

Reunited

D-day relived by men of the 'Hell on Wheels' division

photos and story by Marcena M. Ely

World War II memories of D-day, Normandy and other European campaigns were relived last weekend by members of Company B, 702nd Tank Destroyer Battalion, 2nd Armored Division.

The veterans and some family members came from all over the United States to hold their fourth reunion in Columbia and Fort Jackson and to commemorate D-day.

While on post Saturday, the group attended the 4th Combat Support Brigade's Big Red Review and toured the Post Museum. The tour led by museum technician Fred DeMag, included a walk through the restored World War II barracks.

A special memorial service was held Sunday by Chaplain George H. Nickols, Jr., in memory of the sacrifices made by former servicemen, and particularly the men of the 702nd.

It was on June 6, 1944 (D-day) that Allied forces joined hands to comb the beaches of France.

Former company commander, Col. (Ret.) Cecil F. Hunnicutt, explained that the battalion "always tries to have the reunion as close to D-day as possible."

The 2nd Armored Division, nicknamed "Hell on Wheels" was activated in Fort Benning, Ga., in 1942. In September of that year, the first units to leave the division headed for North Africa where they received additional overseas training.

"We were told we were fighting a war to end all wars," said 1st Sgt. (Ret.) James Ridenhour.

During the war the men of Company B fought in a series of massive attacks. They participated in five major European campaigns — Normandy, Northern France, Rhine, Ardennes and Alsace and Central Europe. These soldiers, who were once commanded by Gen. George S. Patton, Jr., landed at Normandy and fought across France and through Belgium into Holland and Germany.

Lt. (Ret.) George Stone said the division's mission was "to shoot and destroy tanks in France, Belgium, Holland and Germany."

"Everybody gets scared," he said. "Only the

fools weren't."

Stone was wounded in battle at St. Lo Breakthrough in France where, Hunnicutt recalled, "there was dirty, bitter fighting. The Germans resisted strongly."

The unit "had to fight to get ashore and fight them (the Germans) all the way through," Stone added.

In 1945 the Tank Destroyer Battalion was recognized for its use of the T-10 Tank Destroyer with 90mm guns against German forces in Belgium.

During the war the division earned a distinctive combat record and was cited as the first American division to arrive in Berlin. The men of Company B accumulated more than 3,200 decorations, received a Presidential Citation and Fourragere of the Belgian Croix de Guerre.

Reminiscing, 1st Sgt. Bill McNally, a company B tank driver and gunner said, "you have to leave the bad things over there and only think about the humorous stuff."

