Leroy Cameron the date is July 14, 1991. I am tape recording my father, Mr. Ralph Cameron, about his military exploits during the Second World War, with the United States Army the 158th Infantry commonly known as the Bushmasters. Mr. Cameron like all Indian children, or all children would like to hear stories and I went to my grandfather, especially in the wintertime when the days are long when the days are short rather and the nights are long so therefore, stories are told in the winter time. Many times I would crawl in bed with him and ask him about different Indian legends. One of the stories that he told me was about military life. Among their own people as they used to fight the warring tribes around us. We were known to be a peaceful tribe but those other warring tribes would come into our land here, to steal our crops, burn our crops up. We go back at them, and fight them and it got so bad that the people from here would call for war and travel and almost two hundred miles to fight those bad those people that have did us wrong. And this is what started my interest in military life. As I grew older, that I would enter the military someway and I trained like hard here. Our recreation was plentiful although we did not have the modern playgrounds that you see now. The many exercising materials that you have now. All we had in those days was our natural resources like the river. Like when I was young I used to I first learned to swim in the farm ditches which was very shallow. I learned to swim there when I got older to leave the house I would go down to the river which is about a mile from my place here. And there I would swim with different boys. Different groups swam in different areas. We did not swim in the deep swift rivers, we swim in the shallow rivers. And later on we went on as we learned to swim we would go out into deeper places and also it was it was easy for me to learn this because every one among us all the children have learned to do this. We must learn to do this to survive because of the two rivers that we lived between the great Yellow River which was flowing, swift and in towns of lots and sometimes we were on the other side of the river and we had to learn to swim across. And also the Salt River, to the north of us which floods out a lot during the rainy seasons. So for this purpose it was it was necessary for us to learn to swim and also another recreation we had was when
we got a little older we could ride horses. Every Indian child, boy, even the girls, learned how to ride horse. I learned to ride a horse at a really young age, I didn't know how old I was but I was about four or five I remember already riding horses. So that was very necessary for us too. A good recreation we would go hunting either on foot but most of the time on horseback. Covering all our areas here, different rivers, the two rivers, we rode along there and hunted and swam and we stay out all day long. But when we got hungry at noon, there were natural food that was around us, all around us so we gather a bunch of them and fill our pockets and we eat that on the way. So our surrounding area here I know every bit of it, because I had been there so many times, the river banks, the mountains, the washes, the many small ravines and where the deer comes down, which trail, I knew those things but I never did hunt for deers because I was not armed with a rifle then. The way we hunted when we were young was with bow and arrows we shoot quails and rabbits, doves, and that's what we hunted. We did not hunt for big games. I guess I would have hunted for big games was but I was taken away from here at an early age. At the age of 10 years old, when the government the government provided a day school here on our reservation and we didn't have no buses then. We had to walk to school, rainy, muddy, cold days in the winter and hot in the summer time but yet we kept on going. All our all the children of this area when we reached the age of 6 years old we uh, we started school. We went through the grades of third grade when we finished the third grade the government came to my house and told me that I must now get ready to enter the Phoenix Indian school which is about twenty miles away from my home. It was supposed to be there until I finished school. During that one time when we were when we were uh, when this was after my age, must have been about in 1940 or 1945 when a bunch of young boys maybe 16, 17 were riding horses and going up in the south to the south, and before it got to the grave there was sort of in the lowlands there and looked up straight ahead which was kind of little higher ground they saw a bunch of uh, men on horseback. This was this we know as the knights, they wore steal armor, rode horses, we saw a bunch of them riding down in the column towards them so when this kids saw this we were all afraid and they took off. Ran off, and then also another incident that happened was during World War II when most of our young men who volunteered the biggest part of this men who left to serve in the military volunteered. But a few were
