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# St. Johns High School

Home of the Redwings!

## Richard Cornwell

Interviewed by Travis Cressman

"My name is Richard (Sunny) Cornwell, I have the nickname Sunny because I'm sunny even on a cloudy day. My grandmother was a lady who was very opposed to nicknames most of the time, but she called me Sunny and it has kept for 88 years.

I was in the sixth Armored Division, 86th Cavalry, Reconnaissance Squadron Mechanized, of the Army. I enlisted in 1944 and I took basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky and for eight weeks I went through mechanics school. When I was in combat overseas I would fight in the scout section. When we were overseas I worked on Jeeps and armored cars; I was responsible for keeping six Jeeps and three armored cars running, and in good condition to fight. After I made Maintenance Sergeant I had five men under me. I used 30 caliber carbines and a fifty-caliber machine gun on the top of the Jeeps as well as a 30-cal machine gun, and on the armored car we had a 37-mm which was the same as a cannon.

I was married before the war, my son Denny was born in 1941 and was two years old when I left for the service. My wife and son stayed in the same place we're still living in, during the war.

I fought in Europe and I was part of the European Tactical Operation (ETO). I went across to Europe on a ship - we were 17 days going there and 21 days coming back. One day the ocean was clear as a mirror and the next day there would be tremendous waves. We could not go on the deck because of the waves were washing over it. We were part of a 137-ship convoy, and the government did not tell us exactly how many people were on the ship because one of us might be a spy and tell the Germans. We played a lot of cards to pass time on the ship. We had chow at about six thirty or seven. U.S.O. was short for United States Operation. We could buy paper for letters and also food and they would put on a dance every once in a while.

The black people in the service had all the bad jobs like truck drivers. But one division that was black was decorated to the highest.

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We could send letters out and would get mail about once a week but when we were in combat there was no mail, we were too busy fighting. All our letters were censored for the purpose of not letting anyone know information about what we were doing, where we were, or what we had for weapons. Our superior officers would black out parts of the letters if we said anything that they did not want to get out. One time we were in Nancy, France and I wrote my wife and said that it had just dawned on me that it was Nancy's birthday - and my wife realized we don't know any "Nancy's" so she looked on a map and she figured out that I was in Nancy, France.

I was 32 when I went into the service; I was one of the older guys but never the oldest. The youngest ones that they would let in the service were 18 or older. I had made a few friends while in the service and corresponded with one from Detroit, MI whom I could tell was a drinker and the drinks probably got to him.

A Panzerfaust, which is the same as a German bazooka, hit a US armored car. It hit a GI that was in the car and took his eyes and his nose right off. I didn't think he would ever live and after the war we went to a veteran's reunion in South Carolina and saw his name on the roster of veterans. I called him and said Kurt? He said, 'yes' and I said you probably don't know whom your talking to, but he did and said, Yes, you're a Cornwell. When my wife and I got to his room he had his 12-year-old son with him to lead him around as his eyes.

I remember one night we had on white suits to use as camouflage because it was snowing all around us. We were on a scouting mission to find out if there was still a bridge our troops could use. It was dark and we lay down in the snow because there was a German patrol squad very close to us. We could hear them talking when they passed by us.

My Opinion on Pearl Harbor is if the people in Washington had paid attention, we would have known about the Japanese plans to bomb Pearl Harbor.

The message I want to send to young people today is I hope we never have another war. No one knows what war is really like unless you have been there. If you have to go in to war go in with a good mood, make the best of it, and do what you are told but don't volunteer for anything. The war hasn't really affected me today.

I enlisted in the service for two years and after the war was over in 1945 I did specialty work after the war like patrolling. A frightening experience

that I had was when we were scouting all of a sudden in the dark I heard a zing and a bullet went right by my foot, I could see where it had landed in the dirt. We had one person get hit in that attack but we got him out of there. The bad thing was that it was our own troops firing at us.

We called the Germans "Kraut" short for Sour Kraut and the French we called them frogs just because.

I don't know if I ever killed a man because when we were shooting I was too far away to see if I had hit one of the Germans or not, and it's a good thing I don't know if I had killed anyone. One thing the war taught me was self-preservation, you take care of yourself.

When in combat we didn't dare start a fire or even light a cigarette because the enemy would see the light from it and know your location. We ate a thing called a K rations which contained Spam, a chocolate bar an inch square, 4 cigarettes, and cheese and crackers, and that was it. You always carried that with you. If you were thirsty you didn't dare drink out of a creek because you would get dysentery. Every once a while Ordinance would bring along a tank of water where we would fill our canteens. Our canteens would hold about a quart, which must be rationed out for a long time for your own good because you may not get an opportunity for water for a while.

Our unit had a German Prisoner of War. He was a real nice fellow, he wrote my wife and I letters in German for about ten years, and we would take the letters to Miss Dabol at the high school and she would translate them back to English.

Back in the states during the war, there were "metal donations" where the children would take all the metal objects they could find to school and the government would take the metal away and melt it down to make weapons. Also there was sugar rationing, and to raise the spirits of everyone the housewives would plant "Victory Gardens."