

Article by Thad J. Russell

Photos by Ken Mckeown of *Lest We Forget*

As a draftee during World War II, Cipriano Gamez was moving from his job at a steel mill in Gary, Indiana to Illinois where he would be training to become a medic. During training, Cipriano went to see the captain in charge to request a transfer into the infantry, so, if he were to be shot at, he would be able to shoot back. His request was denied, as the captain said that the U.S. Army needed medics. And so, later on during the training, Cipriano told the same story to an officer who happened to be recruiting volunteers for the parachute infantry, and the officer said *Simply sign here, and we will put you in training to become a paratrooper.*

On March 18th, 2008, Cipriano was requested by the veterans' group Lest We Forget to appear during a seminar entitled *D-Day: From Normandy to Paris* to give testimony as to his experiences on D-Day and afterwards. Col. Don Alsbro, the backbone of Lest We Forget and a Vietnam Veteran, had contacted Cipriano and invited him to come. Among the veterans in the group, and the students at Lake Michigan College of Benton Harbor, Michigan, where Lest We Forget instructs military history, Mr. Alsbro is known as *The Colonel*.

My assignment from *The Colonel* was to pick up Cipriano in Highland, Indiana and transport him to and from Benton Harbor for the seminar. Upon arrival, I found Cipriano in uniform and ready to go. Our first rest stop was at the Dunes Tourist Information Center on Interstate 94, where Cipriano was immediately questioned about his experiences by the lady at the desk. After 15 minutes we resumed travel to arrive at Sawyer, Michigan where I promised Cipriano a nice buffet dinner. While there, the waitress noticed that Cipriano was a WWII veteran of the 82nd Airborne Division, which was followed shortly by the arrival of the manager of the restaurant whose son is a medic in the modern day 82nd. These two spoke for about 15 minutes. After I finished my 3rd plate from the buffet (Cipriano was smarter and stopped at 2), I looked at my watch and realized that we needed to rapidly take to the road to meet our time requirement, so I pulled out my credit card to pay, but the manager refused to allow us to pay.

During WWII, Cipriano traveled by ship to England on the *James Parker*, a Liberty Ship that transported the entire 508th PIR. The first night, the soldiers were ordered to maintain *lights out*, but several guys couldn't see to play poker, and MP's came along and broke out all of the light bulbs.

Upon arrival in the lecture room at Lake Michigan College, Cipriano came to know Arden Pridgeon of the 96th Infantry Division in the Pacific during WWII, and Marv Fuller, who served as an electrician on the USS *Saratoga*, one of the flat tops that had been out to sea when Pearl was attacked, as well as an army supply sergeant who was stationed near Frankfurt where the 508th served as the Honor Guard. He then met Dr. James Smithers of Grand Valley State University, the speaker for the evening, who specialized in studying Latino's serving during WWII. Dr. Smithers was very interested in talking to Cipriano about his experiences since he is of Latino heritage.

During WWII, Cipriano was often termed *Mex*, and faced racial discrimination that was a severe and real aspect during that time era. Fortunately, Cipriano was of good temperament and had good friends that helped him out along the way. One of these friends was *Chief*, an Indian who stood 6'5" tall and didn't tolerate injustice from anyone, and had no fear of demanding fair treatment, especially when it came to receiving glasses at a pub one evening.

For the second half of the seminar, Cipriano sat in front of the class as a panel of four veterans who would answer questions about their WWII experiences. After Cipriano was introduced as a *Pathfinder*, a veteran of Lest We Forget, Lt. Cmdr. Bill Dillingham, asked Cipriano the question: *How did you become a pathfinder?* Cipriano, who had sensed the interest of the crowd, answered the question as follows with a touch of humor:

We were in our tent one day. Three of the guys were in town, three were there playing poker, I was reading a book, and Sgt. Stone was recovering from a hangover. Lt. Weaver came into our tent and began talking to us – mostly small talk, and then said to me “Congratulations, you just volunteered to be a pathfinder.”

In responding to the question concerning the duties of a pathfinder, Cipriano explained that there was an 18-man team that jumped as a stick from a C-47 with equipment consisting of a radar unit termed *Eureka*, that mated with another radar unit termed *Rebecca*, installed on a C-47 and a series of yellow holophane lights, operated by a car battery, that served to mark the drop zone. We had to land safely, collect the equipment, find the DZ, and then set up the equipment. The radar unit could guide the C-47 to the DZ, but did not tell the pilot when he was over the DZ, so he had to keep a look out for the holophane lights that were set up in the shape of a *T*. The Germans could not see the lights because the lights had a series of opened flaps that made them visible by air, but not by land. Cipriano was then asked about his drop, and stated that he was misdropped and landed 5 miles from the DZ, on the east side of the Merderet, a bit north and east of Chef du Pont. Since he could not reach the DZ, he banded together with other paratroopers and fought for Chef du Pont and La Fiere, both towns having bridges and causeways that had to be held for the incoming invasion forces.

When asked about one of the most frightening experiences, Cipriano said that he was in a wheat field being sprayed by an MG42, in which he laid perfectly flat on the ground, and counted the time between when the machine gun passed to other directions, and then returned. He said that he precisely trained for this situation, and remembered the training quite well. While the machine gun was firing elsewhere, he crawled forward for some moments, and then laid flat again when the firing returned. Eventually he successfully crossed the field.

The Colonel, who had spoken with Cipriano on the phone, discovered the Cipriano had become acquainted with General James M. Gavin, commander of the 82nd at that time, during three instances. This intrigued *The Colonel*, who asked Cipriano to comment about The General:

Gavin was a soldiers' soldier. When you finished speaking with him, you felt encouraged, and ready to follow him into battle. He was also a general that you could have a cup of coffee with. Some of his nicknames were "Gentleman Jim, Slim Jim, and Jumpin' Jim." The non-verbal statement that the general made was "follow me and I'll take you there." Gavin always thanked the soldiers for their efforts, and was always up front in combat.

In closing, Cipriano stated that when he returned to England after combat, one of the most sobering moments was when he went into the tent and saw all of the empty cots, knowing that these men, his friends, would not return.

Cipriano did not speak of the war after his return until many years later. He resumed his work at the mill for 38 more years before retiring, but now participates with Chapter 30 of *Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge*. He has given his full testimony in a new book by Barry Veder, and regularly attends WWII reenactments in uniform. While at the seminar, Cipriano was invited to attend the WWII reenactment being put on by Lest We Forget this June, which may be seen online at: www.in-am.org/ww2

Those wishing to send cards and letters to Cipriano may do so at the following address:

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