



Courtesy photo  
Lt. Chester Wheeler of Concord receives the Distinguished Service Cross from Brig. Gen. Charles Bowen at the State House in 1944. Joining Wheeler for the ceremony are his wife, members of his family and Gov. Robert Blood (second from right).



# Mission improbable

► Chester Wheeler, who barely survived a Japanese onslaught on tiny Attu in 1942, never considered himself a local hero.

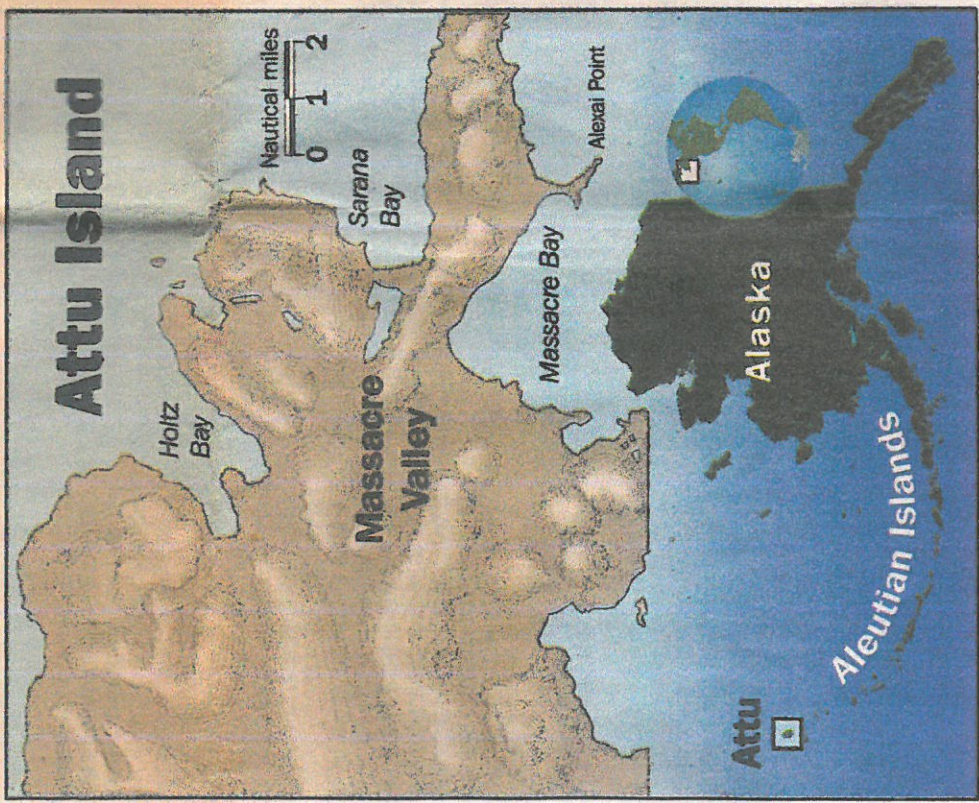
**N**early 58 years after a .30-caliber slug dropped him like a dead weight on a cold, barren island far from home, Chester Wheeler does not remember the moment as a highlight of his life. Make no mistake — he remembers it — but like many other World War II veterans, he wears his heroism with modesty.

Next Sunday at Concord's City Auditorium, Wheeler will step forward to be honored as a member of what is widely heralded as the 20th century's greatest generation. He will be a special guest that night during the *Monitor's* show marking the release of *The New Hampshire Century*, the collection of 100 profiles we published as a turn-of-the-century retrospective.

Wheeler is not one of the 100 people profiled in the book, but I ran across his story while researching Ruel Colby, who is, Colby was the *Monitor's* sports editor for decades. During World War II, he turned his column, "The Sport Galley," over to letters from the young men who had left Concord to fight the war. That was the focus of the Colby profile — not his life but the trials, told through him, of Concord's men in uniform.

Several of Colby's columns are clippings yellowed with age in the scrapbook that Ernestine Wheeler kept for her son Chester. The lead item from Colby's column of Sept. 9, 1943, was a letter from Wheeler, then four months into his rehabilitation. He had been a football star at Concord

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CHARLOTTE THIBAUT / Monitor staff





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High, class of 1938, and had earned his degree at the University of New Hampshire.

From his hospital bed, he shared a stark thought with Colby, who had covered his athletic career and whom he considered a friend.

"I'm flat on my back," he wrote, "with the unpleasant thought forever present . . . that my chances of ever taking part in competitive sports again - that interest we had in common and the very thing you represent - are negligible."

This prospect caused him to reflect on the place of athletics in his life and the nation's. "I have relived my high school days a thousand times," he wrote. These musings led him to conclude that the discipline and training he and his brothers in arms had received as athletes gave them an advantage over the enemy.

"Because this theory of Axis Superman has been knocked into a cocked hat, and with good reason, I'm convinced that the American soldier can come closer than anyone else to the 'American Ideal,' insofar as accomplishing near impossible missions is concerned," he wrote. He highlighted this section of his letter with three words in capital letters: "WE CAN'T LOSE."

A few months later, Wheeler came home. He was one of the first Concord boys shot in the war, and his hometown made a big deal of him. His bravery under fire earned him the Distinguished Service Cross, which a general pinned on his chest at the State House. Wheeler spoke before the Rotary and at schools.

The military could not have asked for a better example. His stern chiseled face, his athletic bearing, his optimism, his reserve, his very survival - all of these characteristics, taken together, bespoke a determination to win a mean, dirty war.

But Wheeler has lived to the ripe age of 81 with the knowledge that long life - the State House ceremony, his golfing days, the happy marriage, the kids - was a gift of fate.

