

# The Mexico Ledger

Mexico, Missouri

Thursday, April 29, 2004

12 pages • 50 cents

150th year - No. 102 © The Mexico Ledger 1 Section



Exercise Tiger survivors enter the celebration under drawn sabers.



Ten survivors of Exercise Tiger are seated to observe the ceremonies. Seated behind them (left) are residents of the Missouri Veterans' Home.

Ledger photos by Dean Patrick

## Army and Navy Anchor Memorial is site of Exercise Tiger 60th anniversary tribute

by RYAN SMITH  
Ledger Staff Writer

It was once a tragic battle clouded in secrecy.

But Wednesday afternoon's ceremony in Mexico marking the 60th anniversary of the Exercise Tiger battle in World War II, served as not only the state recognition of the attack that took the lives of more than 700 men, including 200 Missourians, but also as the national ceremony.

Exercise Tiger "holds a cherished place in the history of the U.S.," commented President George Bush in a letter read by Missouri Secretary of State Matt Blunt during the ceremony. "I join all Americans in saluting those who fought for freedom."

Blunt joined Missouri First Lady Lori Hauser Holden, as well as other state and city officials and military leaders in honoring the fallen from the Exercise Tiger.

"Today we honor the courage of those soldiers. By their service the course of history was changed," said Dave Isaacson, CMSGT of the U.S. Air Force.

The guests of honor included ten veterans from Missouri, Illinois, Kansas and Florida who participated in the battle on April 28, 1944.

Those veterans were given small American flags to place in the flower box at the base of the Exercise Tiger memorial during the emotional ceremony. Survivors of the fallen soldiers were given red roses by Holden to put in the same place.

Later, a somber soldier rang a bell in remembrance of those who lost their lives in the war.

Blunt called it, "our expression of gratitude and admiration for those of you who served."

Mexico was chosen to be the host of the remembrance because it is home to the only Exercise Tiger memorial in the nation. The large Navy-donated anchor and granite wall that lists the names of the Missourians who died in the war, was dedicated and placed in the northwest corner of the Audrain County Courthouse lawn in 2000.

As part of the ceremony, a bench next to the anchor was dedicated, as well as a plaque that lists Missourians who have died in the Iraqi war. The plaque also represents the first Iraqi Freedom memorial in the U.S., noted Walter Domanski, executive director of the Exercise Tiger Foundation.

### Veterans remember

Charles Griffey, like many other soldiers who were packed into the transport ship on that fateful dark night 60 years ago, was half asleep. Others were playing cards, writing letters to girlfriends, or chatting with each other.

It was nearly 2 a.m. and the operation was called "Exercise Tiger" for a reason. It was supposed to be a mere practice run, a simple rehearsal for the invasion of Normandy off the coast of England.

And so Griffey dozed - well that is until the torpedo struck.

"Yeah, it threw me in the air pretty good," the 81-year-old Independence, Mo. native remembered with a grin. The first shot from the small German torpedo ship narrowly missed the landing ship-tank (LST) on which Griffey was stationed.

The second torpedo struck the boat in the stern directly and killed 13 men.

"We were stunned," recalled Griffey. "I went to get my gun at first and then I said, 'Hell, I don't need that, I need a lifejacket.'"

Unfortunately, hundreds of soldiers would need a lifejacket.

The LSTs were supposed to be protected by two British escorts, but the English destroyer ship was called back to base for repairs, and because of a communications mix-up, was not replaced.

The error would prove to be a fatal one.

Meanwhile, nine German torpedo boats traveling from France stumbled upon the lightly convoy and quickly torpedoed three LSTs, including Griffey's 289.

LST 503 was hit by a torpedo just after 2 a.m. and had to abandon ship by 2:30 a.m.

Shortly after that, the LST 531, called the 3206 Quartermaster Service Company which carried a company consisting entirely of Missouri men, took a direct hit, split in two, and sank in six minutes.

Some died almost instantly, others abandoned the sinking ships and died in the English Channel waiting for rescue ships. Tragically, many of the men died because they incorrectly attached the life preserver to their waist.

After the carnage, records showed that 749 Ameri-

cans, two hundred Missourians, and eight from Audrain County lost their lives in Exercise Tiger. It was the largest single day loss of U.S. life since Pearl Harbor.

### Hiding Tiger

The bodies of 260 men were recovered and buried in a cemetery outside of London. Hundreds of others were never recovered from the English Channel and were considered missing in action by the military.

Those actual numbers would not be released for several decades.

Because of the top-secret nature of the mission - military leaders fear the Germans would learn of plans of the D-day invasion - the troops involved in Exercise Tiger were ordered by "higher-ups" not to speak of Exercise Tiger.

"They drug in our ship the next day and they put us on trucks, covered us up so no one could see us, took us into a camp and set a guard on us. We couldn't talk to anybody," remembered Griffey. "Then the next morning some high ranking personnel came and talked to us and threatened our lives if we talked."

According to Griffey, those that did talk were transferred out.

"It was understandable, we all realized what was going on," said Griffey. "From then on, it went out of our minds."

Leonard Burns, 80, of Fulton, was part of a communications company which had reached the beach ahead of the convoy of transports.

"They didn't really tell us what was going on. We heard things, explosions and firing, but we weren't sure what was happening," said Burns.

Many of the troops, however, were too busy to ponder the specifics of certain battles. Many of the survivors went on to take part in D-Day and other key battles.

"I didn't have time to think about it at all. It was, in a sense, a small portion of my time in the service," said Griffey, who participated in the invasion of Normandy and later went to Okinawa for the fight against Japan.

But in the mid-1980s, details about Exercise Tiger



Relatives of deceased Exercise Tiger soldiers place roses at the wall of the memorial.



Brig. Gen. Michael Pace (right) reads the name of each Missouri soldier killed in Iraq during the unveiling and dedication of an Iraqi Freedom plaque "honoring the brave Missourians killed fighting the war on terror." Holding the plaque are Susan Haines and Airman Don Daly.

began to emerge. An English author discovered dogtags, helmets and other military items on the shores of Slapton Sands Beach. Finally, a Sherman tank was raised from the waters, and the U.S. government admitted the truth about Exercise Tiger and the classified documents were unveiled.