

AVD.1

Bruce Cameron  
September 25, 1991  
Terri Frey

TF: This is September 25<sup>t</sup> 1991. Terri Frey speaking for the Anoka Historical Society, interviewing Bruce Cameron.  
Could you give us your full name, please?

BC: George Bruce Cameron.

TF: Okay, and your birthdate?

BC: June 1<sup>st</sup>, '17. 1917.

TF: And where were you living when the war broke out?

BC: In Anoka, here.

TF: At the time the war broke out, did you have any hobbies, and were you working?

BC: I was working at Federal Cartridge. I was mixing firing powder and the primers for shells.

TF: Let's see. Do you remember where you were on Sunday, December 7th, 1941?

TF: When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

BC: We had been out the night before, and typical young people, a little bit late, and so I know my dad told me when I came downstairs- he told me about it. The radio. That's all they had was radio, and that's all you heard.

TF: Did you volunteer or were you inducted? \_\_\_\_\_

BC: Well, some of us were kept at Federal Cartridge. We couldn't enlist or volunteer. And I don't remember how long a period that was, and then when we had enough people trained to go in this powder room, then we - I started to enlist, and then all of a sudden, my draft notice came in, and so I'm listed as a draftee, but I was given at Fort Snelling, I was given my choice of service, because I'd already filled out the enlistment papers.

TF: I see. Okay. And so you went into what service?

BC: I went into the armored division.

TF: Okay, so then you were at Fort Benning and then you went overseas? \_\_\_\_\_

BC: Went to Fort Benning and then we went up to Camp Miles Standish, Massachusetts, and from there, we went overseas.

TF: And when did you go overseas? What year was that?

BC: We were in combat 19 months. We left Camp Miles Standish to go overseas on D-Day, and then we were extra weight that broke out of the beachheads in Normandy. And then from there we spearheaded to Paris. And they divided the Division in three columns, and we were spearheaded into Paris and closed off Paris from the Free French, and took Paris back. That was their request, so we just blocked it off, and they cleaned out Paris.

TF: So you were at Normandy, then?

BC: Yeah, we were extra weight that broke on the....The German.....had it blockaded and they put our division in and we were the extra weight in combat that broke through, and being an armored division, we just kept right on. They split us up in three columns, and we spearheaded across France to Paris.

?? And you were in the Battle of the Bulge.

BC: Well, that was quite a bit later.

?? Well, you saw combat, and plenty of it, right at Normandy right away then.

BC: Yeah. We saw it.

TF: Okay, and then you went to Paris.

BC: Yeah. We sat in a holding action from there, and then when we went north from there, there was some- another town- I can't remember the name of the town. And that too - the town, was cut off. The Germans were holding out, and our division - they had the town cut off, but they didn't have the strength to clear the Germans out of there, because of division come in, and we did break the deadlock. And then from there, we went across to Moselle, France, and we ended up- I think it was Moselle, France. From there, we went north and helped them get the American paratroopers out of the - they were cut off in Holland. From Holland, we went to the Battle of the Bulge. And there was quite a few of those - I don't know if you'd call it a break or not, but myself and five or seven of us, we had more mathematics than we ever did. A tank hand can be used as an artillery piece, so we were taken out of the tank, back in what they called the fire direction center, and we figured the angles and the locations, cuz to use that tank hand as an artillery piece. So we were taken off of the extreme front line, back to that until they broke whatever - like these blockades and that was broke, then we went back into our tanks. I think there was seven of us that did that advanced math that could figure the mathematics for the fire direction center.

TF: Oh, very interesting. Uh-huh.

BC: I can ....cuz I took a lot of math in Anoka High School and Dunwoody, I took math there. And it paid off.

