

People were singing I'll Be Back In a Year Little Darling

Thanks for <sup>the</sup> History of  
Our Veterans -- Air Force

(Name - Onnie Robert Cockrell, Jr.)

Age - at death 90...

June 4 - 1915 — Feb 19 - 2006  
<sub>Birth</sub>

He had graduated from Barton  
College and taught 2 years  
in Bertie County. (4 Coached)  
at Lewiston-Woodville, N.C.

(In July)

1941 - He left Wilson on a bus!!  
Thinking it would be only  
① year - but sad! He  
loved his Home Town. He

trained and it was  
Next - New Orleans Air Base  
Then War <sup>was</sup> Declared - He  
cried as he called his

Mother To say - I can't

Come home for Christmas.

Then shipped to Fort Dix -

Trained

(2)

1941 - New Orleans

1942 - England = Ch<sup>?</sup>ester  
on to North Africa <sup>to</sup>

Nov. 1 1942 - On an <sup>troop</sup> ship <sup>Liverpool -</sup>  
1943 - Sardinia <sup>Brazil</sup> <sup>England</sup>

Since Onnie loved teaching History --- He was overwhelmed when he saw famous sights = This certainly gave him insight when he was able to return to his classes and show and explain vividly these historic places. This was at Rock Ridge. His students still offer words of praise as they describe how real and vivid his classes were.

Jim Hunt often mentions how interesting the History classes were.



Trained - New Orleans (2)

1st went to <sup>?</sup> Chester, England

from  
this to Liverpool, England  
Port of Embarkation

Nov. 1 - 1942 Oran, North Africa  
+ on troop ship ~~to~~ ~~the~~

The Brazil (Nov. 12, 42)  
Marched (we have a picture of ship)  
18 Miles to Take

Air Field from Germans. The  
Germans fled as we  
approached Air field

From North Africa.

From North Africa - Sardinia,  
Corsica, France (Dijon) England  
+ Germany

from -

Ann Cowan Cockrell  
208 Seven Hills Rd

Wilson, N.C.

(Over)  
Discharged Oct. 7 - 1945

Phone - 237-1039

He wasn't well  
when writing the  
notes I found. Am sure some  
of the spelling is wrong.

The paper enclosed gives  
his warm feeling when he  
got back to Ft. Bragg and  
his parents were waiting  
for him.

I did not know Onnie  
at this time.

He returned to Lewiston -  
Woodville as principal and  
coach. I taught 1st grade -  
We were married in Ahoskie

Dec. 22, 1946 -  
(We moved To R. Ridge)  
in 1947.



Saturday, May 25, 2002

# THE WILSON DAILY TIMES

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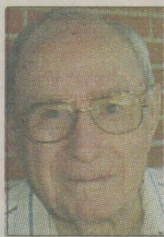
## 'Dearest Mother'

WWII veteran Onnie Cockrell shares treasured letters he wrote during war

By Alex Keown  
Daily Times Staff Writer

Letters are always the best thing to receive in the mail, especially if it is a letter from one of your children. And it is even more cherished if that child is in the middle of a war.

Onnie Cockrell was one of those letter writers. Cockrell, a graduate of Atlantic Christian College, was a 26-year-old school teacher when he was drafted in July of 1941. He was only



Cockrell



North Africa  
Feb. 7<sup>th</sup>, 1943

Dearest Mother,

I want to tell you about my visit to a town in North Africa. I will call the town "X" because of military reasons. Roughly speaking, I would say the population of "X" is 8000. Just as many other towns in North Africa, this one has its town squares, parks, a few modernistic buildings, <sup>mosques,</sup> and barrooms. In this town there is also a section with its narrow, crowded streets. On both sides of these streets are the various

was taking off on a bombing mission, I obey a natural instinct for survival. I turned and ran as fast as I could back toward the motor pool. It was then I heard the grinding crash of the

"One of the first



of 1911. He was only supposed to be in the service for one year, but when war came to the United States, Cockrell's service extended to more than three years. During his 39 months in the Army, Cockrell maintained a correspondence with his mother, Lucy, the salutation reading "Dearest mother."

Instead of writing about the horrors of war, Cockrell, a lover of history, told his mother in simple eloquence and extensive detail about the wonderful and beautiful things he saw on his travels in Europe and North Africa.

Cockrell said letters took about a week to get to his mother from wherever he happened to be. That included not only travel time but the time it took Army censors to read his letters to make sure no secrets were being disclosed. The letters she wrote back to him, none of which remain in his possession, took about the same length of time to return to Cockrell.

