

Interview with Paul Viens

WWII Military Vehicle and Equipment Restorer

MSG Half-Mast: Tell us a bit about yourself and what inspired you to collect these vehicles.

Paul Viens: I grew up in Levittown, PA, moving at the age of eight in 1963 to Indiana. Without exception, every father in my neighborhood served in WWII and/or Korea. My father was a tanker in the 702nd Tank Battalion assigned to the 80th Infantry Division. Mr. Williams next door landed in Normandy. Richard, his only son, was killed on January 5, 1970 in Vietnam. As I recall, our neighborhood was mostly populated with Infantry veterans, all enlisted.

My father talked often, as did all the other fathers, of their time in the Army, but never talked about combat experiences when we kids were within earshot. As a child, I would strain to hear the conversations, which always seemed to focus on: basic training, equipment, weapons, and locations. As kids, we all built models of tanks, trucks, jeeps etc. So trying to get information about these vehicles from our dads was an ongoing conversation. The subject of actual combat with my father was limited to one four-hour conversation when he was 71 years old, a year before he passed away.



Left photo: 1943 M3A1 Scout Car (manufactured by White Motor Co.)

Right photo: 1943 969 Wrecker (Diamond T)

Fast forward to buying my first WWII military vehicle: a 1944 Dodge WC-51 three-quarter ton truck that served with the 25th Cavalry Recon Battalion of the 4th Armored Division before being transferred to the Swiss Army post-war. Today with 24 vehicles and trailers, I spend seven days a week on maintenance and restorations. But, of course, that wasn't always the case.

In high school, and when attending community college, I worked in an auto body shop. After graduating from a four-year college, my first real job was with the truck tire division of The Firestone Tire and Rubber Company. While there, I earned an MBA in finance and then worked at an airport. I was recruited from there to start an aeromedical helicopter program for a hospital. Thirteen years later, I started my own business catering to the needs of physicians and hospitals. By then, I was two vehicles and two trailers deep!

It was then I realized that all the shades of olive drab available to restore pre-WWII through 1975 Army vehicles were not correct. So I embarked on gathering every document and manual known

regarding this subject, as well as accumulating over 27 gallons of original WWII and immediate post-war paint. Coupled with over 3,000 paint chips, I started a paint company (TM9 Ordnance Products). Now, the correct shades are available, and after a year in business, I was contacted by the restoration facility at Ft Benning, GA. From there, the U.S. Army was one of my best paint customers for historic vehicle restorations. I am honored that TM9 Paint is now on the most famous American tank of WWII: an M4A3E2 Sherman nicknamed "Cobra King." Commanded by Lieutenant Charles Boggess of the 37th Tank Battalion of the 4th Armored Division, it was the first vehicle to break through the German lines and relieve the "Bastards of Bastogne." Today, it is located at Ft Belvoir, Virginia.

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MSG Half-Mast: What are the greatest challenges you've faced restoring military vehicles and equipment?

Paul Viens: Finding parts for vehicles made by companies that no longer exist is a real challenge. I suspect many readers have not heard of Corbitt, Diamond T, Auto-Ordnance, Brill, or White. The real source for parts was in Europe for many years post-war. However, in the last five years, many surplus yards have scrapped what little inventory remained. Over the last 25 years, I have made six trips to Europe with other collectors looking for parts.

The vast majority of WWII military vehicle collectors have Jeeps. Domestically there are less than 25 of us with larger and diverse collections. In turn, it is a very tight community, where the fabrication of parts becomes a constant way of life. Most surviving vehicles were modified in the 75 years after WWII. I have vehicles that were used by the Swiss, Italian, Belgium, and Dutch armies after WWII. Not to mention the countless domestic vehicles modified for farming, construction, and logging.

My M5A1 Stuart light tank is a perfect example. According to an article in *Army Motors Magazine*, after returning from Europe, it was rebuilt in Berwick, PA, then shipped to the Schenectady General Depot in NY. From there, it was sold to the Canadians in 1946. It was modified to Canadian standards. Then in 1956, Canada sold 90 Stuarts to the Portuguese government. Most were used for training or placed with the Federal Police. Some were shipped to fight in Angola in 1959. In 1983 SECO, a U.S. company bought a number of the surplused Stuarts from the Portuguese, demilled the main guns, and brought them back to the U.S. to sell to collectors.



Left photo: M5A1 Stuart light tank.



Right photo: instrument gauge panel (Cadillac)

These vehicles sat outside, with hatches and engine covers open or missing for over 40 years. You can imagine the path to iron oxide was well in place.

One of the biggest issues regarding restorations hovers around hardware. Almost all hardware today is zinc coated, and has hardness lines molded in the heads. This was not the case in WWII or Korean War eras. Hardware was parkerized or, more commonly, cadmium-coated. The hardness marks must be ground off, zinc removed and sent out to get plated. Many of the actual hardware used is simply not available (5/8-18NF cage nuts for example).

If you restore any Dodge, every bolt must have the Dodge, Desoto, Chrysler, Plymouth logo. If restoring a Jeep made by Ford (GPW) every part and bolt must have the Ford "F" stamp.

Restoration requires skill sets that include fabrication, welding, machining, cutting torch, sandblasting, painting, and mechanical ability. Research and patience are mandatory requirements. WWII-era trucks have: points and condensers, generators, adjustable voltage regulators, oil bath air cleaners, mechanical fuel pumps, vacuum or air-powered wiper blades, hydrovac or booster brake systems, non-synchro gear boxes, etc. When was the last time you polarized a generator, or re-wired an earth-ground 6v truck with filters because the resistor spark plug did not exist? Needless to say, the hunt for original ordnance tools is always a high priority.

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MSG Half-Mast: What are some cool things you've been able to do with your restorations, such as movies, historical re-enactments, or the like?

Paul Viens: As an executive committee member of the Museum of the American G.I. (americangimuseum.org), in College Station, TX, I bring vehicles over for special occasions, reenactments and living history weekends at least twice a year. I spent two years restoring the museum's AH-1 Cobra Gunship in my shop. Last year, to honor the 75th anniversary of D-Day, two other collectors and I shipped two WWII GMC CCKW's, (both frame-off restorations with rebuilt original engines), a Jeep and trailer to the United Kingdom, then flew there ourselves. Two days later, we picked up 25 others at Heathrow, mostly students from Texas A&M University. During a total of three weeks, and always wearing USGI correct period uniforms, we crossed the Channel, spent nine days in Normandy, and visited countless battlefields and cemeteries from WWI and WWII. Finishing the trip after driving about 1,500 miles, we spent three days in Bastogne and La Gleize, Belgium.

We had some mechanical issues, but with a hoard of spare parts, and specialty tools, we never had a serious problem. I'm sure we weren't the first to replace a broken brake return spring at Utah Beach. In fact, it was rewarding being able to fix anything because of proper preparation.

But nothing is as rewarding as having an original WWII USGI uniform make two trips to towns in Belgium. The first time, my father wore it; 75 years later, I—his oldest son—did.



Left photo: 1943 M20 Armored Command Car (Ford) – Mr. Viens (left) chats with LTC Joe Northrup, U.S. Army, Ret. (right)
Right photo: 1944 M16 Halftrack (White Motor Co.)