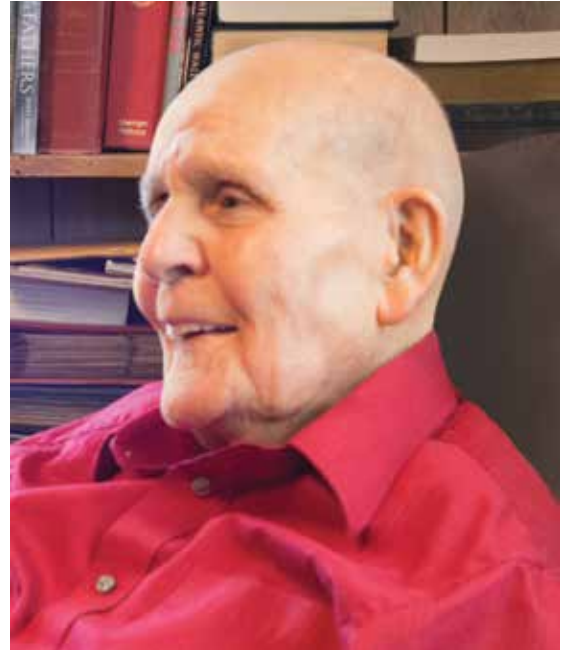


George Perrine —

One of the Best of America's Greatest Generation

Written by: **Dan Whetzel**
 Photography by: **Lance C. Bell**
 Family photos courtesy **Richard Perrine**



George Perrine reflects on events that most people only read about—events that placed Americans at a crossroads in the twentieth century. The choices and challenges George faced during the decades of the 1930s and 1940s were not easy ones. The Great Depression had made life difficult for him and millions of other Americans, while military dictatorships in Europe and Asia simultaneously threatened world peace.

The men and women who came of age during the Great Depression faced unprecedented challenges—foreclosures, bankruptcies, and massive layoffs were part of life. The future grew more dim after war exploded in Asia and Europe during the late 1930s, a conflict that would hit home with the attack on Pearl Harbor when the nation was ill prepared to fight a global conflict. Despite the setbacks, Americans quickly responded to confront the military dictatorships that threatened democracy at home and abroad—it was a war that had to be won. Those who responded to the twin evils of economic depression and global conflict have been appropriately called the “Greatest Generation.” While most of those who experienced that era have passed, George continues to provide insight and inspiration into the time period that defined our nation.

George Perrine, long time resident of Loch Lynn Heights in Garrett County, Maryland, vividly recalls the economic hardships of the 1930s. “My early years were in North Carolina and Kentucky. But when I got old enough, I contracted to work with a farmer in Garrett County, so I left North Carolina.”

George was soon offered another economic opportunity when the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was formed under the Franklin Roosevelt administration. The CCC was a major part of President Roosevelt’s New Deal program intended to develop natural resources on government lands by employing young men who labored for thirty dollars a month. Importantly, twenty-five dollars had to be sent home.

“I worked for the CCC at Gambrill State Park in Frederick County and Benjamin Banneker Park in Washington, DC. One of my jobs at Gambrill was digging holes to set power

poles. Later, I was transferred to Banneker and worked at laying sod and a lifeguard.”

World events soon overtook the CCC program at the end of 1941. Imperial Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor prompted George to enlist in the Army in early 1942. “I thought it was the right thing to do. I figured we were going to go over there and fight, so we might as well go ahead and get it over with.”

George’s youthful enthusiasm followed him to induction at Fort Knox, Kentucky, where a variety of specialty schools had been hastily set up for recruits. The army’s unpreparedness became evident when training started. “We had weapons that were relics from World War I. We just took whatever they had for training purposes. The same was true with vehicles for the armored division. As we got new equipment, it was used. Some of the new equipment was never tested before we took it overseas.”

In September 1941, orders came through for Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where the 2nd Armored Division was being assembled. Upon arrival, George learned that another train load of GI’s had also arrived, but lacked basic training. This was significant because the division was scheduled to embark in about one month. According to George, “We started a very quick course, a cram job of learning how to be soldiers.”

After the short stint in North Carolina, the division was transported to Fort Dix, New Jersey, where equipment was being readied for the impending embarkation. “We covered equipment in Cosmoline. It’s a very sticky substance like axle grease. Once covered, vehicles would operate in damp conditions.”



American troops in North Africa during WWII — George was part of the Anglo-American invasion of French North Africa, code named Operation Torch.

George proudly wears his Army uniform, more than 70 years after his military discharge.

Following departure from the states, George headed to North Africa where he became part of the Anglo-American invasion of French North Africa. Code named Operation Torch, Americans carried out their first military operations against Vichy France, and later German occupied areas at Tunisia. George arrived quietly at Casablanca on December 24, 1942. Several days later, however, German bombers targeted the port docks causing considerable damage.

