

Local U.S. Army Veteran Reflects on Pine Camp Tank Training and WWII Survival



Adams Center resident Amos “Andy” Cambron, 91, trained at Pine Camp (now Fort Drum) in 1943 before driving his tank into D-Day, the Battle of the Bulge and the Hurtgen Forest.

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(Editor’s note: Amos “Andy” Cambron, a 10th Mountain Division World War II veteran, died Wednesday in Watertown at the age of 93. The Mountaineer paid tribute to Cambron in the following article, which originally ran June 19, 2014.)

Not long before D-Day, Cpl. Amos “Andy” Cambron was in a New Jersey bar when a stranger asked him what he did in the Army. Cambron had just learned how to drive a Sherman tank through the woods of a remote training area in northern New York called Pine Camp.

“You ever use the escape hatch?” the man asked him.

“Never heard of it,” Cambron replied.

“You should,” the stranger said. “You might need it one day.”

The 5th Armored Division shipped to England in February 1944. Not long after rolling off an LST (Landing Ship, Tank) during the Allied invasion of Normandy, France, Cambron’s tank was hit by a bazooka and caught fire. Three other Soldiers, including the tank commander, were shot and killed while climbing out of the turret above him.

Due to the wisdom of a stranger, Cambron was practiced at using his tank’s escape hatch, and he was out before he could be discovered, crawling through some weeds and finding a spot in the shadows, where he lay perfectly still for hours.

Once Allied forces had cleared the area, Cambron emerged, hands on his head, walking towards the pointed rifles.

A captain ordered him to speak, knowing English-speaking Nazi paratroopers often wore dead Americans’ uniforms to get behind enemy lines.

“Sir?” Cambron said.

“I want to hear you say something,” the captain demanded.

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Ha,” the captain said, hearing Cambron’s drawl. “He’s no German. He’s from Oklahoma!”

‘Greetings’ from the Army

Cambron grew up in a home with no electricity in the small town of Cole, Okla. Once the Dust Bowl struck, his father packed up the family and moved to California looking for work.

“You could see the highway between Oklahoma and Arizona littered with abandoned vehicles and other things as people moved west,” Cambron recalled.

A mechanic by trade, Cambron’s father could only find work picking fruit and cotton. So when he received a surprise \$150 bonus from his World War I service, he used the windfall to bring the family back to Oklahoma, where he produced and exported moonshine to Arkansas and Texas.

But Cambron eventually grew up on a farm in Litchfield Park, Ariz., about 20 miles west of Phoenix, when his father's venture failed and the family moved west again.

Several months after graduating high school, Cambron said he returned from a long day of fishing with his brother and two friends to some strange news.

"Well son, seems you're not go-ing to be around here very long," his father told him.

"Why?"

"Them (Japanese) just bombed us in Pearl Harbor."

Cambron, who figured he might make a good pilot, visited what is now known as Luke Air Force Base just minutes from Litchfield Park. But his vision was not 20/20.

"To heck with the 'Air Force,'" he said.

It was only a week later that a letter from the Army came in the mail.

"Greetings!" it began.

It was just before Christmas 1941. The Army gave him a choice of shipping out immediately or waiting a week. Cambron said he was ready to board the train.

For his initiative, the 19-year-old was put in charge of the other recruits, most of them Mexican-Americans and Native Americans.

"You pay good attention to Cambron," a sergeant shouted.

"He's gonna be the boss of this place."

Pine Camp

The 5th Armored Division was born at Fort Knox, Ky., in October 1941. Division Soldiers were training at Camp Cook, Calif., when Cambron caught up with them.

He was attached to the division's 47th Armored Field Artillery Battalion. From Camp Cook, the division headed to Camp Forrest, Tenn., where Cambron rode a motorcycle and delivered memorized messages between commanders during infantry maneuvers.

During down time, Cambron said local residents threw parties for the Soldiers that involved a lot of dancing. He said he later found out that women “spray-painted” the back of their legs to look like nylon stockings.

At one party, for fear of “sabotage,” Cambron’s buddies interrupted him from giving his real name to a girl he had asked to dance.

“It’s ‘Andy,’” they told her, a nickname he still goes by today.

In July 1943, the division headed to Pine Camp (now Fort Drum), where Cambron was eventually moved from behind the handlebars to behind a map in the driver’s seat of a Sherman tank.

“It was snowing one day, and the captain called me in and told me I can’t drive a motorcycle anymore,” he said. “I was going to be a tank driver.”

After being assigned to a barracks, Cambron and his buddies spent most of their time training on their tanks, cleaning the guns and learning the instrumentation.

Cambron said Pine Camp was heavily guarded at the time to protect against sabotage. Weapons were locked and loaded whenever a Soldier pulled guard duty, which often entailed treading through heavy snowfalls.

But as with Tennessee, there was time for rest and leisure at Pine Camp, too.

“Hey Andy, where the hell you been? You AWOL?” asked one buddy after not seeing him for a spell.

“No, I’ve been training,” Cambron said.

“Well, you should have been with us. There’s this little town out here called Adams, and it is full of women and booze.”

Cambron, who admits he never was very bashful around women, spared no time. He dated a nurse first. Then, he attended a dance at Hotel Adams and spotted Amy Caulkins sitting with her friends.

He looked at her and then pointed a finger at her. “See that girl sitting over there,” Cambron told his buddies. “She’s gonna be mine.”

