



William "Bill" Kornke, 95, moved to the Northern Neck 15 years

Former POW shares gripping account

by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi

Even now, after three quarters of a century have passed, William "Bill" Kornke becomes emotional when telling his story as a German prisoner of war during World War II.

The 95-year-old pauses to compose himself when recalling the sight of a fellow soldier who had his back blown off during a battle, or talking about how he helped to bury a U.S. pilot shot down over a field in Prussia, or watching comrades starve. The memories are etched vividly into his mind.

Kornke, 95, lives in Northumberland County's Bluff Point. He moved to the Northern Neck 15 years ago from Baltimore County, Md. That's where he was in 1943 when he turned 18 and decided to enlist in the Army. With the war underway, things moved quickly—a week later, he went to the draft board and was soon aboard a ship to Scotland.

By September 1944, Corporal Kornke was part of Operation Market Garden, a battle that Allied forces hoped would end World War II. The plan was for Allied air forces to hit key territories and bridges so ground forces could cross the Rhine River.

"Only, it didn't happen," said Kornke, who watched as fellow soldiers were killed and maimed in the battle. "I guess I was one of the lucky ones. We lost so many."

Instead of suffering injury or worse, Kornke was captured and became one of the more than 120,000 Americans who lived out part of the war as a prisoner.

Before being sent to a camp, captured prisoners in Europe passed through a Durchgangslager, or transit camp, where they were interrogated. Kornke was taken to Frankfurt, Germany, for interrogation, where he said prisoners were initially greeted "like you were a long-lost friend. They told you they had a library there and you could meet with your friends."

In reality, prisoners were locked in holding cells and fed a bowl of barley soup. Some were spit on and had rocks thrown at them.

After interrogation, he boarded a train for a grueling two-week trip to East Prussia, where he and about 25 other soldiers worked on a farm, living on potatoes and bread, digging for remnants of vegetables in the soil and sleeping on shelves covered in straw.

"We dug potatoes and cleaned manure out of stalls and spread it on the fields. And that was our life," he said.

One day, he witnessed an air fight and saw two Allied airmen parachute out of a damaged plane. He was forced to dig a hole and help bury in a box the one that died. He never knew what happened to the other.

In December 1944, Kornke and about 1,000 others began a long journey, walking from East Prussia to Hanover, where they arrived in the spring of 1945. They spent their nights sleeping on the ground in fields and survived on whatever plants and vegetables they could forage.

"Some made it and some didn't," he said. "Some of the men were so desperate they were cutting hunks out of dead horses and eating that. I couldn't do that. I ate rutabagas we'd find in the fields."

When they arrived in Germany, an advance Allied unit had captured and cleared the town.

"So we got to Germany and we were free. We didn't know what to do, so we roamed around the town," he said. "We laid on the kitchen floor of a hotel and tried to eat up all the food we could find, which made a lot of the men sick, since they hadn't eaten in so long."

Kornke weighed only 123 pounds when he was taken to France for evaluation before being sent home to the states. He arrived back in the U.S. at Fort Lee and spent the last few months of his military career on guard duty in Baltimore County.

He worked for the railroad for 43 years before retiring in 1988 and lost his wife, Betty, in 2016 after 40 years of marriage.



William "Bill" Kornke enlisted in the Army in 1943.

Everybody
has a Story

Conquering life's challenges a pound at a time

by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi

“I lost my son in 2017 and I think I lost my life then too,” said Ann Belle Cain.

It's been just over three years but the grief is still evident in her eyes and her tone as she describes her son. JaVon Thompson was a Lancaster High School and George Mason University graduate, a juvenile probation officer in Maryland, a 31-year-old who loved the water, hiking and adventure.

“Every description of ‘perfect’ is what he was,” she said.

He went out swimming, then called to let her know he wasn't feeling well—after spending a month in a coma

at Johns Hopkins University, he died from inflammation on

his brain. That was the official cause of death, but a multitude of tests never revealed what caused it.

No matter the age or the circumstance, that kind of loss—the loss of a child—elicits unbearable pain. To add to her heartache, Cain's nephew had been shot and killed a week before her son's death.

“I dwindled down in grief and couldn't pull myself out,” she said.

A mental health case manager, Cain helped her clients deal with loss, grief, depression and crisis, but she couldn't help herself.

The weight started packing on—she gained 60 pounds in two months. She failed out of graduate school. She resigned her job after 22 years because she “was supposed to be helping people with their problems” and found she couldn't anymore. She opened up 20 credit cards and started mounting debt.

