

Veteran Edward Kissam

Before Having Gainesville's First Integrated Waiting Room, Doctor Soldiered In The Air And Sea

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL STONE

*Now bone and muscle strengthen under stress,
And moral fiber toughens, waiting out the guess.
The clouds and fire will come and try your soul,
But easy living should not be our goal.*

— EDWARD KISSAM, 1968

These days, at 90 years old, Dr. Edward Kissam doesn't remember too well. But by his side, his longtime companion and his daughter help guide the memories, articulating the accomplishments of a man, a soldier, a peacemaker, a casual poet who has seen the tragedies of war, the triumphs of evolving medicine and, perhaps most meaningful to the Florida faithful, the foundation of Gator football glory.

Shortening Kissam's life to specific labels would mean calling him North Central Florida's first orthopedic surgeon, the first doctor in Gainesville to integrate the waiting room, a small player in the development of the sports drink Gatorade, and a World War II seaman and later flyer.

But it's more so the spirit within the skin — outwardly defined by a calm demeanor that paces through almost a century of events gradually and matter-of-factly but never boastfully — that makes him an exemplar of the Greatest Generation.

That's validated greater in no other action than perhaps his decision to have an integrated waiting room when he started his orthopedic practice in 1960 at Alachua General Hospital.

"I felt that people were equal and that they shouldn't be separated because of their skin or anything else about them," Kissam said from a couch in the Gainesville house of his companion of 20 years, B.J. Summerlin. "I [didn't treat] people different because of how they looked or even whether they had any money or not — as I recall, they didn't have to have any money for me to take care of them."

"He chose to do it that way," added Summerlin, who also worked as a nurse at the practice for a brief time in the late '60s. "He blocked off the back door so the [black Americans] couldn't come in the back door. They had to come in the front door."

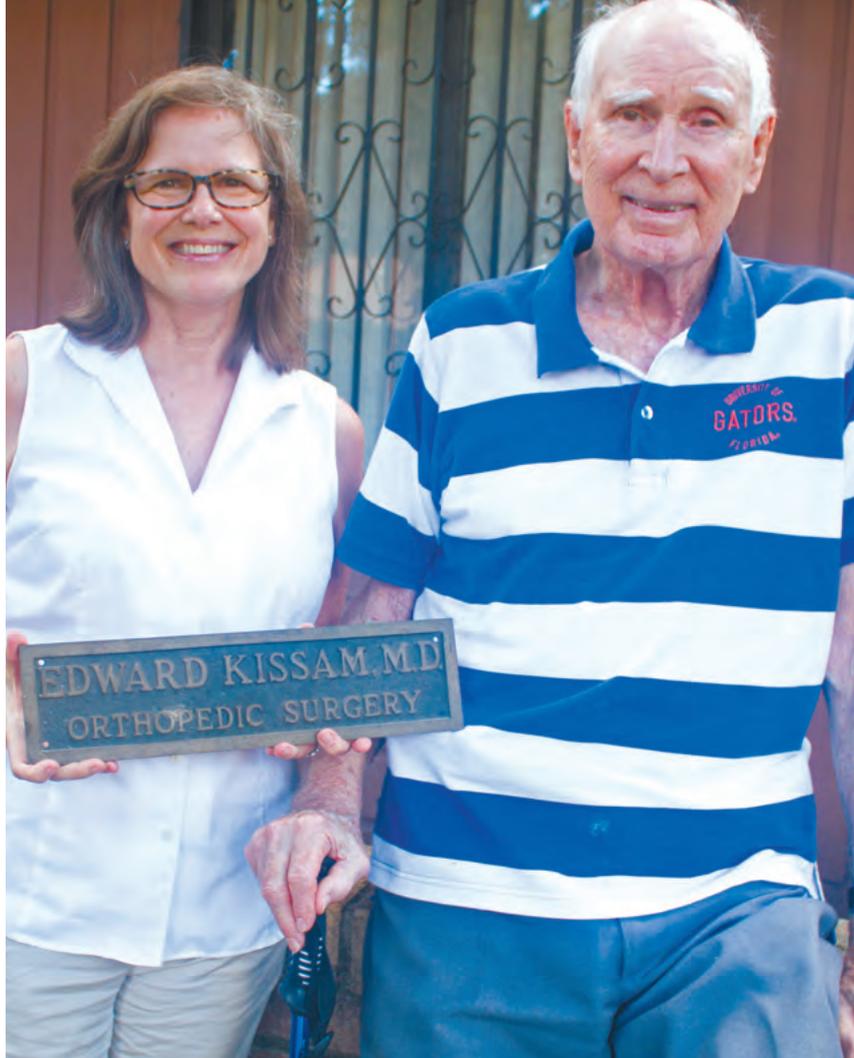
"I was proud, but I didn't know quite the extent," said the daughter, Babette, who was just a small child then and is the oldest of Kissam's five children. Her third-grade year was the first time she shared a classroom with black students, two of them, and both sets of parents were seen by Kissam, who was known in town as the "black doctor."