The Lorraine native had graduated from Adams High School and was working as a telephone operator. The two dated three times before Cambron shipped overseas. They wrote letters to stay in touch and ultimately reconnected after the war.

March to Germany

Cambron walked up the gangplank in New York on Feb. 10, 1944. He said he could see ships for miles in both directions as the convoy crossed the Atlantic.

When he arrived in England two weeks later, Soldiers of the 5th Armored spent several months of intense training at Camps Chiseldon, Ogborn, St. George and Tidworth to prepare for the Normandy invasion.

Cambron said the area was often bombed by the Nazis, who fired V-1 flying “buzz” bombs to terrorize the British population.

“You could hear them coming,” he recalled. “They made a hell of a racket. You crossed your fingers and hoped it went over you.”

On June 6, 1944, an explosion rocked Cambron’s LST just as his tank made landfall on Utah Beach. Everyone left on the LST was killed. Cambron took cover beyond the beach. He said he had to remove the carnage from his tank tracks in order to continue.

Fighting through the hedgerow deathtraps of the French countryside, Cambron’s unit carried on its quest to liberate Europe’s mainland from the Nazis.

Ironically, before escaping his bazooka-blasted tank, Cambron had run into the tank-enamored Third Army commander, Lt. Gen. George Patton.

Stuck in a ditch off the road somewhere in France, Cambron said he saw a jeep with three stars approaching as artillery rounds whistled overhead.

When the general got out, he shook Cambron’s hand, asked him his name and walked around the tank.

“You are doing a good job, son,” the general told him. “If you lose this one, we’ll get you another one.”

Not only one of the lucky few to survive D-Day, Cambron survived a handful of direct hits to his tank during subsequent battles.

He was also among the first Americans to reach Paris.

While there, he said he was gassing his tank when a German sniper shot at him, but the bullet struck his radio instead.

He jumped off his tank and saw a fellow Soldier crawling up. He told Cambron that he had been tracking the sniper and to not worry because he would get him.

Cambron said he crawled along a hedgerow and got down in a ditch. The other Soldier, after crawling past him to peek over the hedgerow, slid back down next to Cambron. He was shot between the eyes.

The disturbing images of World War II were far from over for Cambron. He said his general, Maj. Gen. Lunsford E. Oliver, 5th Armored Division commander, often warned the men of the losses that loomed on the horizon.

After liberating Paris, a months-long stretch of horrific losses awaited him in the dense Hurtgen Forest near Belgium, followed by the Battle of the Bulge.

“Hurtgen Forest was a terrible place,” he said of the horrific Allied defeat in late 1944. “They slaughtered Americans there.”

Allied forces prevailed at the Battle of the Bulge, however, and Cambron was a part of the liberation of Luxembourg and Belgium.

“The Belgium people were so kind,” he said. “Luxembourg had the happiest people I’ve ever seen.”

Once in Germany, the tank ahead of Cambron was destroyed by heavy bazooka and anti-tank fire while entering the southern town of Krefeld-Fischeln in March 1945.

Under heavy fire, Cambron maneuvered his tank into a narrow area while his tank commander attempted to locate the enemy. After a pause, Cambron startled enemy gunners by rushing out into high ground, allowing the tank’s artillery observer to direct fire on the centers of resistance.

Cambron was credited with saving his crew and other Soldiers nearby.

Among the first American troops to penetrate Germany, Cambron said his unit was a part of the Allied Forces liberation of several Nazi concentration camps, including Dachau, during its march toward Berlin.

“It was so hard to believe what Hitler had done,” he said of the camps.

Reintegration

Cambron, who turns 92 next month, is a decorated Soldier with numerous valor awards. He lost many buddies during World War II and participated in some of its costliest campaigns, including D-Day, the Battles of Hurtgen Forest and the Battle of the Bulge.

When he returned to the U.S., he was temporarily stationed at Fort Bliss, Texas. After looking up his old girlfriend in Adams, the two were married Aug. 22, 1945.

Cambron said he did not mind moving north, especially because of the North Country's renowned fishing and hunting traditions.

Following in his father's footsteps, he became a mechanic. In addition to working in the private sector, he worked part-time on tanks and half-tracks at Fort Drum over the years.

The couple owned a cottage in Henderson Harbor for decades before moving to Adams Center, where their daughter, Carol Reed, lives. They also had two sons, both of them Vietnam veterans.

Although there was not so much as a scratch on him, Cambron did not survive the war intact. He said for many years after, his wife knew something wasn't right. Among other things, his hands shook so severely he could not manage to hold his coffee.

To combat the nerves, he said he spent as much time as he could with his wife and children.

"I tried to get myself right," he recalled. "It took quite a while."

Unlike treatments available to- day, he said a trip to the VA was fruitless.

"What's wrong?" the doctor asked him.

"I can't stop shaking like this."

"Are you wounded?"

"No sir."

"Sorry, I can't help you."

In time, a prevailing optimism along with his own way of grieving with Family by his side helped Cambron pull through.

"It's just like here in January, when my wife died," he said. "I cried for two solid days."

Trisha Johnson, a part-time driver for Watertown's Samaritan Keep Home who spends a lot of time transporting Cambron to and from his home, marvels at his outlook on life.

“He’s very uplifting and a great joy to be around,” she said. “He picks people up.

“He’s just such a positive person,” she added, “which is amazing coming from what he has seen and done in his life.”

In the end, Cambron said his duty in service of his country was just a “job” that needed to be done.

“With World War II, we had to win,” he said. “If not, what would the world be today?”