After leaving the United States, Cockrell first went to a Great Britain. The country was feeling the blows from the German Luftwaffe's bombing. But Cockrell did not look at the world through war-jaded eyes. Instead he looked through the eyes of someone hungry for knowledge and enthralled with beauty:

"One of the first places I visited was Berkely Square. I must confess it was quite an accident that I saw it. I was not thinking of it at all when suddenly I walked right up to it. I instantly thought of the popular song a few years back; 'A Nightingale Sang in Berkely Square.' Remember it? A very pretty song and a very pretty square," Cockrell wrote more than 60 years ago.

Later in his letter he wrote about London Bridge. "I stood on this bridge and gazed down at the Thames river. The view from London Bridge is one of the greatest sights in London. To the east, across the Thames, is Tower bridge, unique in design. There is no bridge quite like it in the world. Also to the east you can see the Tower of London."

He wrote in great detail of his visit to the ancient Southwark Cathedral, parts of which date back to 1106 A.D. William Shakespeare, Cockrell wrote, was a member of the parish for a few years. After describing the many parts of the cathedral and some of its history, Cockrell wrote "I felt the presence of God as I stood there."

now and then



Upon arrival in North Africa, Cockrell described his visit to a town he called "x." He could not name the town in his letter for military reasons.

"It was a beautiful day. The sun was shining and not a cloud was in the sky. In the background the mountains seemed to rise and meet the blue of the sky. High overhead an American plane droned along in a leisurely manner. I was feeling great as I started out on my first trip to 'x.'"

Cockrell described the markets and the Arab vendors who thrived on haggling over prices. He described walking through the streets of the town and hearing the song "Chattanooga Choo Choo" coming from the town square. Cockrell also wrote of meeting "the descendants of races and empires, which were making history at the dawn of life, thousands of years ago. ... Many of the tribes around this section can look back with pride to the great Arab empire which attained immense power while Europe was still struggling with the Dark Ages."

One thing Cockrell did not describe to his mother was the war. Although he only saw limited action, Cockrell did not want to worry his mother.

"I tried to be as cheerful as possible. I never told her about anything like that (war stories). I didn't want her to worry," Cockrell, now 87, said from the comfort of his living room earlier this week.

Cockrell's wife, Ann, said he would have never wanted to hurt his mother.

"He had such a beautiful relationship with his parents. Their children were their life," she said.

The one horrific story that Cockrell reported to his mother involved the crashing of a B-26 bomber. Cockrell was stationed in Sardinia in the summer of 1943. On the way to the mess tent, Cockrell saw it all happen before his eyes.

"Suddenly, I was horrified to see a B-26 bomber plane hurtling toward the bivouac area in which the cooks tent and the mess hall were located. The plane was flying only a few feet above the ground, and I knew it would crash in the area. Knowing the plane

plane and a terrific explosion. ...

"The left wing of the plane hit the top of the cooks tent before crashing, but no one was injured. The plane's crew did not survive. Since the men who resided in the bivouac area, where the crash occurred, were away at different locations, we thought no one in our outfit was injured. However, we later learned that John Hoffman, who had been on guard duty the night before, was killed in his tent as he slept," Cockrell wrote.

"For a few days after the crash I tried to eat in the mess hall which was located a short distance from the runway. It seemed that most every day at chow time was when the planes took off on a bombing mission. While eating in the mess hall I could hear the increasing roar of the B-26s coming down the runway. Louder and louder the engines sounded. Often I would break out in a cold sweat and my stomach would become a hard knot. I could swear a plane was going to crash into the mess hall. Finally I gave up and ate my lunch outside on the days the planes took off. Some of the more hardy still ate inside the mess hall, but I felt more comfortable eating outside with those that shared my fears."

Although Cockrell did not have a letter detailing his happiest experience, he remembers it vividly. That experience was going home. Sailing to Europe took 13 days. The ship had to sail in a zig-zag pattern to avoid German submarines. But his trip home only took five days, in a straight line,

"Five happy days," Cockrell recalled.

Sailing into New York the ship was met by a tugboat which had a band celebrating the soldiers return.

Cockrell's mother never discarded her son's letters. She kept them until the day she died. After her death in 1968, the letters returned to Cockrell who has them to this day.

After landing in New York, Cockrell's company boarded a train and made its way back home, to Fort Bragg. Cockrell said the train passed through Wilson. Cockrell said his father saw the train from his Goldsboro Street home and somehow knew his son was on it. His parents jumped into their car and drove to Fayetteville.

When Cockrell got off the train he was greeted by the sight of his father and "Dearest mother."

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— Onnie Cockrell  
in letters to his mother