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BOOKS SINGING

## ‘Norfolk’s Jim Thorpe’ pens his story

By **Bill Reed**

### Correspondent

Norfolk in the late 1930s and early '40s was a gritty town that harbored what was to become the world's most formidable Navy and a corps of hard-nosed teenage athletes whose names still resonate in local lore.

Among the first was the legendary Johnny Brown, a three-sport standout at Maury High School and later at the Norfolk Division of William and Mary and then the College of William and Mary, where he would earn a master's degree on the GI Bill.

Now a 93-year-old Virginia Beach resident, Brown has authored his third book on those early days.

This one, titled "The 16th Cavalry Spearhead to the Rhine with General Patton," is a lively account of his transition from schoolboy jock to a tank commander under the fiery Army leader.

Brown will autograph copies of this 178-page, soft-cover book from 3 to 5 p.m. today at the Meyera E. Oberdorf Central Library and from 3 to 5 p.m. Nov. 4 at the Ocean View Station Museum in Norfolk.

"This is really my biography – growing up and going into the service," Brown said. The story begins on Page 23, describing his early childhood playing soldier along Steamboat Creek in Colonial Place in Norfolk and his gradual shift in interest to sports.

### From sports to war

At Ruffner Junior High School and Maury High School, Brown made a name for himself as a track athlete, specializing in the broad jump and pole vault events, and later on the football and baseball fields.

Local sportswriters of the era dubbed him "Norfolk's Jim Thorpe" for his versatility in all three sports, an honor Brown proudly alludes to in prefaces to all three of his books.

The outbreak of World War II saw Brown enlist as an Army private in October 1941. He was selected for Officer Candidate School shortly afterward and transferred to the 16th Cavalry, managing along the way to play football at Fort Riley, Kan., with a group of college All-Americans of the day.

Eventually, Brown and his unit were shipped to England from the port of New York City aboard the luxury liner Queen Elizabeth, which had been converted to a troop ship.

"It was snowing when we pulled out and I saw the Statue of Liberty off our portside," he wrote. "Suddenly a chill went down my spine. She was beautiful."

### From England to France to Germany

After spending weeks in a drizzly, muddy encampment in England, Brown and fellow GIs were shipped to the coast of France following the June 6, 1944, Normandy landing, and were assigned to a tank unit that was part of Gen. George S. Patton's drive to the Rhine River and Germany.

After taking town after town along the German border, the 16th Cavalry and Brown arrived at Idar-Oberstein, which had been the former headquarters of the Waffen SS, an elite and highly feared Nazi guard unit.

"I met with the mayor and demanded that within two hours all weapons be placed in street gutters – or else. He complied without asking what 'or else' was," Brown recalled.

The next day Patton arrived and Brown made a hasty exit from the town.

"I didn't want him ask why I wasn't at the front or something," Brown said in a recent interview. "I didn't want to get slapped."

Brown was alluding to a well-publicized incident in August 1943, in which Patton slapped a shell-shocked GI hospitalized in Sicily, after accusing him of cowardice.

The 16th Cavalry reached the Rhine several days later, after some tentative reconnaissance, and crossed it on a pontoon bridge constructed by U.S. Army engineers.

### Victory nears

The war in Europe was ne a r i ng its end as t he unit rolled into Bingen, where Johnny Brown sustained his only injury of the war – a broken ankle that occurred in a pickup baseball game with another cavalry unit.

It happened, he said, when one of his baseball spikes got snagged in the grass as he was sliding into second base.

Brown still has a yellowed photo of himself in uniform, on crutches, grinning into the camera.

With the surrender of Germany in May 1945, word was the 16th Cavalry might be shipped to the Pacific Theater of War – possibly the Philippines or the Japanese mainland, where military leaders were defying U.S. surrender terms.

The news was unsettling to battle-weary GIs who had slugged it out with the Germans across France and Germany for the better part of two years.

They received a last-minute reprieve as they were loading aboard an Army troop transport ship at Mar seille, France.

“The ships were at Marseille dock on Aug. 15 (1945) when they announced VJ Day (Victory in Japan Day),” Brown wrote. Instead of the Far East, the troops were headed for the U.S.

### Back to school and sports

Once home in Norfolk, Br ow n r e su me d t rack competition, entering and winning gold medals in the Virginia AAU Track Meet.

He enrolled in the College of William and Mary, played baseball for the Norfolk City League, played football for the Norfolk Shamrocks in the Dixie Pro League, got his college degrees, and went into teaching and coaching in his hometown.

