



Tony Lambruno served in WWII, returned home

Before being drafted into World War II, Tony Lambruno's biggest trips from his Douglas home were to not-so-exotic places such as Pierce, Kempton and Davis. The U.S. Army changed that quickly, with stops at several U.S. destinations before Lambruno headed to Australia and New Guinea.

Before he knew it, the fresh-faced Tucker County native found himself watching a movie in the basement of General Douglas MacArthur's compound just outside Manila in the Philippines.

"We got to Manilla before our equipment," said Lambruno, whose regular job was lighting runways for military planes to land. "We served as guards until it got there, and that's where I met MacArthur. We were sent to guard his office, where he met with generals from other countries."

Lambruno said the general's wife, Jean, and son, Arthur, lived nearby and he sometimes protected their home, including a goat that was the son's beloved pet.

"When they left Australia, someone gave his son a goat," recalled Lambruno, now 95 years old and living at Cortland Acres in Thomas. "We guarded it, too – we couldn't be mean to it or touch it. You didn't dare hurt that goat."

Jean MacArthur would sometimes ask soldiers to join her in the home.

"She was just a common lady, very nice," Lambruno said. "We ate dinner with her a couple times, and she'd ask the men to come to the house and watch a movie in the basement."

Once the equipment arrived, it was back to Manila and living in tents, a life that was even less glamorous than it sounds. And although Australia and New Guinea rank high on the list of places some would like to visit today, it was much different during 1940s wartime.

“There were mosquitoes everywhere,” said Lambruno, who contracted malaria that affected him well after he returned home to Tucker County. “They had snakes big enough to swallow a boar. We were out in the jungle, in the thick woods. We went out to set up camp in 7-foot high grass, and the snakes were big enough to look over it. We stopped, turned around and ran back. We were scared, I’ll tell you that.”

Although Lambruno’s unit never experienced a direct attack, the chance was always there.

“We were a target at night,” he said. “We’d light up the airports with a 60-inch mirror light so the airplanes could land. All we had to fight with was rifles.”

Despite experiencing so much of the country – Texas, Florida and California – and the world, Lambruno knew he wanted to come home to Tucker County as soon as he was discharged.

“I came right back to where I was born,” he said. “I had to go up to the GI hospital in Pittsburgh to get my nose fixed from where it had been broken, and while I was in there he said he’d go ahead and take my tonsils out. He left a bandage in there, and I started choking. They had to pull it out.”

Before he was drafted, Lambruno had worked at a coal tippie in Douglas, but that job was finished when he returned.

“They asked if I wanted to go in the deep mines and get paid by the amount of coal I dug,” he said. “You had to walk on your knees, and I kept standing up and banging my head. I did it for two days.

“The third day I didn’t go to work. I told the superintendent Lincoln freed the slaves and I’m no slave. He gave me a job back on the outside.”

Lambruno spent 47 years married to Alma Lambruno, who died in 2007. He worked in the county’s coal mines, relishing in the hard work that was a tradition for not only his family but his generation.

Legendary television broadcaster Tom Brokaw termed Lambruno and his peers the “Greatest Generation” because of their youth in the Great Depression, battles in World War II and building of a nation upon their return.

“I believe that,” Lambruno said when asked about the term. “It makes you feel good. It makes you feel like you did something.”

He said he doesn’t talk about those events of 70-plus years ago very often.

“In the last 20 or 30 years, none,” he said. “There’s nobody to talk to about it. During the war they took a lot of young people out of these towns. I got a letter and went with a busload out of Parsons. They took us to Ohio for our physicals, then we came back and waited for the call.”

Lambruno said he truly enjoys living at Cortland Acres, where he moved two years ago.

“They have really good girls who work here,” he said. “The staff is good. My sister died here at 106. My mother was 100. Now Tony’s in here, and I don’t know for how long.”