

Stories of Honor: WWII veteran reflects on 'a wonderful life'

Barbara O'Brien
Jun 14, 2021

Pvt. Howard Biondi was loading a 90-mm anti-aircraft gun in New Guinea in 1943 when word came down that the captain wanted to see him.



World War II veteran Howard Biondi at his home in Wheatfield, Tuesday, May 25, 2021.

Mark Mulville/Buffalo News

"Why the hell does a captain talk to a private? Captains don't talk to privates," he recalls thinking.

Turns out, the captain was looking over resumes, and saw the 22-year-old from South Division Street in Buffalo was a meat cutter.

"He says, 'I want you to go into that kitchen and give me something besides ground meat out of a cow,'" Biondi said.

Biondi went into the kitchen, which he credits for getting him a sergeant rating. He remembers making coffee in a garbage can over a butane stove. After the water boiled, he would put a bag of coffee in and let it settle, then ladle out the brew.

He did the same thing with tea, although he had never made tea before.

"I put too much tea into this thing, and when the captain – he liked his tea – when he put it in his mouth, I thought he was going to put me in a firing squad!" Biondi said.

Biondi, who will turn 100 June 25, was drafted into the Army during World War II in 1943.

He served three years in New Guinea and the Philippines as a technician, fourth grade, with the 496th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Gun Battalion. When he wasn't in the kitchen, he was holding the 40-pound shells that were loaded into the gun to shoot down Japanese planes.

"The shells were big," he said. "When that gun went off, you had to stand on the side of the recoil. If you stood in the back, it would cut you right in half."

He worked in a butcher shop on South Division Street before he was drafted. He went to Fort Stewart, Ga., for training and boarded a ship out of San Diego for the passage to New Guinea.

When the troops got to New Guinea, they didn't have barracks or cots, sleeping much of the time on the ground.

"You put the poncho down and laid on the ground and you slept there," Biondi said. "You'd wiggle your shoulder and your fanny into the ground a little to get squared away."

The 496th traveled up the coast of New Guinea, beating back the Japanese. The battalion went to the Philippines shortly before the war ended.

They had heard about the efforts to build an atomic bomb, but they did not know much about it.



World War II veteran Howard Biondi holds his good conduct medal along with his bronze stars at his home in Wheatfield, Tuesday, May 25, 2021.
Mark Mulville/Buffalo News

"It's fantastic even to believe when you hear it, especially for a kid like me on the East Side of Buffalo," Biondi said.

But, he said, no one wanted to be in a war, and they were glad when it ended in 1945 and they could come home.



A photo of World War II veteran Howard Biondi, top center, copied at his home in Wheatfield, Tuesday, May 25, 2021.
Mark Mulville/Buffalo News

He returned by train to Buffalo, arriving at the Central Terminal in early 1946 to a madhouse.

"Oh yeah, are you kidding? Everybody was happy, the family came and relatives came, friends came," he said. "Oh, you're glad to see everybody, and kiss the ground that you made it back."

"I've had a wonderful life, wonderful parents, wonderful brothers and sisters, wonderful children," Biondi said. "I have only one thing I regret in my whole life, one thing. My wife died of breast cancer."

The former Theresa Marinaccio, who Biondi knew since they were children, died in 1984.

Biondi attended School No. 6 and Hutchinson Technical High School. He dropped out as a junior and traveled to California to fight forest fires with the Civilian Conservation Corps.

After returning from World War II, Biondi worked for A&P for 30 years as a meat manager. He continued cutting meat for a small shop after he retired, and took up golf, eventually becoming president of Grover Cleveland Golf Course.

Biondi, who has lived at Wheatfield Commons for three years, said the key to his longevity is "everything in moderation but prayer."

During the pandemic, he talked to his family on the phone, and waved to his daughter through a window.

"I never want to brood over things. You look for the good things. You don't look for the bad things. Try to be happy, try to be good, and don't take advantage of people," he said.

Barbara O'Brien

Reporter

I grew up in Rochester, graduated from St. Bonaventure University and worked in radio before joining The Buffalo News. I report on issues in local communities. Over the years I have covered stories in every town in Erie County.