on the eighth day of January, 1944 to go overseas."

Thompson was an



WWII vet Johnny Thompson's Fort Leonard Wood, Mo. photo from 1943, right, and Thompson now, left.

ABOVE: Johnny Thompson, center, 1943, Fort Leonard Wood, Mo. - Photos: Courtesy of Johnny Thompson

Army combat engineer and was flown to England. He said it was 11 days after D-Day (June 6, 1944) that he was sent to Normandy, France. For five days and nights he waited to get on a landing craft. It was such a huge operation, he and others were delayed for what seemed a long time before deployment.

"When I landed at Normandy, I went up to the front line," said Thompson. "I stayed there and was in the town of Sherbet the day the Nazis surrendered."

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Johnny said the engineers were among the first to land on the beaches of Normandy because it was their mission to cut a road from the beach to the highway.

The engineers were mainly a building outfit. They built buildings, roads, highways and bridges. Whatever the military needed to get through or over, the engineers built. Johnny was in the bridge outfit and they were often sent in to repair or build up the bridges the Nazis had destroyed.

"The engineers had to do it with the enemy on one side and the U.S. on the other side," said Johnny. "We had to put the bridge up which was a

hard job, tough job, dangerous job."

Johnny believed the engineers were the backbone of the service, yet the least recognized. He said his outfit was with the 1st Army, 3rd Army, 7th Army, etc., scattered all over Europe.

Johnny said he almost died one night when he fell from a bridge. He couldn't remember why they were crossing such a dangerous place and at that time of night, but they did. The month was January and the ground was covered in snow and the river was icy. The bridge was damaged and partially blown up and had cross ties that had been knocked out. Thompson missed his step and fell in the drink.

"The only thing that saved me was the height

of the bridge from the river," Johnny said. "It was a low railroad bridge."

He said there were dangling parts of the rail hanging down and with them and three engineers from his outfit holding on to one another, they were able to reach down and grab him from the icy water.

"When they got me out, I was so cold, I was

dizzy," said Johnny. "That was really a close call for me freezing in that water."

He recalled another accident that he was almost involved in and no doubt would have lost his life if he had been. Johnny was almost sent to the Remagen Bridge in Germany. It was, at the time, the only existing functional bridge crossing the Rhine River. The Germans had attempt-

ed to blow it up, but were unsuccessful. It was damaged, but still usable. He was on his way to the bridge when orders came for his outfit to go somewhere else. The next day, the Remagen Bridge fell in to the Rhine.

"There were 28 men killed on this bridge the day it fell in," said Thompson. "One of my best buddies was killed on

it." Johnny said he wasn't sure how many others he knew and worked with who were also killed that day. He knew of two men.

By this time the war in Germany was coming to an end. After the war was over, Thompson came home with five battle stars including medals for Normandy and the Battle of the Bulge (Dec. 16, 1944).