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Because everybody
needs an editor . . .

and a newsletter



What if?



John J. Cannon, Francis May, and Gerald Dewsz (from left), 95th Recon troopers, photographed at the Army's assault climbing school in West Virginia, April 1944.

Some Americans remember childhood visits to cemeteries on long-ago Memorial Days when their fathers felt drawn to solemn ceremonies for men who were gone.

Some Americans have a small box containing a father's or grandfather's rank insignia, division patches, battle stars, and maybe a Purple Heart. The box may have been stored for decades without words.

Those gauzy memories and fragments of history tell stories we don't hear. As any family member of a World War II combat veteran will tell you, the men who

fought, bled, and returned didn't much care to talk about it. At least not to people who weren't there with them.

That describes the 95th Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop (Mechanized), 150 men who saw combat in France, Germany, and other places.

But what if?

What if the recon troopers had told us about ranging in front of the infantry in lightly gunned and thinly armored vehicles, probing for gaps in enemy defenses? What if they told us about their core mission of staying alive long enough to get on the radio and report what they found?

If those answers were in a book, we'd have more evidence that humanity and history can't be separated, wouldn't we? What if I wrote that book? Okay, I will.

And as long as we're asking, what if the men had told us about training and twenty-mile marches in a Texas summer?

The insidious sand and wild temperature swings that bedeviled them as they sharpened their skills in California's Mojave Desert with the rest of the 95th Division?

The incongruity of going from peaceful cities and farms to a war-weary continent most of them had never seen?

The ferocious battles in and around the fortress city of Metz, France?

The terror of night patrols? (The troopers did them on foot, or as the cavalry phrases it, dismounted.)

The indiscriminate mangling of soldiers caught in an artillery barrage?

The sudden disappearance of troopers who later turned up in German POW camps?

The indescribable shock of death's arrival?

The end of war, the return home, the restarting of lives?

For the last two years, I have hunted for answers to such questions, and I have much to share.

I have collected histories (published and unpublished), located specific U.S.

Army military records about the recon troop, haunted the National Archives (online), found and read private memoirs, filed Freedom of Information Act requests and received replies, examined U.S. Census records, gathered documents from states, researched hundreds of old newspapers and a few dozen books, deciphered family trees on Ancestry.com, visited graveyards, and interviewed historians, military professionals, doctors, and other experts. I talked to surviving members of the 95th Division who were not recon troopers but trained and fought alongside them. Most importantly, I've talked to family members across the country who told me recon veterans' stories as best they know them. Some families shared letters and photos—now yellowed but always treasured. I've visited places in Europe where the 95th Reconnaissance Troop fought, and I've marveled at the respect French people show to families of American GIs eighty years later. I've engaged translators and guides in Europe because I only speak English and barely that some days. I've made my way to lonely places where details of 1944's misery are inevitably fading with the turn of generations. I've waded deep into the history of the little-known M8 to comprehend how that armored reconnaissance vehicle was used to advantage despite its shortcomings.

All of which has prepared me to write a book to answer questions the troopers did not acknowledge. The answers are best presented through the prism of their lives. Those men include (in no particular order):

Elbert “Tuffy” Reneau, who was drafted in little Anthony, Kansas, in 1942. As he rode a train to a basic training camp outside Austin, Texas, he couldn't have envisioned the day in 1944 when his recon jeep was attacked near Reinange, France. He and two other troopers were wounded, but he got everyone back alive. Three tires had been shot away on the jeep, and Tuffy drove that thing through a minefield. He was awarded the Silver Star. Tuffy (a childhood nickname that stuck) also couldn't know in 1942 that somewhere on the train he took to basic was Floyd Adams, a man he'd never met who was also headed to service with the 95th Reconnaissance Troop. And would later become his brother-in-law.

Luther Olsen was a college graduate, teacher, coach, and professional baseball prospect in Stanton, Iowa. With the draft's call, he was a private. He came out of the war as a staff sergeant, having declined offers to become an officer. He preferred to stay with his platoon. While in combat, he wrote letters, sometimes several a week, to his young nephew in Chicago. Those words to a boy, sometimes scribbled hastily in a battle-scarred building where he was taking cover for the night, reassured the wider Olsen family that he was fine, he would survive, he was strong.

Livio Segalla was eight years old and didn't speak English when he and his mother landed in Coytesville, New Jersey, after making their way from Poia, Italy. In a few years, he was a quintessential American teenager with an unwavering passion for the Yankees. He drew remarkable pencil sketches of his heroes Joe DiMaggio, Hank Greenberg, and others. At age twenty-three, he was in Europe again, now wearing a U.S. Army uniform. In a firefight on November 6, 1944, he lost an eye and most of his left hand.

John J. Cannon, a soft-spoken man who had a way with livestock and farm machinery, set out in 1938 from Dust Bowl-ravaged Nebraska in search of opportunity. He was a hired hand on a farm near Johnsburg, Illinois, in 1942 when the McHenry County draft board summoned him. Familiarity with tractors may have set him up to drive a "vehicle, wheeled, combat," which was the Army's fractured syntax for the six-wheel-drive M8. The armored vehicle was built on a Ford truck chassis, packed with radios, speedy on pavement, unreliable offroad, and toast in a panzer gunsight.

Ernest Keppel graduated from Virginia Military Institute in May 1942 and within ten months was leading 95th Recon's second platoon. That platoon found, captured, and held a key river bridge in Bionville-sur-Nied, France, (the town is still tiny—four hundred people, the mayor says) in November 1944. The lieutenant had a habit of finding the rare light-hearted moments of warfare. Maybe that was a way of disarming family members who wondered about war's darkness.

Samuel Musick, among the larger men (six-foot-two, 195 pounds) to fit himself into the sardine-can innards of an M8, was known to many as "Big Sam." During combat on November 15, 1944, he was blown out of the vehicle and wounded. He was captured and spent the rest of the war as a POW. If you wonder how a big man could be thrown in such a way, it helps to know that the M8 turret had no armored hatch, just a canvas flap on top that was supposed to shield the crew from rain and snow.

Milton "Gene" Horch, who was drafted late in the war, arrived in combat in January 1945 as a replacement to fill gaps left by the dead and wounded. Gene, who was married and had a young son, was an accordionist who performed throughout the Midwest with a band known as Sheriff Tom Owen and His Cowboys. The Western-style band (the musicians wore cowboy hats, and their names were stitched into their chaps) played live on Midwestern radio stations, such as powerful WLS in Chicago and the smaller WMT in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. You can listen here to one of their songs, "[A New Ten Gallon Hat](#)."

We'll never know enough, of course, not after eighty years. But even a glimpse

has meaning and value.

I've nearly finished the research. I'm writing the book now and putting together videos that could help readers further understand the lives of these troopers, their courage, and their reluctance to talk about it.

I plan to use this newsletter to offer updates on the book's progress, so if you're interested and you're not a subscriber, I encourage you to sign up for the newsletter on jcannonbooks.com. It arrives every other month, and it's free. You can also message me and I'll sign you up. What could be easier? I'm publishing a version of this introduction on other social media sites, so if you see it twice, that's why. Like other writers who grovel, I would appreciate it if you persuaded your friends and family to subscribe. This project is for anyone who wants to read deeply reported and enriching nonfiction written in a conversational voice (he says, hoping to sound modest). It is built from accounts gathered before they could slip behind the curtain that time insists upon throwing in our paths.

A 17,000-pound bit of history



[Click the photo for a short video I made about the M8](#) an armored reconnaissance vehicle unfamiliar even to some military historians. And you might like the view from inside on a ride through northeastern France.

Kind regards

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