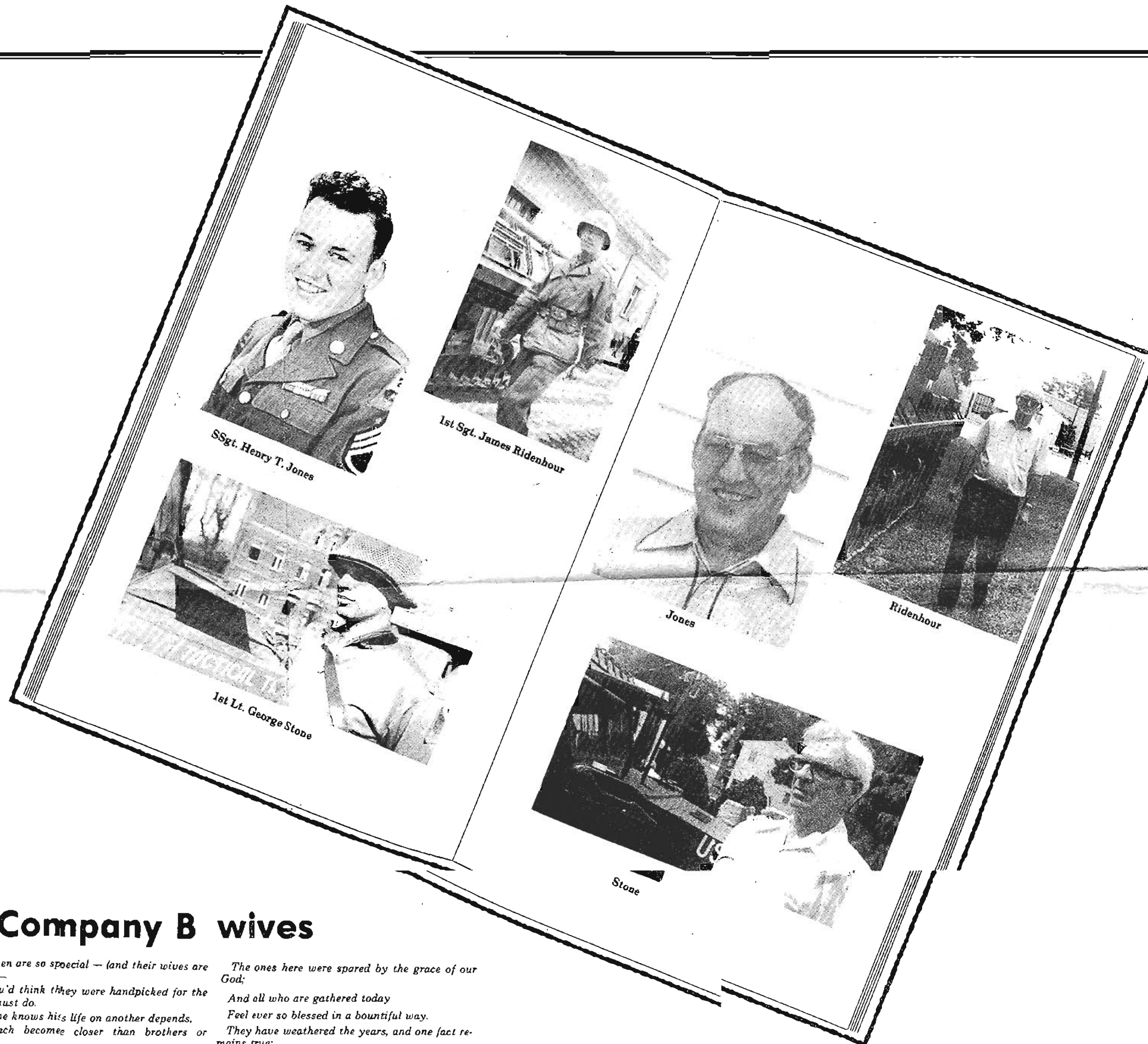
As an example of the "humorous stuff" McNally said, the men used to give each other haircuts by placing a bowl over the man's head and cutting the hair around it. He laughed, "You should have seen some of the haircuts I had."

Henry T. Jones, alias "Chicken Jones," known to the company as the youngest man ever to join the Army, recalled his days of being the unit mascot. "Chicken" said he was in the service for 15 months before Pearl Harbor and the unit begged him to give up fighting and go back home.

But, the 17-year-old sergeant stayed in the battle and confessed that he did receive a lot of special treatment because of his age. Many times, Jones said, he got a boost right to the front of the chow line.

One facet of war which McNally said he wants to remember is the closeness of the men in Company B.

McNally described unit comradeship as being "closer than brothers."



Reunion opens window to war for Company B wives

photos and story by Marcena M. Ely

The reunion of the soldiers from Company B may have given the wives and relatives of those men a closer look at something that they had heard much about but, never actually seen — war.

"I think it was just as hard for us (the family and friends) at home as it was for the people (service-members) in war," said Hazel Blanton, whose husband, Jimmy, was awarded a purple heart. The Blantons are from Denver, N.C.

"Nobody gets left out of the war," she said. "We all had boyfriends and friends who were fighting."

Since the days of Company B's battles, Blanton said, the wives have become good friends.

The pleasure of renewing old friendships and the rekindling of a spirit of camaraderie is reflected in a poem entitled, "An Affair of the Heart (The Reunion)," by Clara B. Brooks, of Holly Hill, Fla., a Company B soldier's wife.

*What's in a reunion that sets it apart,
When kindred souls meet with strong ties from
the heart?
It's bitter-sweet memories mingled with fun,
From the meeting's beginning until it is done.
So diverse a group formed from all walks of life,
When our country, in anguish, was forced into
strife;*

*These men are so special — (and their wives are
nice, too) —*

*That you'd think they were handpicked for the
job they must do.*

*When one knows his life on another depends,
They each become closer than brothers or
friends:*

*No man in the war could see what lay ahead —
If he, too, would lie with the fallen and dead;
And, many's the time, in the war's fiercest heat,
When each must have felt the strong fear of
defeat.*

*Although thousands have died who lie under the
sod,*

*The ones here were spared by the grace of our
God;*

And all who are gathered today

Feel ever so blessed in a bountiful way.

*They have weathered the years, and one fact re-
mains true:*

*That they are holding up well for the hell they've
been through!*

*We pray for the day when all fighting will cease,
When men live together in love and in peace.*

*Yes, it's hard to explain just what sets us apart —
But reunions are special affairs of the heart!*