Assigned to a scout car with Company B, 2nd Armored Division, George confronted the ever changing landscape of war while in North Africa. “We used a Jeep, or anything else with wheels for scout cars—we were very flexible. We had 37mm anti tank guns and 50 caliber machine guns on the armored vehicles. The guns were mounted on metal platforms, so I stood up behind them without protection. And we were always improvising. If one thing didn’t work, we would try another.” The improvisation described by George became a significant advantage in completing missions and an American trademark during the war.

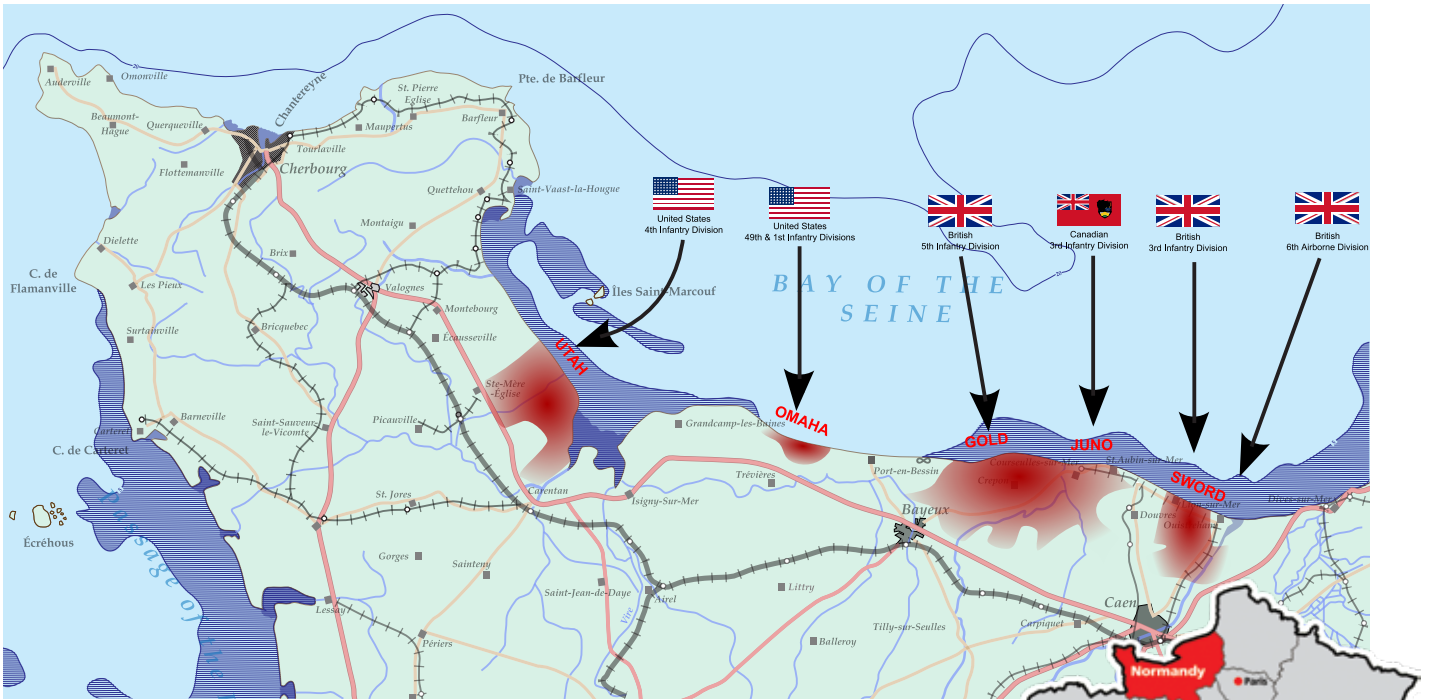
George’s unit moved eastward from Casablanca toward Tunisia where it provided support to the 1st Armored Division that suffered losses against German forces. Once the Germans retreated from North Africa, amphibious training exercises began for the purpose of landing on the island of Sicily. “We spent several months getting ready for the invasion, and I was part of the force that landed in Sicily on July 10, 1943.”

George quickly encountered Italian forces on Sicily. “On July 14th, I was wounded by shrapnel when my armored car was destroyed by fire from an Italian anti-tank gun. I was hit by four pieces of shrapnel. One piece penetrated my left leg and lodged in the calf area. Another piece lodged in my left shoulder and the top of my left thumb was ripped off. The most serious was a large piece that lodged in my chest.”



Convalescence and medical treatment followed at an army facility in Algeria until September 1943, when George returned to the 2nd Armored Division and made the overseas journey to Liverpool, England, where plans were being made for the invasion of German occupied Europe. According to George, England had its advantages, “It was a pleasure to get a roof over our head after living in the field for a year.”