He became principal of Granby High School, a post he held for 17 years, and retired in 1981.

Of his war and athletic experiences over his lifetime, Brown had this to say: “The best coaching job I ever did was to bring all my boys back home.”

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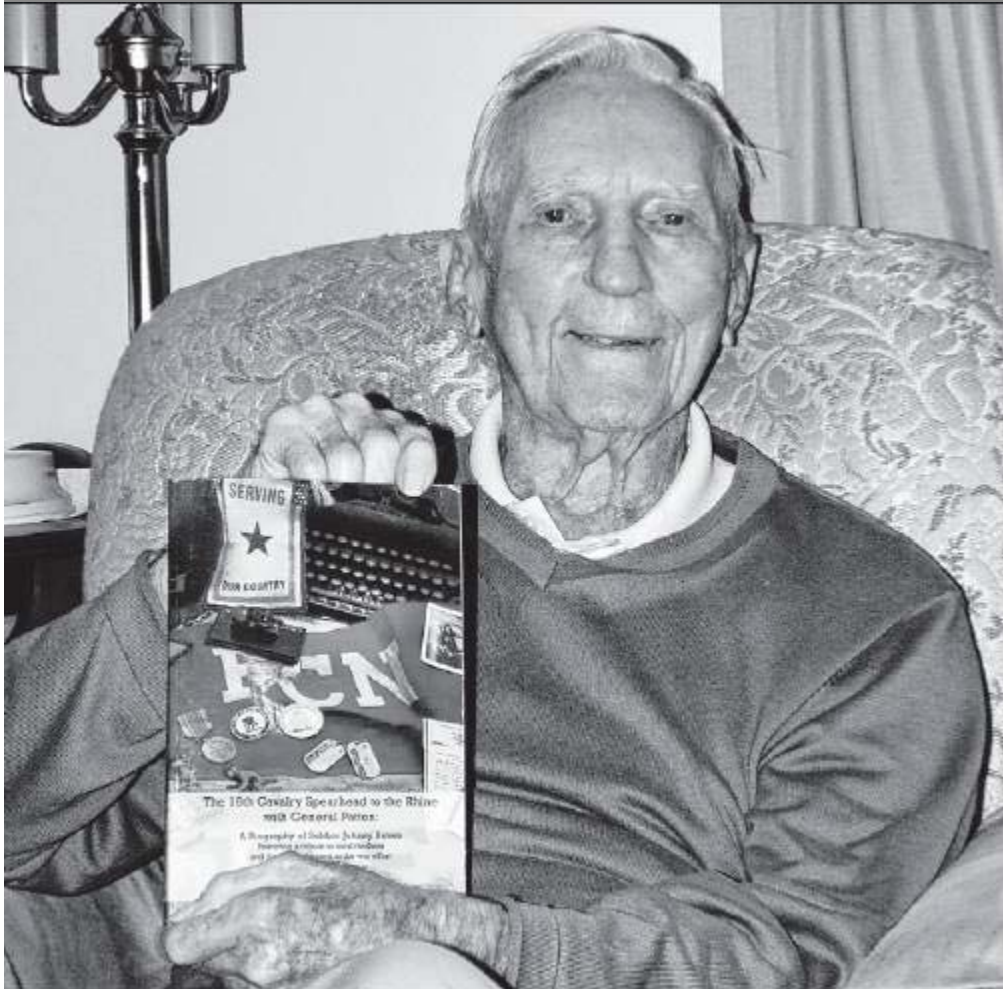


Images from the pages of Johnny Brown’s book include a shot of fellow 16th Calvary members in a jeep and him on crutches after breaking his ankle in a baseball game.



## interested?

Virginia Beach resident Johnny Brown will autograph and sell copies of his book, titled "The 16th Cavalry Spearhead to the Rhine with General Patton," (178 pages, \$20, soft cover) from 3 to 5 p.m. today at the Meyera E. Oberndorf Central Library in Virginia Beach and from 3 to 5 p.m. Nov. 4 at the Ocean View Station Museum in Norfolk.



COURTESY PHOTOS

Johnny Brown, now a 93-year-old Virginia Beach resident, was a star athlete at Maury High and the Norfolk Division of William and Mary.

## other books by Johnny Brown

"The Granby Roll," a remembrance of his high school buddy and legendary Granby wrestling coach Billy Martin

“Before They Were Monarchs,” a story of Brown’s playing days at the Norfolk Division of the College of William and Mary – now Old Dominion University, home of the newly minted Monarchs football team