drafted and during the war time, the people here on the reservation saw a miracle like, it was like in the Bible it tells about Mary and Joseph just like the Bible mentions traveling on a donkey the woman riding the donkey with a child the man, the husband, riding, walking along side of her. This was seen by a bunch of people here on the reservation during those war years about 1943 along in there. But that's when most of our people most of our people all got together, they wondered what that sign meant. Although a lot of us understand there is good in Bible teachings so the whole community planned and thought it was a good omen that a lot of these servicemen that had left here will come back safely. And that is exactly what has happened, everyone of us have returned safely except one man, one young man, was shot up on his foot but he crawled back to safety and he came back home. So this is what I have to say now. And then as I said about my interest in the military as I was taken to the boarding school in Phoenix, Phoenix Indian school I went to school there and I did not learn to speak the English well. I could not read very well. The rules and regulations that were posted up for us to follow every day I could not read and understand all of it. So I made mistakes, but they did not consider that, of me not understanding. I was punished severely sometime for it, so I know that it was very hard for me to sit up and try to study. Cause of all these things that is that is around me, that I'm just tense, my body is tense and afraid so I cannot really, really learn what is being taught but as I grew older I got bolder and stronger and realized that I must learn this school system, and go to school. So after that, things got a little easier and that is when I when the interest that I had when I was a young boy came back to me when I reached the age of 18, I was old enough to enter the military. And there was a there was Arizona National Guard was headquartered there at the Indian school, right there on the campus. So when I reached 18 I enlisted in the company which was composed of Indians. About 18 different tribes from all over the state and out of this company the company officers were all full blooded Indians. Our commanding officer, Captain Stewart Lewis a full pima from Casablanca, Arizona was our company commander. And our executive officer was first lieutenant Richard P. Ballinger, a tribesman from the east, forgot what tribe he is but he's a full blooded Indian. And he was employed by the school here and the third officer was a Mexican American man named Lieutenant Diaz. And this was the officers that I remember and also that the non-commissioned officers like the sergeants
and corporals were all Indians from the school here. So we trained there every once a week, every Wednesday we trained for one full hour learning the tactics of warfare and it was interesting to do that all year long and then if when school is out the summertime, we took one month to train at Fort Tuthill, Arizona which is located near Flagstaff, Arizona. Out there we did a lot of out field maneuverings going through warfare tactics and learning the many different ways of surviving out there like you would in a real war and at the end of the month we would come back home and then would starting school again, starting school again. And then about that time 1939, the world was preparing for war, like in Europe. I was sitting there at the Indian agency on our reservation here one morning, listening to the radio and that was the time when it mentioned that Germany was running over the country of Poland. So right then, when I heard that I knew somehow, someway that America would be in it also. So I decided to join the Army, enlist in the Army, so the first thing I did, was when I went back to school that fall, I entered the Company F, Arizona National Guard at that time. At the in there I learned more about it, I studied all the things that make you, you taught in order to survive. And we were next told that America was uh, armed to enter the war. At that time, we were still at the Indian school but orders came that we were to move to a different location. And this location, was on the north east corner of the Salt River on Central Avenue. There was a great big dance hall there at that time, and there were a lot of giant cottonwood trees around the area there. So as we were given areas to move from our place, each company in the regiment moved there. The companies from Phoenix were there and company F was one of them. There was about four or five other companies there. And we, that we that was our headquarters there. And then on the weekends we would go into town, and we didn't have no bus services at that time on Central Avenue to Phoenix so we walked up there in town and spent the day there like on weekends but we have to be back in the evening about by six o clock. This went on for about three or four weeks and during that time we were camped there by the riverside. I saw a lot of volunteers come in, some were from our same community here the volunteers had entered the service there. And also a few other non-Indian people that were volunteer. This had to be done in order to strengthen our company up to what they call battle strength. So when we got our quota then we were preparing for next like I said a month
we been there a month when we were preparing to leave again. And I remember on
Friday evening just before sunset the whole companies that were there marched down
Central Avenue towards the railroad tracks. And our train our passenger car for company
F was parked right by the underpass on Central and the railroad tracks there. So we
marched across the street and there we got on our train. And the other companies also
were given passenger trains to enter so they did. We started out about sunset, when into
the northerly direction towards flagstaff and then on east. We traveled all day all night
and all day the next day and about seven/eight o clock in the evening it was dark. We got
off our train and we found out that it was the Fort Sill headquarters which was an artillery
unit that was stationed there. We saw the many barracks there, that was lined up all over.