Being an eye witness and participant to the greatest amphibious operation in world history cannot be overstated. Operation Overlord, the code name for the invasion of German occupied Western Europe, saw more than 5,000 vessels cross the stormy waters of the English Channel on June 6, 1944. Aboard the vessels more than 160,000 troops huddled for long hours before embarking to land on the beaches of Normandy. Thousands of additional troops would follow the first wave.



Operation Overlord was the code name for the invasion of German occupied Western Europe, with troops landing on the beaches of Normandy in France, on D-Day (June 6, 1944). George's unit landed on June 7th at Omaha Beach.

Left: George and Mildred Perrine, 1940s.

Below: George and Mildred Perrine, 2015.



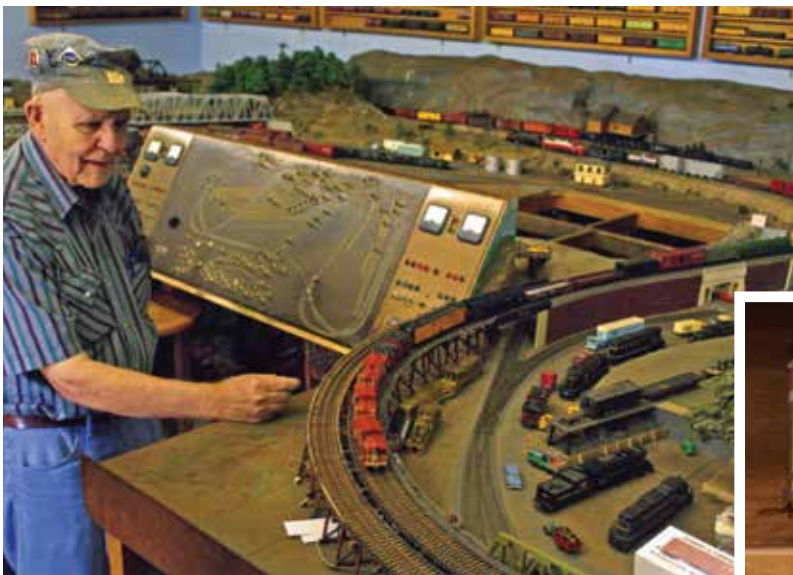
The massive operation continues to inspire memories. "The huge air fleet of American and British planes filled the sky all night on June 5 and all day on June 6. We knew this was not a dry run, but the real thing. We headed out in an LST (Landing Ship Tank) on D-Day +1, June 7, and sailed that evening, taking 18½ hours to cross the channel and anchor off Omaha Beach. There was not much that could be seen from the LST deck because of all the smoke. When we got closer I could see a lot of junk scattered about, equipment, and casualties from the intense fighting. There was still artillery and rifle fire. We got off the beach in an armored car, headed inland a short distance, and found cover in brush where we waited for orders."

As the battle raged, plans changed rapidly. "Sometimes we were assigned an area. At other times the order would be to occupy a specific spot—it could be a road crossing, a house, or river crossing. One time we were ordered to a road and bridge that didn't exist."

Improvisation proved to be helpful. "Sometimes we were told how to get to a location, other times we got there the best way we could find. But we always kept ourselves spread out and mobile."

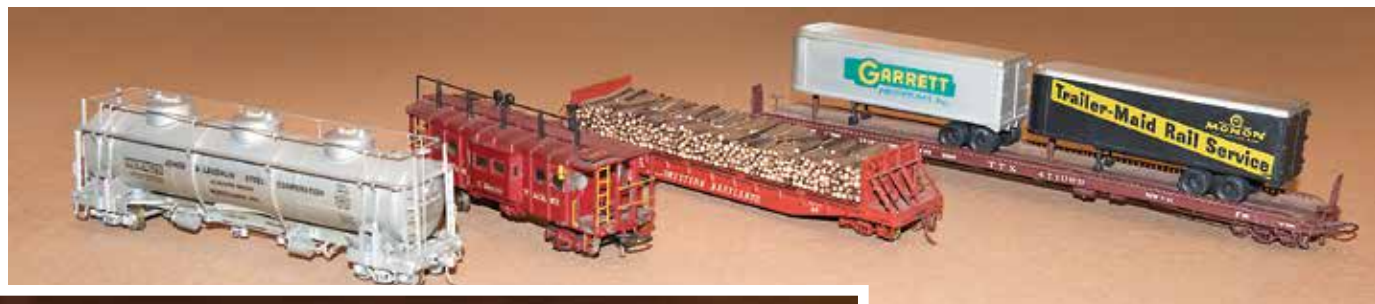
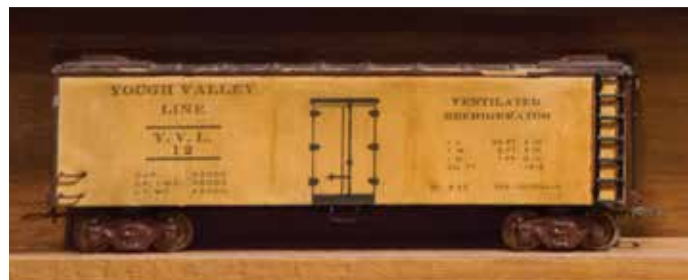
What about sleep? "You went weeks without a good night's sleep. You slept any chance when it was relatively safe. I would crawl under a blanket in the vehicle."

