

Former German POW honored

By Sherri Onorati, Special to The Leader

Unlike previous honorees, May's Veteran of the Month belongs to a distinct club that no military service member wishes to be a member of – he was a German prisoner of war during World War II.

Originally from Thaxton, Mississippi, nonagenarian William Travis Hawkins was born on July 13, 1921, one of seven children, to Amos and Tinie Hawkins. Like many young men of his time growing up in Union County, Mississippi, Hawkins was raised on a farm and not afraid of hard work. During his junior year in high school, Hawkins made the courageous decision to join the U.S. Army and enlisted on Sept. 23, 1942 at Camp Shelby, Miss.

After attending basic training at Camp Hood, Texas, Hawkins spent the beginning of WWII serving as a medic, but a promotion to sergeant changed his career path, and ultimately, led him through a series of events, which led to his capture.

He was sent overseas as the gunnery commander of the 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion, 1st Platoon, Company B, which was a part of the opening invasion of Normandy, landing on Omaha Beach on June 12, 1944. Hawkins and his unit participated in some of the fiercest battles in the European Theater – Hill 192, the Vire Offensive, Brest and the Battle of the Bulge – battles that made even the most hardened of soldiers weep at night.

It was during the second day of the Battle of the Bulge on Dec. 17, 1944, while fighting for the town of Honsfeld, Belgium, that Company B and the 1st Reconnaissance platoon were attacked and surrounded by the Germans. The 1st SS Division, Kampfgruppe Peiper, a unit nicknamed the “Blowtorch Battalion,” captured Hawkins and 131 other members of his unit and of 1st Recon after a fierce battle. Angry with the American soldiers, the SS troops began systematically slaughtering the Americans as they tried to surrender. Survivors, including Hawkins, were forced on a 15-mile march over the next three days to Stalag 13C near Hammelburg, Germany – the location of their imprisonment for the next four and a half months. It was later determined that more than 300 American POWs and 100 Belgium civilians were murdered during the three-day death march.

Stalag 13C held more than 30,000 prisoners of war from nine nations, including the eldest son of Joseph Stalin and the son-in-law of General Patton, Lt. Colonel John K. Waters. Hawkins and his fellow prisoners were held under dreadful and harsh conditions where men died on a daily basis, sick and malnourished. The average temperature didn't rise above 20 degrees F and food was scarce to non-existent. Hawkins was made to serve as a cook and often had to resort to serving a paste of sawdust and water, just so the men would have something to eat of substance. He was also forced to cook for the German officers and would use that opportunity to sneak small bits of food from the Germans' pantry so he would have something to feed to the Americans, a task which would have meant his death if caught.

On April 29, 1945, General George Patton's 47th Tank Battalion liberated the camp and Hawkins and his fellow prisoners were freed. Hawkins and a few other POW's found their way to an abandoned home in Germany, where they recuperated for a few weeks before making their way to Leeds, Belgium, and then on to France where Hawkins caught a boat back to the United States. Once back on American soil, Hawkins spent the remainder of his time in the service as a military police officer at Fort Belvoir, Va.

“Stalag 13C was the coldest, dark place I’ve ever been in,” whispered Hawkins, the memory of those months, even after 71 years still very painful. “I served from 23 Sept 1942 to 4 Nov 1945... three years, one month and 12 days. I had considered making the military a career but after being a POW, it was time to go.”

After his discharge on Nov. 4, 1945, Hawkins held a variety of jobs, including cattle herdsman, pecan factory worker, grocery store owner, and as a district manager for Kemper Insurance.

Hawkins married Earlene, the love of his life on 1 July 1942 and together they raised four lovely daughters, Frankye Knoff, Linda Alexander, Janice Pilkington and Peggy McKinnis. Hawkins and his wife moved to Atoka in 1993 and they were married almost 70 years when she passed in January 16, 2011. Today, he attends the Assembly of God and is a member of the West Tennessee Association of Ex-P.O.W.’s.

The Tipton County Veteran’s Council presented Hawkins with several awards for his many years of service, including a certificate of honor, a years membership in the Tipton County Veterans Council, a certificate for an 11x14 canvas portrait given by Munford Funeral Home and a flag flown over the state capitol, signed by the governor and given by District 81 State Representative Deborah Moody.

“It is with heartfelt appreciation of your tireless efforts in support of our United States, the Tipton County Museum, Veterans Memorial and Nature Center in partnership with the Tipton County Veteran Council gratefully acknowledges your service as our veteran of the month,” said Kathy Desjarlais, president of the Tipton County Veterans Council, reading from the certificate of honor presented to Hawkins. “Your dedication to our country is commendable and an honorable addition to the fight for freedom in the world.”

At 94 years of age, Hawkins’ hearing isn’t what it used to be but his memory and mind is sharp but like others of his generation, it’s taken almost seven decades for him to open up about his experiences.

“It is good to hear him in more recent years talk about the war and what he went through,” said his youngest daughter Peggy McKinnis. “We knew he had been a POW but growing up he did not talk about it and we knew not to ask about it.”

“I was in charge of a 10-man crew and I told my [commanding officer] that I’ve got the best darn crew in the entire battalion and that was the way I felt about them,” said Hawkins. “They were wonderful men. We did more firings of any gun crew in our company and when they set us up to get something, we never failed to get it. We went through some awful dark situations and I wonder how I’m standing up here with all my limbs intact, no fingers missing, no toes, no legs.... Every time I go to the VA, I see guys with the injuries they have and I’m still walking around intact, I’m thankful that the good lord thought enough of me to let me survive. I certainly am thankful to you people for honoring me here tonight. We don’t live in the biggest country in the world, but I do think we live in the best country of the world. I’ve been to several countries and they just don’t measure up to what the U.S. does. We’ve got a beautiful country and we ought to be more proud of it.”

The Veteran of the Month program is sponsored by the Tipton County Museum, Veteran Memorial and Nature Center and the Tipton County Veterans Council. Sponsors of the monthly event include Tipton County Veterans Council, Patriot Bank, The Bank of Tipton and Munford

Funeral Home. Underwriters include the VFW Post 4840 and the Disable American Veterans Auxiliary in Millington. Honorees are recognized on the second Tuesday of the month at 6:30 p.m. and the public is invited to both make nominations and to attend the ceremony.