Yet Kissam's story of enlightened Americana started much earlier, when he graduated from high school in Elizabethtown, North Carolina, in 1942, a month shy of his 17th birthday. A standout football player, Kissam was offered a scholarship by Clemson to play quarterback. "But the war was on, and I didn't take that."

Instead, he chose a calling he saw as much more important: contributing to the war effort in the port city of Wilmington, 50 miles from his home, by building Liberty ships, mass-produced, simple vessels used to transport the equivalent of 300 train cars per trip of what was deemed "emergency cargo."

World War II veteran Dr. Edward Kissam, who served as a merchant marine before becoming, simply, a Marine during the war, holds a decades-old picture of himself playing with Topher, one of his five children.





“His eyes were wide, and he was just shaking, and I said, ‘Don’t worry. You’ll be alright. You’re not going to be hurt.’ He said, ‘You get on there where you belong.’ He really was afraid.”

The job proved to be more of a transitional one. He soon took another in New York as a merchant marine — sailors that, during the war, transported troops and supplies and, with one in 26 dying in the line of duty, suffered the greatest death percentage of all U.S. war services.

Though still a teenager, Kissam showed he could handle himself as a seaman during training, so he was assigned to the Liberty ship Thomas Nelson Page.

The Page’s first mission with Kissam aboard was to transport a load of flour from Norfolk, Virginia, to the Italian port city of Naples following the Axis powers losing it to a local uprising and then the Allies, who moved in Oct. 1, 1943.

The Page was one of 60 ships in the convoy carrying food, munitions and other supplies, and during the trip across the Atlantic and into the Mediterranean Sea, swift vessels would guard against U-boat attacks by circling the convoy and dropping depth charges.

“They were just swarming around the convoy all the time,”

Kissam said, “and even at night, you could hear, ‘Boom!’”

The U-boats did claim two ships from the convoy, and another was lost to German bombers the first night in Naples’ harbor.

Before the Germans lost the harbor, they purposely sank boats in it to make Allied docking difficult, so some ships in Kissam’s convoy had to tie up to the sunken ones. The Page did just that, but because it was carrying flour, it was deemed nonessential and was told to go out and anchor so another ship hauling ammo could dock.

A German bomber “dropped a bomb on that ship that took our place,” Kissam said. “It was hit and went up in one big boom. I didn’t see anyone who was afraid the whole time — not one fear. I really can say that truthfully.

“Everybody was interested, but nobody was afraid.”

After holding onto the flour for two months, the Page finally dropped it off in North Africa, and the emptied ship was converted to a troop transport, carrying U.S. Army soldiers, ally



(Opposite) Kissam poses with his companion of 20 years, B.J. Summerlin (left), in Summerlin's Gainesville home, and with his daughter, Babette, who's holding the nameplate from the orthopedic practice Kissam opened at Alachua General Hospital in 1960.

ABOVE: Kissam holds a sketch of himself from his time in military service.

Algerians and German prisoners between Africa and Italy.

It was during these transports — specifically, one night docked at Naples during a German bombing — that Kissam finally saw someone, an Army soldier, who was afraid.

“His eyes were wide, and he was just shaking,” Kissam recalled. “And I said, ‘Don’t worry. You’ll be alright. You’re not going to be hurt.’ He said, ‘You get on there where you belong.’ He really was afraid.”

Also aboard the *Page*, Kissam once removed a poison trap one of his three bunkmates, a 45-year-old black American who worked as a cook, set up for another seaman who had been threatening toward the cook.

“I realized that would be a really bad thing for [the cook] and for whoever was there, so I went and took that down myself. I got rid of it,” he said.

The *Page* served as merchant marine Kissam’s home for 10

months until it returned to The States, where he signed up in May 1944 to become, simply, a Marine.

Kissam went through some “rugged battle training” at Parris Island in South Carolina, eventually becoming a navigator on B-25 Mitchell bombers. Though he wasn’t called into combat before the war ended, he would navigate aboard cargo planes in 1946 in aid of the U.S.-backed Nationalists in China in their civil war against the Communists.

“Around the base [in Tsingtao, China], there were tents just spread out for a quarter of a mile or something, and every time one of our planes would take off, the tent flaps would flap and they’d be firing at us with rifles,” Kissam said. “And once in a while, there’d be a hole in the wing, but they never did damage us so that it made any significant difference.”