Meals were served when possible. "There would be a plan for serving food, but often it didn't work out."



Left: George enjoying his HO railroad set up in an outbuilding near his home.

Below: George meticulously hand crafted a stock of HO scale cars using Hershey Syrup and Borden Milk cans. These cars and more are on display at the Oakland B&O Museum, Liberty Street, Oakland, MD.



Someone would find an easier way, and that's how it was handled."

George assessed the German Army to be a formidable opponent, but the Waffen SS troops (armed wing of Hitler's Nazi party) were fanatical. "The German soldiers would sometimes surrender, but not the SS."

Operation Cobra, code name for the American offensive to roll up the German Army at Normandy, provided George with unpleasant memories of fighting. "We were ordered down a road, then orders kept changing, so that a large circular area was covered over a period of weeks. It took us 30 days to get back to where we started. In July, there was 14 days of combat with only a two day break, so I came to the conclusion that war can get you hurt!"

Injuries were sustained on October 8, 1944, when the division was breaking through the Siegfried Line. "I was ambushed by a German patrol behind our front line. The

9 mm round went through the calf of my leg. It did not stop me, so I ran like hell and was not hit again." After 4½ months of convalescence and treatment, George returned to the front lines in Belgium.

"I was assigned as gunner on an armored car. While on a screening mission, we were checking out a road block that was too close to the division line. When we realized that it was a manned outpost, the driver whipped the Jeep around, and we got out of there fast. But a bullet from either a rifle or machine gun struck the fore end of my rifle in the gas cylinder area. The force from the bullet turned me over backward. I could move my eyes around and see my feet, and I could see an arm up against the wheel box with a thumb hanging down. In the meantime, I was choking on my own blood."

Upon being carried to the safety of a medic, George learned that he couldn't swallow because his chin was on his chest and he could not turn his head. "I was practically paralyzed and later evacuated to a general hospital in the port of Southampton before transfer to the states."

The serious wounds required multiple surgeries and convalescence at a series of hospitals, including Newton B. Baker in Martinsburg, WV, and Valley Forge General

Hospital in Phoenixville, PA. "After it was decided that no additional surgeries were required, I was discharged from the army, March 18, 1947."

On November 30, 1945, George married Mildred Florence Killius, a Loch Lynn resident who was born in a house just three blocks from where the couple established residence in 1948. The couple successfully raised five children (Richard, Stephen, Paul, John, and Susan) in Loch Lynn and continue to reside there.

With army work behind and family life pending, George made a living by trapping, coal mining, and timbering before accepting the position of clerk at the Mountain Lake Park Post Office. The Post Office proved to be a good fit for the veteran and he was soon promoted to Postmaster, a title held until retirement in 1979.

Retirement meant that George could be active in the local government and civic events. It also provided an opportunity to become more involved with model railroading, a hobby introduced to him by friend, Bernard Gonder.

HO became George's railroad scale of choice, as the miniature world continued to grow in an outbuilding near his home. Hundreds of freight cars, and multiple engines operated on the layout over the years. Not content to simply purchase manufactured equipment, George began to fabricate rolling stock and engines with an uncanny attention to detail. While he acquired the trucks, wheels, and motors, the remainder of the models were meticulously hand crafted using Hershey Syrup and Borden Milk cans, and occasionally brass stock. Some of George's collection of handcrafted scale models have been donated to the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Museum located at the train station in downtown Oakland.

George Perrine's remarkable life experiences only came to light in more recent years. According to family members, it wasn't until about fifteen years ago that he began to openly reflect on military service. One of the more memorable occasions became part of Oliver North's *War Stories*, a popular television series highlighting key military events in American history. George's memories summarized the North African campaign.

George Perrine continues to reminisce on more than nine decades of life experiences at his home in Loch Lynn Heights. A well known and respected member of the Garrett County community, he represents the best of America's Greatest generation.

The author acknowledges an article by Lora Teets.

View some of George Perrine's hand crafted HO scale model train cars at the Oakland B&O Museum, Liberty Street, Oakland, MD. www.oaklandbandmuseum.org



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