- TF: When they tell the kids that they'll have some chance to use their math when they're grown up, I don't think this is one of the things they think about.
- BC: Well, I figure it...
- TF: But it certainly did....
- BC: I figured if you weren't sitting out there, you weren't quite as good a target, sitting there back in the firing direction center as you were that - well, we used to refer to them as cast iron coffins.
- TF: Oh, yeah. Well, are there any unusual incidents in any of these battles that you can remember that you'd like to share?
- BC: Well, just outside of Paris - there where we took the little town; I don't remember the name of the town-it's a suburb, and the people apparently-the French people -were very happy to be liberated, and I'll never forget-we were kidding about it the other night- this French woman come out of her house, and she was about as wide as she was high, but she had a good bottle in each hand. And over there, they take a drink out of the bottle first and then give it to you because it's a habit going way back to medieval days where you poisoned a person. So that was the proof that it was clear liquor.

Well, it turned out it was this what they call Calvados, it was clear, and the strongest liquor I've ever tasted in my life. I could feel my toenails curl up when I drank the darn stuff. That, and the Battle of the Bulge, an infantry outfit - a new green infantry outfit - panicked from our right flank, and let the Germans in behind us. And we managed to get away, although we lost our tank, and we - most of us in our battalion - in our tank battalion, I don't know how many tanks we lost, but we were on foot, and we worked our way back 2-3 days behind German lines, and we worked our way back to American lines. It was just daylight when we come out of the woods, and somebody hollered "Halt!" and all of us were wet, cold, hungry, and quite a few had froze hands and feet. And I've got trouble with hands now from that.

I remember ...

- TF: You froze your hands and feet, then?
- BC: Yeah.
- TF: Oh.
- BC: But thanks to a former baby doctor from Chicago, he saved the fingers and the feet for all of us. He seemed to know what he was doing where some of the rest of them, all they talked about was amputating, and he said, "No." He soaked our hands and feet in some kind of a foul-smelling solution, and massaged, and we've still got the feet and hands, although they bother me a lot - my hands. Both fingers and thumbs of both hands are 2/3 numb, now, but they're still there.

BC: But when we got back in - just got to the American lines - I remember somebody yelled "Halt!" and wanted to know if we were-what the password was. We didn't have the password. We'd been behind German lines. About that time, my buddy stumbled and both of us fell, and I guess we used typical American language and this guy says, "Come on in, GI, cuz only a GI can use that kind of language."

(Laughter)

BC: So I suppose we were a little bit normal. And after that..... it wasn't long before we were back in the ..... , we were back in the tanks, again.

TF: So they got you back quite soon, then.

BC: Yeah. It was a matter of a couple three days before we went back to - I don't remember where it was - and in new tanks and the crews were back, and then we went from there -what we did, we crossed the Rhine River. I didn't cross in the tank because, again, I was in the Fire Direction Center. But then, we went from there in different towns in Germany and finally ended up sitting outside Berlin watching the Russians clean Berlin out. And the one thing I remember there is this man - German - come up on a motorcycle. You know. He took the white flag, and he opened it, and ....there was an officer.... cuz they wouldn't surrender to anybody except an officer. Very conscious of rank. And the dam driver of mine turned around and says, "Well, they can surrender to you, Lieutenant." Well, I was no more a lieutenant than the man in the moon. At that time, I was a sergeant, although I was discharged as a private first class. And so he kind of stuck with the deal, and the guy turned right around, and the next thing you know, why, this big armor- turned out to be a 12-cylinder deluxe ... - I don't remember his rank - he was way up there. He surrendered 1500 men to a five-man tank crew.

TF: Oh, wow!

BC: Well, he was educated. I found out afterward, he was educated in New York. He went home to visit his family in East Germany, and about the time Hitler closed the doors. He was in the Army, and he had taken military training as a kid, so he - in using his words, he said, "Well, I capitalized. I knew I was in the Army so I used my military training." He said, "It's much better being an officer than it was carrying a rifle." And a very useful man to talk to. He told him men to take and put your guns and all your ammunition and ..... you vehicles over there, and you go over there, and pitch a tent, and set up the kitchen there. He wanted to surrender his men to the Americans. He didn't want them at the mercy of the Russians.

TF: Mmm.