One thirty-second of an inch: That is how close the Japanese bullet that tore into his groin came to severing his femoral artery.

"Geez, I was lucky," he said during a recent interview. "If it had hit that artery, I'd have been dead in less than a minute."

### Debacle

Attu is the last island in the Aleutian chain - American territory. The Japanese occupied it in 1942. The job of Wheeler's outfit, the 7th Infantry Division, was to dislodge the invaders.

From beginning to end, the battle was a bloody, horrifying debacle. What little training the Americans had was for desert fighting. Attu was barren and rocky, its ground frozen tundra. The Americans were poorly clothed and poorly fed. Although the Japanese were outnumbered and too far from their homeland to be reinforced, they were suicidal in their devotion to Emperor Hirohito and determined to fight to the death.

Second Lieutenant Chester Wheeler was in the first wave of troops to land at Massacre Bay. The fog that day - May 11, 1943 - was dense, and

the troops sat offshore for eight hours before taking the beach uncontested.

Wheeler found himself on an island that a fellow officer described this way: "Attu seemed devoid of life. Not a tree, an animal, or anything else that moved. . . . If man ever rides a rocket to the moon, he can see a preview of the bleak lunar land by first going to Attu."

The American campaign plan was simple, as in stupid. Wheeler's battalion was to march up the right side of Massacre Valley and take the high ground at the end of the valley. Wheeler was a platoon leader, in charge of 40 men.

"As soon as we got in," Wheeler said, "the Japanese opened fire from two sides and the end of the valley. We were trapped, with no cover and no vegetation."

The Japanese had dug in. When the Americans tried to do the same, they found that icy water filled their foxholes a foot into the ground.

"We started taking casualties right away," said Wheeler. "The colonel was killed the first day. I was standing right beside a captain when he got shot through the heart."

In May, the sun shines 21 hours a day in the Aleutians. Day after day the men were sent back into the valley to get shot. They had little or no sleep. Their feet were frostbitten. The K-rations they carried on their backs ran out in a day or two. These conditions caused a dangerous desperation.

"We were all so miserable," said Wheeler. "It was almost like being killed was better than doing what we were doing. It didn't look like we were ever going to get out."

Wheeler saw the enemy at a distance of 600 to 700 yards. He sometimes fired his carbine at a Japanese soldier, but he doubted he hit anyone. His duty was not to shoot but to lead, and however hopeless he found the mission, he did his duty.

### Wounded

According to the citation that accompanied his Distinguished Service Cross, Wheeler took his platoon forward again and again while "many other junior leaders were suffering from the bewilderment and inertia caused by the shock of first intense hostile fire." On the third day of the battle, "undaunted by the heavy price his platoon already had paid, Lieutenant Wheeler courageously carried out his orders to attack and again led his platoon forward after the remainder of his battalion had been stopped by the severity of the enemy fire."

Shortly after sunup on May 14, Wheeler was again out in front and moving forward when an enemy slug tore into his groin. The bullet, he would later learn, destroyed the femoral nerve and grazed the artery. "I felt like I got hit by a sledgehammer," he said. "It took my feet right out from under me."

Wheeler called over his platoon sergeant and ordered him to continue the attack. As his men moved on, he lay back, waiting to die. He was out in the open, in plain view of the enemy. There

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were no medics. The wounded were removed under cover of darkness, and nightfall was 20 hours away. "I thought I was gone," Wheeler said.

He was conscious of enemy fire the whole time he lay there. He figured the enemy would shoot him again if he moved - a worry that was reinforced when mortar shrapnel gashed his right leg and cut his boot.

"A million things were going through my mind," he said. His men were like family, and he was angry that he could not stay with them and despairing that he might never rejoin them. He was upset about boots that did not keep the men's feet from freezing. He worried about his parents back home in Concord.

At 1 a.m., an hour after dusk, two hours before dawn, Wheeler heard voices. It was pitch black, he was alone, and he could not tell whether the voices were Japanese or American. "This could be it," he thought.

But the voices belonged to American medics. Though weary, Wheeler had the presence of mind to know what this meant. "I was elated," he said. "I thought maybe I had a chance."

Back home, a confusing casualty list in a Boston newspaper convinced some people that Wheeler was dead. His mother dutifully pasted the notes of sympathy in the scrapbook she kept. She also put in the letter Wheeler wrote home from his hospital bed in Washington state on May 22, eight days after his wounding. In a neat steady hand, he told his parents that "you might be relieved to hear that I'm still kicking."

### Homecoming

At great cost, the U.S. Army won the Battle of Attu 15 days after Wheeler was wounded. Many of the island's last Japanese defenders were wiped out in a vicious suicidal attack in the fog. Four hundred survivors blew themselves up with grenades. Of about 2,700 Japanese occupiers, 27 men were captured. U.S. casualties were 549 killed and 1,100 wounded, not including the hundreds who suffered frostbite.

Chet Wheeler came home in January 1944 to receive his medal at the State House. He spent nearly a year and a half in rehabilitation hospitals. After the war, he managed to return to competitive athletics as a golfer and for many years he ran the Beaver Meadow Golf Course for the city.

Next Sunday at the *Monitor's* celebration of the century, when we honor Wheeler, we will also be honoring his generation. This is a fitting notion, considering his own opinion of the recognition that came his way for his fighting on Attu.

"I never felt worthy of the honor bestowed upon me," he said. "You know, I was just doing what I was supposed to do - protecting the guys in the platoon. Everybody did their job. Everybody tried to protect each other.

Of the Distinguished Service Cross, he said: "I didn't do anything that special. Why me? It seems like they should have given it to everybody."