“I was avoiding everything, the scale, pic-

tures, family reunions... I ate my emotions away,” she said. “I started getting to the point I couldn't go up the stairs, my blood pressure was through the roof, I became pre-diabetic and I'd ride around the parking lot over and over looking for the closest parking spot. Pushing the cart around the store wore me out.”

She tried to take the weight off. “You name it [the diet], I've it done it.”

Nothing worked.

A perk of her new job as a care coordinator with a major insurance company was the opportunity to work with a coach to set goals and challenges.

“Then COVID-19 came and I said I know I'm gonna die now,” she said. “I'm overweight, with high blood pressure, pre-diabetic and I'm African-American.”

As a last resort, she thought about weight-loss surgery and reached out to VCU in Richmond. She was connected with the hospital's weight loss clinic, which supports a low-carbohydrate diet. She amped up the challenges, started a low-carb diet with intermittent fasting and, in March 2020, lost 17 pounds.

By November, she was 60 pounds down and today Cain can happily say she's lost 100 pounds. In the process, she says “I'm at a better place. My relationships are better. I took on a second job and my debt is coming down. My mental health is better.”

It's obvious from her smile as she talks about her weight-loss journey and her new dedication to exercise, she's enjoying life again.

Once the weight started to come off, she “slowly started walking up the steps and walk

“Eat better, stay hydrated and be intentional.” — Ann Belle Cain



Ann Belle Cain's inspirational journey includes a 100-pound weight loss.

Everybody has a Story

CONQUERING, continued on page A2

Conquering life's challenges

continued from page A1

ing around the yard.” She also started journaling with positive affirmations and completely embraced the low-carb diet plan, whipping up cakes and chocolate snacks with carb-free substitutes and creating her own recipes like a pizza with a crust made from chicken.

In June 2020, she started walking with her cousin Valerie Rich at Town Centre Park in Kilmarnock. She'd progressed from not being able to walk up the stairs to walking four or five miles around the park. She bought an elliptical, a treadmill and weights.

Soon folks were reaching out to her for inspiration on her personal social media pages and the VCU weight loss clinic sites.

“The journey was ‘let me lose five pounds, not let me lose 100 pounds.’ I tried to be realistic. You have to be realistic.

“Each week, I set my goals—small goals—but I try to hold myself accountable and make my weekly goals realistic,” she said.

Cain went from a size 32 to a 22, from 403 pounds to 299. “I'd like to be in a size 16, but I don't know what that looks like, weight-wise.” She hit the 100-pound weight loss achievement three weeks ago.

“And I don't say I've lost the weight 'cause losing something implies you want to find it or want it back,” she said.

She no longer works with a coach because she says “I

became my biggest coach by creating new habits and changing my mindset.”

Cain has been interviewed by a doctor and 400 pre-med students. Right now, she's coaching three ladies through the VCU site, which provides accountability, connection and support.

“All these people from all over, from Georgia and New York, are reaching out and asking ‘can you help me?’ It's great, but I tell them the struggle is real.”

Two months ago, she joined a fitness center and works twice a week with a personal trainer. She also takes water aerobics class twice a week and is in the gym every morning except Sunday.

This is a total lifestyle change which requires weekly meal prepping and planning, strategically dining out and being an investigator at the grocery store.

“Sugar is in every single thing,” she said. “And I've learned all the names for sugar. I read the labels and if sugar is the fifth ingredient, it's not that much in it. If it's in the first five, I don't buy it.”

The key to dining out is knowing where you're going and checking the menu before you go. Pick two meals that fit the low-carb plan and don't be afraid to ask for special preparation.

Low-carb doesn't mean deprivation, she said. There are so many things that don't have carbs.

“I like bread a lot. The concept of making a sandwich, I fight with that a lot, a lot, a lot!”

Instead, she makes lettuce wraps or sandwiches with a bun made from eggs and mozzarella cheese.

She alters regular recipes to cut out the carbs and even baked herself a birthday cake.

Her to-do list now includes writing a low-carb cookbook. It's already illustrated as she takes photos of everything she cooks and eats. That also helps with accountability.

“My quality of life has definitely improved with this journey.” She no longer takes blood-pressure medication after 22 years and her A1C—which measures longterm glucose levels—is now 5, which means she's no longer pre-diabetic.