BC: That was the closest I ever come to seeing an enemy come up and almost kiss your shoes. But he was very interesting to talk to, and then he come over and wanted to know if we would eat - if he could give us a meal, I think. He knew there was just the five-man crew. Of course, there was a radio within a very short period of time, there were other tanks available. In fact, the whole battalion was available quickly, but his interest was to get his men away from the Russians, so more than cooperated. And they brought over the typical - when they brought the meal over, I said, "Yeah, they could bring the meal over." We'd been eating these C-rations in cold tin cans, and after awhile you get a little tired of it, cuz you're hungry. And to the-he had the men carry the food over-why, of course, another guy would come and he'd take a fork, and take a sample of these things to prove they weren't poisoning us. It was a whole custom - I think it still is fairly custom over in Europe. But it kind of struck me as one of those things you remember.

TF: Yeah. Sure.

BC: And the food was delicious. The first time I've ever eaten horse meat. He told us afterward it tasted every good as beef.

TF: Uh-huh.

BC: Except it's a little coarser grain, that's all. But as far as the food- whoever their cook was, he sure put up a very good meal.

TF: Do you remember any other incidents connected with the battles or with your service that you'd like to tell us about?

BC: Well, I can remember another time when we go over to another town we were moving towards, we left Berlin, and we were supposed to take the Danish peninsula, and that was held by Hitler youth, mostly, and ... so it looked like it was gonna be a pretty rough deal. We were moving at night, and all of a sudden lights come on all over and the first I knew, this guy come up and pounded on the side of the tank. We stopped and it was a German. "The war is over!" That's all he could say in English, and he had a great big bottle, and he was .....already. He was happy, I think, the war was over.

Then, we got to - it was a chaotic mess the rest of that night, but they turned down the headlights on everything, and we were just on occupation duty for quite awhile.

TF: Uh-huh.

BC: Until it was all the different points..... The first tank we got hit was destroyed completely when we were taking Moselle, France. That was a fortified city, and the darn division, when we tried to take it, we got thrown out. And we really got thrown. In fact, our four or five crews - our vehicles got hit, and we crawled up a ditch. It's one thing- from that day on, I've never had respect for people that throw junk in ditches, because we crawled up that darn ditch, and the minute you raise a little bit, they'd machine gun over, and that was all that protected us.

TF: Oh.

BC: And finally I don't remember if it was an American or a French Red Cross picked us up- but there was a couple of boys with minor injuries, but really most of us was -the injuries we got was all scratched to heck crawling out of the ditch. But that was in .....France. Our crew lost five tanks and every one of us came home.

TF: Wow! You were really fortunate.

BC: And every one of us have been in the hospital at least once.

TF: Did you... ?

BC: We did have one fellow was killed. He was a replacement -well, when my gunner was in the hospital, I don't remember- he got hit, and he was in the hospital, and this fellow, our tank got hit - the..... got hit and we got - you've got 2 seconds - there's 20 seconds to get out of the tank after it get it before they hit you again. And we told him to abandon the vehicle, and he didn't. Why, we'll never know. But he got hit the second time, and killed, and he was a young fellow from Chicago. I can't remember his name. He hadn't been with him that long, and we didn't know him very well. But then, my original gunner came back, and we ended up-most of us came home together. So we were quite fortunate.

TF: Yes. I would say so.

Did you win any medals?

BC: Oh, a Purple Heart and Good Conduct, and I guess there was...

?? Well, it tells on here, but see, I can't read that.

BC: There was some awards given to us by the French and by Holland and Belgium, given to the division, but you had a right to a certain ....about it. So I guess I did send for a couple of them, but it was quite... I never did get them. But there was divisional awards for combat units. We were in occupation duty in Belgium, but ... .in the town. They were celebrating their first day of liberation, and they found out that - the Belgians found out that we were - that our battalion was the one that liberated that town, so nothing was presented-we had to be in their parades, and they had a tremendous big banquet, and they had the whole town. It was quite an affair after the banquet, where all of a sudden we were the ....center of attraction, I thought. But they sure had tremendous food. I like Belgium and Holland. They're quite a bit like - even back then, they were very much up to American standards. Normandy was more like-the Americans were ..... , but continental France was, to me, quite a few generations behind time.