And I we thought we're going to move into one of those barracks, but we marched
through them, we kept saying maybe the next one will be ours and we marched on ,
marched on till we got out of the regular army post area and out into the open prairie
grounds there was nothing out there. It was about a mile away from the regular barracks,
then we moved, then all of a sudden we came to uh, floors, wooden floors the size of
where a for a tent to be erected. Where eight men stay in that one tent, we saw these
floorings there and also in the middle was the tent all folded up and the tent pole. So
immediately we were given instructions, we went to our area, different company areas
and we were putting up our tents. And everything was like I said was just like out in wild
country. We didn't have no water system, water had to be trucked in and the toilet
facilities were not there, we had to use slit trenches dug in the ground, so it was hard even
for the kitchen in the unit to set up their kitchen to feed us and the next day we went to
sleep right away. That night, first night when we were arose early in the morning, there
was the regular and the whole 158th Regiment was there with people all around us. And
then also came in the other regiments, we were a member of the 45th Division known as
the Thunderbird Division and the division is composed of four regiments and they came
in one by one and the place was all full. As far as the eyes can see, you can see tents
lined up in straight formations and I remember there was another full Indian company set
up the same way, like we were their officers were all Indians, full-blooded Indians and
the enlistment of different tribes and I believe that was Company C of the 179th
regiment. I could be wrong by now. But anyway, they were there too, a hundred percent
Indian, so they so we saw those Indians boys there, they would come over and visit us and some of us would go over to their company areas and visit them. And we trained there in Fort Sill Oklahoma starting from the months of September to the end of December of the same year. And then we were ordered to leave Fort Sill Oklahoma and move down to Abilene, Texas and the place was named Camp Barkley Texas. So one morning we got ready the trucks came and we all loaded on about 20 soldiers to a truck and we all moved out by trucks the whole division moved out and it took a long time before maybe about three four days when the whole division was moved out there to the new location. And when we got there it was a little better there was tents already put up so we moved in it and then we start training again. Going through the same thing over and over again and I used to wonder why we have to do this again but I found out the reason why which I never could understand why we did it so often when we knew we had perfected it. But we kept on we had to keep on doing that but this is what I'll tell later in the story as I go along why it was so important that we did these things. And in Camp Barkley we had the privilege of going to town in Abilene, Texas it was about ten miles away I believe and trucks go out in the direction so we go out there and we spend the day there in the theaters and other places that persons choose to spend their weekends. So we spent we were there all that time doing the same thing same training, every day and also doing night problems. We were preparing and go out at nights and go through like warfare but later we found out in real, actual combat time the American Army does not move out, it stays in this position throughout the night because out there it is a different kind of terrain, and its easily its so dark and we can easily get lost so we but out here in the states we did that, its mostly compass reading and a lot of other things too that goes with it like you know how we have to be at a certain place at a certain time, with the other platoons or squads to carry out our mission so must of that was taught there at Camp Barkley. So that's what we did there all the time. We continue to do the same thing training and uh one morning one day we heard that Pearl Harbor was attacked, we I went to and I another friend of mine went to Abilene, Texas that Sunday morning and when they were taking in a theater we sat there and it was about we almost finished the show when two or three of our officers came in and sat behind us. And they asked us if we knew what was going on out there and we told them no, we had been here all this time so
then they broke the news to us that war has been declared and that also we finished our show up and we came out and when we came out on the sidewalk we could hear radios blaring in every direction throughout the town announcing what has happened of the war so we uh, the orders were for all military to return immediately to their post. And then there were militarys and lot of militarys police out there telling us to go back to the camp, so we look for a way to come back to camp. Everybody even those who were on furlough were given notices wherever they were to report back to the camp, Camp Barkley. And when we got back to the post and or everyone that got back from the post from furlough we were given strict orders not to leave the place there and they put out extra guards with live ammunition to keep us there. So nobody moved out and all furloughs were canceled everything was called off and we sat there and then during that time, our company commander kept Captain Lewis being of age was not eligible to go overseas again. Because he had already as a young man served in the navy during World War I and so there was a get together one day and there were gifts, many gifts were given to him by all members from the company. I noticed that there was a lot of boys that were shedding tears because at