“What I've done is create a toolbox and what that toolbox does is keep me grounded,” said Cain.

“I'm just in it to win it. There are no excuses for me right now and there will be none.”

Creative tradition evolves from a hunk of cheese

by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi

Most would agree cheese is an unconventional medium for a sculpture. But one person's food is another person's art supply.

For some reason 15 years ago—Emory Rice can't remember why—he decided he “was gonna do something with cheese.” And just like that, an unusual holiday tradition began.

On Christmas morning, Emory and Margaret Rice's children and grandchildren rush into the house and past them, not to see what presents lay under the tree, but to see Emory's cheese creation.

Since 2005, Emory has sculpted a local landmark or home out of loaves of sharp cheddar cheese.

A fourth generation carpenter and retired owner of Emory Rice Building and Repair, Emory has always worked with his hands. And it seems as long as the 84-year-old's hands don't fail him, he'll be expected to create his annual sculpture.

“I wasn't going to do it this year,” he said, “but Margaret said I had to.”

The idea behind this year's sculpture of his homeplace in Litwalton came to him later than usual.

“I usually have some idea a couple months before Christmas, but this year I didn't,” he said.

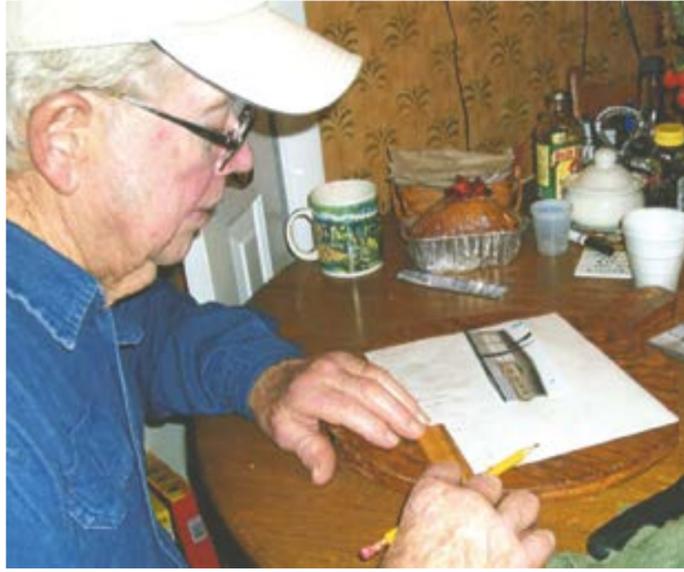
Emory sits down at the kitchen table of his Alfonso home on Christmas Eve and begins the tedious job of sculpting loaves of sharp cheddar cheese. From start to finish takes about two-and-half hours.

“You can't take too long,” he said. “The cheese gets too soft and it's hard to work with.”

“And you don't bother him,” said Margaret. “He has his ruler, his square and all the knives in the kitchen on the table.”

He doesn't reveal what's he's making to anyone but Margaret, and on Christmas morning, it's unveiled for the family to see. It remains on display Christmas Day and then is cut into big pieces, wedges and slices and distributed to family and friends.

“I think everybody on Alfonso Road gets cheese,” said Margaret.



Emory Rice's sculpting process often begins with pen and paper.



This year Emory Rice sculpted his childhood home in Litwalton.



One of his creations was the Upper Lancaster Volunteer Fire Department firehouse in Lively.

“And Emory looks forward to his cheese toast and macaroni and cheese for two or three days after.”

Each sculpture includes 10-15 pounds of sharp cheddar, purchased in 5-pound loaves.

“I've done so many, I've forgotten now what some of them even were,” said Emory.

No worries; Margaret has them all recorded in photos.

His first sculpture was the Lively branch of Chesapeake

Bank. There's also been sculptures of his mother's home, their home in Alfonso, Christ Church, Beulah Baptist Church, the Upper Lancaster Volunteer Fire Department firehouse, Lebanon Baptist Church, the old Lively High School, a



Emory Rice begins carving a 5-pound loaf of cheese.

picnic table and chairs and a barn with animals, which met with catastrophe.

“The barn was so big we couldn't get it in the refrigerator over night and the next morning it had collapsed,” said Margaret.

The sculptures of homes even

include shrubbery and bushes made of cheese. And the whole thing is held together by toothpicks.

Although he said he's not sure if he'll do it next year, Margaret says he will: there's a new great-grandbaby in the family to enjoy the tradition.

Everybody has a Story