BC: We were slated, originally, we slept in buses in Belgium, and we were supposed go on the invasion the invasion of Japan. Thanks to those that dropped the A-bomb, that ended that.

TF: Ah.

BC: And I wasn't looking forward to that, because they figured then that the invasion casualties would be about 90%, is what they figured.

TF: Wow!

BC: And we trained in Belgium for the invasion of Japan with amphibious tanks and that, but thank the Good Lord we never had to use it. And the fact that it made no difference how many points you had- whether you'd discharge or not- they needed armor duty, and they were declared essential drivers and tank commanders and gunners. Of course, you had loaders and assistant drivers, and picked them up anywhere. So we trained quite a bit then in .. for the invasion of Japan, but they said we didn't have to do that whole deal. Our invasion, for our crew at home, was a discharge.

TF: Well, what would you say the hardest part of serving in the military was?

BC: Well, the hardest part was seeing the extreme number of infantry casualties. Those boys caught hell. Actually, we had, compared to what they caught, we had it easy cuz we had - the only thing we had to worry about was the anti-tank guns and artillery piece. As far as the rest was, the machine gun fire issue, we were tank, and by proper training, you were pretty well protected, although a few tanks had their hatches open. Well, I got hit by machine guns, which broke my finger and... my arm when I was when I was wearing a ... jacket. This was the closest thing yet. And I couldn't figure out what there was it was on my finger; it was bone.

TF: Did you feel your training was good?

BC: Absolutely. Your training is - these kids, like I told some fellows, if you're trained - the more training you've got, the better chance you've got of coming home. We saw a youngster who come in which were trained, and wasn't exactly. We had an infantry officer assigned to us in France - I don't know exactly where - he come up to me from the States, here, and we were told not to get near the tanks and what not, and we told the officers after dark, you sleep under the tank because they throw what they call "airburst artillery" in. Artillery would reach the air and just split - just like hail - and the casualty rate was high. If you were deep in the fox hole, there was no protection from that. Underneath the tank, they were protected from it. And we informed these officers we're not gonna move that tank because at night, the only protection we had was the infantry, and the tank was damn near helpless at night. Now, they've got lights that we didn't have. And they've got a - I forget what they call it - an infra-red light that you don't really see, but it gives the tank crew to see. I've read about it, but I've never seen it. But that's something that they've developed since we got out.

TF: Mmmhmm. Well, what was the best part of serving in the military?

BC: Well, the day the war was over.

(Laughter)

?: I knew you'd say that.

BC: We got to go home.

TF: Did you feel there were any advantages to serving in the military? Any good parts?

BC: Well, to protect the American women and children from having to go through what I saw when the children go through in Europe, yes, it was worth it. That alone would be worth the time. When you see women and children eating out of garbage cans, and no clothes, and what not, why, I don't see any American women and children live that way.

TF: So how long were you in the service altogether then? From '42 to..... ?

BC: To '45. December 1<sup>st</sup> of '45. That's right isn't it?

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TF: So a little more than 3 years?

BC: Yeah. We were in 19 months combat

TF: And then what did you do immediately after you were discharged?

BC: Well, like everybody else, I came home and we had a month before we had to go back to work. So I took one month, and then I went back to Federal Cartridge. For a year, I went back there.

TF: Well, thank you for taking the time to share your personal war story with us, and you're an important part of our nation's history, and ...

BC: Well, I don't know how important we were. We had a job to do.

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TF: Do you have any final words you'd like to put on the tape? Anything else that occurs to you you'd like to tell us about?

BC: Well, if kids end up when we're drafting, for God's sake learn all you can while you're in basic training because that can be a difference between whether you come home or whether you don't. The only difference, as far as I see, whether it's atomic warfare or like we had, practically man-to-man, the training they give

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you seems kind of asinine at the time, but it's just like when you're working. Something you learn way back in grade school all of a sudden comes to you, and you can use it today. And so I think these kids are not aware of it, and I know some people, you know, too, they're gonna be career military. And I think they have a much better chance of coming to combat back from the draftee that's just doing what he absolutely has to. But if the draftee learns what he can, he's got a better chance of coming home. That's my opinion of it, anyway.

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