

MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

Memories clear for D-Day vet



The Rev. T. B. Marsh looks through his photo album from the trip he and his wife, Mary, took to France to mark the anniversary of DDay in 2004. (Bulletin photos by Mike Wray)

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By DEBBIE HALL - Bulletin Staff Writer

The Rev. Theo Bryant "T.B." Marsh is among the dwindling ranks of World War II veterans who have been called "The Greatest Generation."

Although it has been more than 60 years since the end of war, Marsh, 86, recalls the events vividly, from the song he learned in boot camp to the days spent off and on the beaches of Normandy.

"What a time. What a time. Great God Almighty, what a time," Marsh's voice rang clear as he sang "the little song we made up

to sing while taking training." When conversation turned to the D-Day invasion to liberate part of Europe on June 6, 1944, Marsh took a deep breath. "Lord, have mercy," he said before recounting his experience.

"We had to sit out on the water in a ship about three days before we could get off or unloaded," said Marsh, of the Laurel Park area. During those three days, German pilots killed their engines and coasted down as they "tried to bomb our ships," he said.

Marsh made landfall on June 12. "That was something," he said, adding that he served in Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg and Germany. While there, Marsh recalled a communication from then-General and later President Dwight D. Eisenhower. In part, it said, "We did not go in as liberators, but as conquerors, and I felt like I was part of a conquering Army," Marsh said.

After joining the Army in 1943, Marsh was assigned to a "trucking outfit," he said. "We had to drive trucks" sometimes 400 to 500 miles to take supplies to the front lines. "We carried ammunition, food, clothing ... you name it. And as the Army moved, all their supplies" had to move with them.

"I've got a whole lot of memories of World War II," he said, and proceeded to share them. "We were the first to cross the Rhine River into Germany," Marsh said. The Germans tried to blow up the bridge "to keep us from crossing, but they did a bum job of it and we followed right behind them."

The enemy then retreated "right into a forest," he said, and that became its undoing. "We went around them and penciled them in. They couldn't go back and they couldn't go forward. We pinned them in," Marsh said. "They were at the mercy of our air force. Our air force knocked their air force out of the sky."

When Eisenhower issued an order calling for those Germans to surrender, they did so, Marsh said. "It was something," he added. He recalled American troops were to travel through a French town on the route to Paris but found the area occupied by Germans. "We sent 1,000 bombs to wipe this town off the map," Marsh said. He and others in his unit watched from a nearby hill as the town was destroyed.

"After that, it was on the way to Paris. (There) wasn't nothing going to stop us," Marsh said proudly.

Marsh reflected on the differences between that time and now. "I guess I've seen a greater transition in my lifetime than there's ever been in the history of the world," he said. There were 150 soldiers in his unit, but Marsh was one of only three who graduated from high school. Marsh is a 1940 graduate of Goldston (N.C.) Colored High School.

"I used to write letters for my comrades" because many could not read or write, he said. "That was an experience." There also were no black officers when Marsh served his country. "We had four white officers" over the unit, Marsh said. "I thought about that during the last election" when Barack Obama was elected president.

When his tour of duty was up in 1945, Marsh settled in Martinsville and raised five sons. He worked in the maintenance department of the Martinsville post office for 26 years, until he retired in 1983. He also served as the pastor of the Pilgrim Missionary Baptist Church for 38 years, retiring in 1999.

Marsh received the French Legion of Honor Medal in 2004 while he was in France to commemorate the 60th anniversary of D-Day. He was invited by the French government and has a photo album of snapshots detailing that trip.

"We were knocking elbows with (President George) Bush, Queen Elizabeth and 15 heads of state," Marsh said.

Although he does not dwell on the time he spent defending his country, Marsh does peruse the photo album "once in a while, when it's raining and there's else nothing to do."