

An Interview with Stan Cowan
WWII Veteran of the 33rd Medical Depot Company
By Michele Starkey

On March 19, 1921, Stanford N. Cowan was born in Akron, Ohio. He would be the only child of Nathaniel and Sonia Cowan. Nathaniel was a veteran who had served in both the United States and Canada during WWI. Nathaniel worked for a clothing and jewelry company and the work often transferred his family all over. When he arrived in the Newburgh area, he decided to open his own business, Cowan's Jewelers. The elder Cowan relocated his family from Akron when his son, Stan, was just a small child who would begin attending school in Newburgh.

In the 1930's, the Water Street business district in Newburgh was a Mecca for shoppers from all over the area to include NYC. Cowan's Jewelers was located directly across the street from Schoonmaker's Department Store. Cowan's Jewelers would remain there until 1963 when they moved the business to lower Broadway.

Stan Cowan graduated from Newburgh Free Academy and attended Ohio Northern University in Ada, Ohio and the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Cowan's Jewelers had already been in business on Water Street in Newburgh for five years since 1937 when Stan enlisted in the Army in Newburgh in September of 1942. He was just 21 years of age when he shipped off to basic training. His training began as a dental technician and he would also be trained as an optician in St. Louis, MO before returning to Colorado.

The 33rd Medical Depot Company was formed in October of 1943 in Camp Carson, Colorado. Cowan would become a member of the 33rd Medical Depot Company and specifically the Mobile Optical Unit that would make and repair glasses on the spot for General Patton's 3rd Army Division.

What were your specific duties and where did you travel overseas?

"From Colorado, we headed by train back to New York to board a ship, the HMS Mauretania, to sail for England. The entire trip would take 16 days and 6,000 miles from Camp Carson to Liverpool, England. "

When did you leave England?

"While we were in England, General Eisenhower invaded the northern coast of France. My unit boarded the U.S. Liberty ship named the "James B. Weaver" on July 9, 1944, and we headed for France. Hundreds of ships formed a gigantic convoy heading towards the shores of France. Colonel McCullough was the troop commander of the ship. Shortly thereafter, on July 11, marked the beginning of our actual participation in the campaign against the Germans and we beach-head landed on Omaha Beach. Anti-aircraft fire went on throughout the night as the Nazi planes struck out at the convoy."

What duties were you performing with the Mobile Optical Unit?

"We were in the business of replacing and fixing eyeglasses for the troops. We remained close to the units and carried stock and supplies along with us. I remember one day an officer approached me and said that he had broken his sunglasses. I told him that I remembered seeing a French optical factory not far from where we were located that may have the materials needed to fix his sunglasses. He gave me a driver and a jeep and I headed to the factory for the new lens. The French at the factory supplied a brand new lens, free of charge, and even offered me a souvenir to take with me."

Did your parents know where you were serving?

“Since we were not supposed to tell anyone where our units were located, I wrote a letter back home to her that said, ‘Look on the back of the watch crystals and you’ll know where I am right now.’ The back of the crystals said ‘Made in France’.”

How many pairs of glasses did you repair or replace for the soldiers?

“My goodness, there were five of us who probably made thousands of glasses. Too many to count.”

Tell us all the places that you served.

“We were in England, France, Luxembourg, Germany, Belgium and Holland. I went in as a Private and the day I was discharged at Fort Dix on December 13, 1945, I was a Staff Sergeant. I left Ft. Dix and took a train up to Beacon, crossed the Hudson River by Ferry Boat and headed straight into Cowan’s Jewelers on Water Street and went back to work the same day. I haven’t stopped working since then.”

Did you have a reunion with your unit?

“Sadly, we never did have a reunion but I did get a visit from one of the guys shortly after the War ended. His name was David Thomson and he was an Optometrist. He came to Newburgh with his wife to visit me.”

There is a rumor that you drove a Harley Davidson motorcycle, tell us about that.

“It’s not a rumor. I had gone to Bermuda and rode on a moped and I enjoyed the feel of it. I remember saying, ‘Someday, I am going to get a motorcycle.’ I started out with a Yamaha 200 cc and worked my way up to a 1450 cc Harley Davidson. I rode bikes for over 30 years until I was into my 80’s. I enjoyed going up to Lake George the 1st week in June every year for many years.”

You still go to work everyday?

“Tuesday through Saturday you can find me at Cowan’s Jewelers. We moved the store to Rt. 32 in New Windsor in 1975. Cowan’s Jewelers has been in business for seventy-five years now.”

Stan Cowan just celebrated his 91st birthday; he still works five days a week at the store and is a member of the VFW Post 1161. He has three children, a son, Jeff, and his wife, Denise, a son, Bruce and a daughter, Stacey and her husband, Bruce and their twin sons, Ryan and Jared, and Jared’s wife, Elana.

The VFW Post 1161 meets every third Friday of every month in the City of Newburgh Post 973 Bldg. The meetings begin at 1:00 pm and you can call Quartermaster Steve Fanizzi at (845)236-7295 or Commander Donald Ruckdeschel Sr. at (845)562-7828 for more details.