

HERNDON INGE JR.

Duty and honor

Retired judge and lawyer reflects on his long career and his harrowing World War II experience in the Battle of the Bulge

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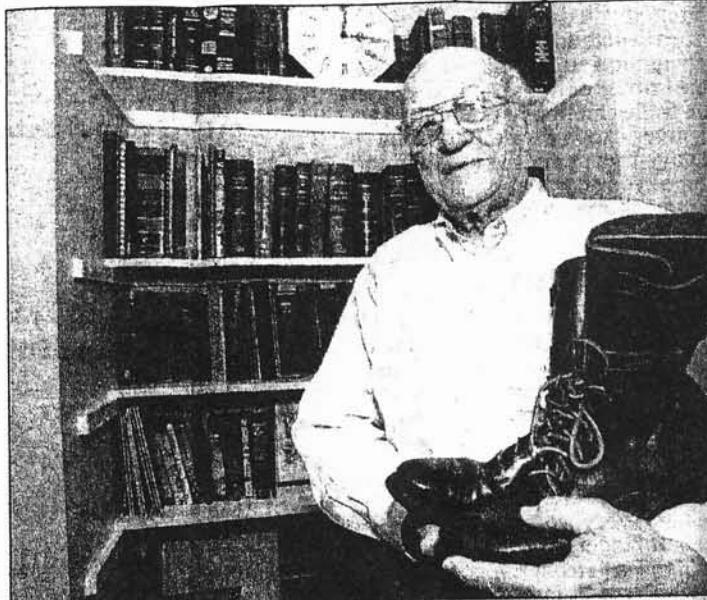
Staff Reporter

After nearly 60 years of heading downtown to preside as a judge or practice law, Herndon Inge Jr. now travels a much shorter distance to sit in his swivel chair.

"My wife fixed up this office for me," says Inge, 88, opening the door of a large storeroom at the back of

his house in west Mobile and entering a world of memorabilia — framed copies of his judicial appointments, law tomes of yesteryear, a copy of the book "The War," based on the PBS series on World War II, in which Inge told his dramatic tale of being a prisoner of war.

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Herndon Inge Jr., with a pair of boots he wore as an Army infantryman

Inge looks back on career and war

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"I haven't decided how to spend my time yet," he says, settling into the chair, a hard-charging though soft-spoken man not yet accustomed to retirement.

Volunteer work is one possibility, he explains, but he never really had any hobbies to pursue. "I was always too busy working," he says, laughing.

As a child of the Depression, Inge, born in Chickasaw in 1920, first went to work when he dropped out of Murphy High for a year to contribute to the family wages. He returned to finish up and go to Spring Hill College, then the University of Alabama.

But his education was interrupted again during his first year of law studies at Alabama, when he answered the call to arms.

His war years, 1943-45, became pivotal in his life.

Inge fought in the furious Battle of the Bulge, where he fell into German hands.

"I had a lot of close calls," he says, thinking back, with quiet gratitude, of how his life was spared, but with sad-

ness over Army comrades lost. "My mother was praying for me."

As he wrote in Army magazine in early 2000: "I thought of the men with whom I had trained, come overseas and shared five months of combat with and who had not made it across the field. Many had lain in the snow for hours, some had frozen to death."

Inge spreads out a map of Germany on his desk and moves his finger across a line he has drawn to show the route that he traveled as a prisoner — from the woods near the Saar and Moselle rivers, to a camp in Hammelburg, and on to Nuremberg.

In Ken Burns' "The War," Inge told of how he briefly escaped from Hammelburg with other POWs, hanging onto the back of a Sherman tank, then a half-track, after a raid by an American task force. A tiny model of a Sherman tank sits on his bookshelf.

The raid, it later turned out, was motivated by Gen. George S. Patton's hopes to free his imprisoned son-in-

law. But Inge and others, heeding the words of a commanding officer who suspected an imminent German attack, headed back to the camp.

Shortly afterward, the Germans surrounded and destroyed the American raiding force.

"The War" gave Inge and other Mobilians — including Tom Galloway, in the same prison camp — great visibility.

"I've been honored by having people call me from all over the country," Inge says.

In the years following the war, Inge stayed busy raising three sons, David, Herndon and George, with his wife, Eleanor, and tending to his thriving legal career. His positions as juvenile court judge and circuit judge in charge of domestic relations proved demanding from 1948 to 1965.

He says he felt that he comfortably handled the pressures of tough judicial decisions. "It worries you some," he admits, in terms of the emotional impact on people involved. "But you're trained."

In 1977, he served as president of the Mobile Bar Association.

Eleanor passed away in 1994. In 2006, Inge married Alice Glover.

He misses the activity of his courtroom and his law firm, he agrees. But, he says, "You get worn down. You get to the point when you're ready."

What he is not ready to do is to stop remembering his long, eventful past, his decades as a lawyer, and above all, those two, heartstopping years when he served his country.

From his bookshelf, he takes down a pair of tall, leather boots, buffed to a dark sheen. They are the last pair of boots he wore while in the Army infantry.

He is no longer the young lieutenant with the dark hair and thin mustache, but he is the same in other ways.

"I can still hear them when they were giving me my uniform. Boot size? 10 C. I'm still a 10 C."

He sets the boots on the floor, gazing down at them as if he just might slip his feet into years gone by.