

VET,

continued from Page A1

tractors, farm equipment and an old Chevy, it didn't take long for his superiors to note his aptitude for mechanical troubleshooting.

"They sent me to the wheeled vehicle school where they asked dumb little questions I thought everyone should know," Thompson said. He breezed through the coursework. But, when he reported to the 16th Division, Thompson discovered they didn't need another vehicle mechanic, they needed soldiers who could fix a busted tank.

He went back to Fort Knox to become certified in tank maintenance and repairs. Taking classes was fine with him because it meant he was getting shipped overseas. After completing his second round of classes, Thompson was stationed in Fort Smith, Arkansas, for about a year before receiving orders to deploy to the European Front in February 1945.

Thompson landed in France and stayed there until late April when orders came down from Patton to begin moving north through Germany toward Czechoslovakia (in the area which is now the modern Czechia).

"In Germany, we went through towns that were like driving through a rock quarry. We had to bulldoze the path to get through the town. There



George Thompson in his Emerald Pointe residence with a gift from the mayor of Nýrany.

KEIZERTIMES/
Eric A. Howald

was tremendous devastation," Thompson said. The Division traveled through Nuremberg making sure the last of the Nazi forces had been cleared out and then made a last push into Czechoslovakia.

About 60 miles into the Czech territory, Thompson was part of a unit tasked with going street-to-street in Nýrany looking for occupation forces.

"I was walking along a stone wall and someone fired on me from somewhere. I got some rock chips in my face, that's was how close it was," Thompson said. A short fire-

fight ensued, but Allied forces won the day.

After resisting German troops, along with others who surrendered, were rounded up, Thompson was one of several soldiers charged with ushering the captives toward the infantry troops following the armored division. Along the way, Thompson ended up having to protect the captives from the Czech citizens.

"They went at those soldiers with sticks, rakes, hoes, whatever they had. They were everywhere, and I did what I could, but our medics patched up more Germans than they

did our troops that day."

From Nýrany, the division continued east to Pilsen.

"Pilsen loyalists were calling for help to repel the Germans. Patton gave our division the word to charge in and take care of the city," Thompson said. Thompson said there were about 6,000 German troops in Pilsen and the Allies sent in approximately 400.

"We took them pretty much by surprise. We located the commanding general and told him we had him surrounded, which he wasn't," Thompson said. The general signed surrender paperwork and then shot himself on the spot.

While the 16th Division didn't loiter in Pilsen long, Thompson made the most of the time. He and a friend he had known since the day he enlisted, Vernon Lewellen, were dispatched to the Pilsen Airport with orders to jerry rig the German vehicles left to rot.

"There were airplanes, trucks, wagons, jeeps, tanks, and more. If they weren't already ruined, they tried to destroy what was left. They'd reach under the dash yank all the wires out. My job was putting a big battery in the back of a German jeep and then go down the line to see if I could start them," Thompson said.

He hotwired as many as he could and the Allies turned over the vehicles to the Pilsen citizens to help with rebuilding efforts. He and Lewellen were at the airport together on May 8 when they learned Allies had accepted the unconditional surrender of the German Nazis.

The 16th Division kept moving north to a "cow-town with no bar," but were recalled to Germany not long after VE Day. In Germany, Thompson was promoted to motor sergeant and oversaw a crew of captive German soldiers who did all the dirty work. He remained there for about six months before returning home.

Back in the U.S., Thompson married his wife, Ruth and had four kids, two girls and two boys. The couple retired to Prescott, Ariz., before Ruth's health problems led them to Keizer around 2008.

After falling out of touch with Lewellen after the war, the two reconnected years later and it was Lewellen who called him in 1990 with a proposition to return to Czechia to be honored as part of the country's liberating forces.

At the time, Thompson didn't even have a passport and nixed the idea, but Lewellen called again after he returned from the first Liberation Day ceremony in 1990.

"He came back and said 'you can't imagine what they did for us.' They had parades and monuments. I went in 1991 and it was everything Vernon said and more," Thompson said.

He's gone back 14 times since his original trip and recently returned from his most recent outing.

In 1995, on the 50th anniversary of Czechia's liberation, Thompson delivered his speech on a stage next to the Cathedral of St. Bartholomew. He's taken part in parades, spoken to students at local schools and developed an affinity for beer spas.

"In every village around there. There are plaques and monuments and signs. They

will never forget," Thompson said.

Some of the friendships he's developed with Czech natives over the years now span three decades, and honors of different types keep pouring in. Two of the more recent ones have come from the modern day mayor of Nýrany. The first was a one-of-a-kind wood carving featuring an American soldier, the insignia of the 16th Division and the seal of town of Nýrany. Another one will have to wait a while, but Thompson has a sneak preview hanging outside his residence at Emerald Pointe in Keizer. It's a Czech street sign bearing Thompson's name.

"This year, I went over and the mayor said he had a special gift, but he couldn't give it to me. He said he was naming a street after me, but they can't do it before I'm dead," Thompson said.

Every year, Thompson is absolutely certain that the Liberation Day can't get any better. Every year, at least for him, it does.

"The biggest change is there are fewer vets now than there were. In the first year I went, there were 20 or 30 of us. This year, there was only three," Thompson said.

The hardest thing to adjust to aside from the red carpet treatment was getting used to being called a hero.

"That made me uneasy because it was the guys who never made it home that were heroes. I only got used to it after I realized they were calling the American Army heroes. I can live with that," Thompson said.

That is a fine hair to split but, after spending a little time with Thompson, it becomes clear that the Czech citizens mean precisely what they say.

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KFD gets gifts from Czechia



George Thompson brought back gifts for the Keizer Fire District from his most recent trip to Czechia.

KEIZERTIMES/
Eric A. Howald

Keizer resident George Thompson will be delivering a gift box of patches and pins from fire departments in the Czechia along with a statue of St. Florian, the patron saint of firefighters in the Czechia, to the Keizer Fire District Friday, June 8.

Thompson struck up a

friendship with one of his hosts who also volunteered for his local fire department years ago. Thompson took a set of KFD patches to the department a year ago. Last month, the chief of several Czech fire departments presented Thompson with the patches, pins, and statue to give to Keizer Fire.

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puzzle answers

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