The Marines discharged Kissam on Aug. 26, 1946, and by the time he finally got back to Elizabethtown, his life had



turned into what he described as disaster.

His girlfriend was about to marry another man.

Separately, one of his best friends from back home in North Carolina, Albert Cross, who served as a bomber's tail gunner in Europe, crashed his private plane near Kissam's home shortly after the war ended.

"He was my best friend," Kissam remembered, softly and with pauses, "and that was really — I was really upset by that."

Perhaps most arduous of all, though, was Kissam's mother going from a sweet, calm lady to having paranoid schizophrenia, and his father couldn't be of much help because a stroke took away his ability to walk. His mom began keeping a loaded rifle in the living room, once tried to run over the local doctor, and was in and out of mental hospitals and shock treatments.

Years later, Babette asked Kissam's brother what brought on such illness: "How did Grandmamma take it when instead of going to Clemson and being a football star, he decided to go in the Merchant Marines? And Uncle Benny said that she began to walk, and instead of doing her normal routine of cooking and cleaning and taking care of her family, she just got up in the morning, put her shoes on and walked — all day, came home at night.

"I've always thought of her as a casualty of the war, too."

But one shining light sliced through the storm: Before he died, Cross had enrolled himself and Kissam at Presbyterian Junior College under the G.I. Bill. Presbyterian started Kissam on an academic career that would eventually lead to a bachelor's in psychology from the University of Florida in 1949 and his M.D. from Wake Forest University.

While working in a cafeteria at UF, Kissam would always hold an avocado salad aside for a grad student in English, Barbara Metze, before the salads sold out. The two married in 1950.

After Wake Forest, Kissam completed his medical training in Augusta, Georgia, in the then-emerging specialty of orthopedics, which focuses on injuries and diseases in muscles and bones. And eventually, in 1960, he and his wife returned to Gainesville because it seemed like the place to raise a family.

That year, Kissam became North Central Florida's first orthopedic surgeon when he started his practice at Alachua General Hospital, which opened in 1928 and closed in 2009.

Treating patients regardless of their race or finances, Kissam's patient load soared, and he would often work from 6 a.m. to 2 the next morning, leaving time for only a few hours of sleep.

"So we didn't see him a lot," Babette said of she and her



(Left) Kissam, who volunteers at the Whitney Laboratory for Marine Bioscience in Flagler Beach, poses in his favorite hat with other volunteers. (Right) Kissam and Summerlin stand with Steve Spurrier, who won the Heisman Trophy as a University of Florida quarterback in the 1960s while Kissam was a doctor for UF athletics.

four siblings.

Legendary UF football coach Ray Graves picked up Kissam as a doctor for the university's athletic programs within a year of the practice opening, and Kissam would work in that role for the whole 1960s, including during Heisman winner Steve Spurrier's tenure.

"He was the best player they had on the team," Kissam said. "You knew this was a special player."

When Spurrier was drafted by the San Francisco 49ers, Kissam wrote a letter to the team saying the young quarterback was in good health — "unlike most of the team if they were on the line," Summerlin said.

"He was writing letters because they couldn't play — I mean, they could play, kind of, of course, but they'd ruin their knees and a lot of their health," she added.

Today, when the Gator football players from the '60s, called the Silver Sixties, meet, some say "Hi, Doc!" and pull up their pant legs to show Kissam the scars he gave them from surgery.

Kissam was also there when UF's athletes were trying Gatorade — then called Cade's Aid after one of its developers, UF professor Dr. James Robert Cade — for the first time.

"Dr. Cade actually brought it to me because I was looking after the teams and traveling with them and so on, so it sounded like it was good," Kissam said. "Cade's Aid, with its minerals in it, made a difference."

"You said a lot of the boys made faces and spit it back out," Summerlin added with a laugh, noting the saltiness of the original formula.

Barbara died in 1974, and, after retiring in 1983, Kissam became an avid sailor.

He has lived in Crescent Beach for the past 18 years, in a house on the lot he and Barbara bought for \$7,000 in the '60s. But he's back and forth between Gainesville, visiting Summerlin often, and is giving moving back heavy consideration.

In reflecting on the war, Kissam's devotion to the welfare of his fellow human continues to radiate, almost contradicting the annihilative darkness that extreme nationalism and hate cast over the world. He flew in bombers but never dropped bombs, and he was trained on Liberty ships' topside defensive guns but never had to fire.

"I was disappointed, frankly, that I didn't get to drop the bombs and stuff like that," he said, "but in another way, I looked at it that I was glad that I didn't have to kill anybody." ■