

Local vet was one of 'Patton's Boys'

Octogenarian Don Hurst of Burlington fought in World War II under the command of the late Gen. George Patton and literally lived in an Army tank for four years.

"I was one of the guys known as 'Patton's Boys,'" he said. "I first saw Patton in Tunisia at the time our forces were being pushed back 26

miles by the Germans, who had us out-numbered."

He met and spoke to Patton a few months later during the invasion of Nazi-held Sicily.

"I don't remember exactly what he said to me, but in part he said we were doing a good job," said Hurst, 86. "I can't remember what I said to him besides saying thank you."

He feels the late actor George C. Scott convincingly portrayed the

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Julie Basile / Times-News

Don Hurst, 86, shows a photo Friday of the tank he served in and nearly died in during World War II. Hurst, who lives in Burlington, was a member of the U.S. Army's 813th Tank Destroyer Battalion under Gen. George Patton.

Boys: Hurst fought on D-Day

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general in the movie "Patton."

"Scott could have passed for Patton's twin," he said. "He looked like him and his voice was like Patton's."

A West Virginia native, Hurst settled in Burlington as a teenager. He will observe the 63rd anniversary of his Army induction on April 1.

He was working at the Plaid Mill, then a part of Burlington Industries, when drafted in 1942 and assigned to the 813th Tank Destroyer Battalion, which became a part of Patton's forces.

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Don Hurst
World War II
veteran

"We were sent back to England in November 1943 to practice for the D-Day invasion of France."

While in Great Britain, he said, then-First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt visited his outfit and, during her talk, "She asked us to tell her the one thing we needed most.

"We all told her thick socks, because we only had thin socks and the weather was cold. In a few weeks, we got a shipment of wool socks and shoe pads. I got three pairs of those socks and two pairs of pads."

Hurst escaped injury during the lengthy D-Day invasion. He said his battalion then fought its way across a large part of France during the summer and fall, but on Nov. 4, 1944, the unthinkable happened when a powerful shell hit the tank he occupied with four other GIs, all his close friends since 1942.

"My job was to load the big shells into the 90-caliber guns and I was at the back of the tank when it was hit. The impact knocked me out of the rear opening and I landed in the mud outside.

"All the others were killed and burned up inside the tank," said Hurst, who was hospitalized 17 days and returned to duty with a Purple Heart.

Limping, but still a vital part of the 813th, Hurst took part in the Battle of the Bulge, the invasion of Germany when Patton's Third Army crossed the Rhine River, and he was there when the Nazis surrendered.

Hurst, who returned home in late 1945, resumed his career with Burlington Industries, and married Peggy Simpson in 1947. The couple, the parents of three sons, have five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

When the couple began attending annual reunions of the 813th in 1973, 27 veterans were on hand. At last year's reunion, there were eight and today there are only seven known surviving members.

The 813th vets will meet next on Labor Day weekend in Greenville, S.C.