the loss of our good leader that was really taught us everything that he knew that we would we would do this and survive so, we went on and on there like I said they gave him a good dinner and also gifts and all kinds of farewell speeches and then the next day, but before that we went out the next day on the Eighth of December we went out as usual for training that's when Captain Lewis told us the news that we were going to move out. But we did not have any idea where we were going to go but we were in a way where we thought we were going up to Europe but we didn't, we didn't know, we got ready and it was Christmas day by then. No not quite Christmas day, the 24th when we got ready to move out to the ports of embarkation to New Orleans, Louisiana, and we got ready that day that evening we were loading our baggage cars on the train and by and it happened so that it was rainy that day and muddy which made it very hard and uncomfortable to load but anyway, we did all that. On December the 24th Nineteen Hundred and Forty One we were preparing to move out to New Orleans so we all the men got together that were given different jobs to load on many different things that we had to take along with us. And my job was to help on the loading of the army trucks and securing them down tying then down so they would not be shaky but then
again we couldn't tie them down too tight because if you have it too tight it would break open so my job and other men with me we had to do that after that it was completed about five o clock in the afternoon we had to come back to our company area and by that time it had started raining, and it was muddy and very uncomfortable to get around in we're all wet and by and by eight o clock we got on the train and we moved out towards new Orleans, we rode all night Christmas Eve and on the 25th the next morning at six o clock I remembered we got to the city of Houston and from there on we rolled on east until noon hour we had our Christmas dinner served on the train there the kitchens were all lined up in the mail cars that's where they prepared the meal and brought it out to us and the meal was very good. Same as you would get anywhere else so we had a good meal that day and we rode on in to New Orleans one of the outstanding landmark that I've hard about but never seen which was the Huey Long bridge. We crossed over it and in a few hours we were in New Orleans and moving towards our area again. There were a lot of over a thousand tents out there where other trips have come and left for different parts of the world so we were moved into our company area and we stayed there the for a couple of days then we were given liberty to go to visit the town of New Orleans. And this is something I have noticed that when I rode on the streetcar that discrimination was enforced there. I saw the colored people moved onto the end of the streetcar but we as American Indians although a lot of us are dark complected too, yet they did not discriminate us because we were in the American uniform and members of the United States Army. So we had the town to roam as we wanted and as I got in town there were different drinking fountains that these colored people had to drink at, and also their side of sidewalks that they had to walk on and then restaurants all those things were taken place there so I noticed all this then we went on into town, especially the first thing we headed for which was a well known section of New Orleans everybody knows and heard about the place the French Quarters there we went and saw the old city there. And then during time we met up with a men that we've never known before, we met us and just like all the other citizens of that town they were very friendly and very courteous to us and he offered us to show us the town so we all went out together and he explained the different towns and what it means what took place there and towards around nine o clock he told
us that he had to leave he was sorry he had to leave to go to work that night so before he left he gave us an introduction card to another place he says on it was a name call for this man and he will serve you so we did we went over there and it was a long great big long bar. And there we were served beer after nine o clock the beer a glass of beer is so large and heavy that you have a glass that you have to use both hands to lift it up to drink out of so and it cost only five cents, a nickel. So we stayed there and we were met by the people, this man that we first met that showed us around never knew about the American Indians of this country. And he thought we were Hawaiian people from Hawaii but as we introduced ourselves to him, and told him he was that much more glad to show us around and help us. So we had a good welcome to many of the people that we have met that because they know that we are there for a certain purpose that we are going to ship out to different parts of the world because we were at war then with Japan and already there was war in Germany. So we went on, we stayed there about a couple of weeks, then one night we were given orders to move out by midnight towards the ship those days they just have finished building finish building the liberty ships that all citizens of this country were taking part in this war effort that was going so we marched on up to our ship that which was about seemed like a mile from our camp to the ship we loaded on and then we loaded on and they told us that we were on the second floor one deck below water line. And they told us also that about an hour or two hours from now we'd reached the high seas and the waves are greater and stronger out there and you will hear noise, bumps against the side of the ship.

This ends the first part we'll continue on the second side. (Leroy Cameron's voice)