

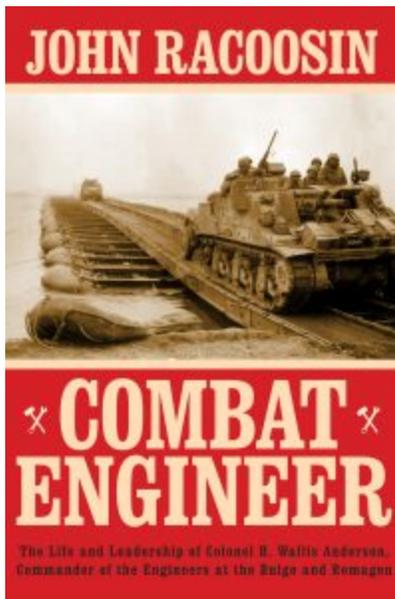
Local Author Combines Family and American History In One Book

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The cover for *Combat Engineer*, a biography about Col. H. Wallis Anderson written by his grandson John Racoosin. (Courtesy of John Racoosin)

WILLIAMSBURG — Col. Harry Wallis Anderson lived quite an eventful life, not that you would have ever heard him say as much.

To give the extremely abridged version, he helped build and maintain the nation's railroads, secured the nation's borders against Pancho Villa, he fought in two world wars, he was awarded for gallantry multiple times and after World War II he helped rebuild the decimated Japanese railroad infrastructure.

When his grandson, local author [John Racoosin](#) decided to write a biography about him, "*Combat Engineer*," there was not a wellspring of family lore to shed light on his grandfather's accomplishments. He knew that he had been an engineer, that he had earned medals for his service and that he had seen action of some sort. Anderson was not the type to sing his own praises.

"The family talk around the kitchen table was that he had done some things," John remembers. "but his generation and

my parents generation down played everything. You just didn't talk about it."

Colonel Anderson and his children would gloss over facts such as being awarded the Silver Star, the nation's third highest medal for valor, on more than one occasion or that he commanded multiple engineer battalions as they fought Nazi troops during the Battle of the Bulge. Racoosin was vaguely aware of some of these accomplishments, but he would come

to find out that he had barely scratched the surface. His grandfather passed away when Racoosin was almost 17-years-old. His perception of Anderson was that he was a distinguished, unassuming gentleman. That was it.

Racoosin was vaguely aware that his grandfather had left some notes about his experiences and that he was mentioned in several postwar history books, but he never quite got around to reading them. After all, he had his own life to live. John joined the navy out of college and traveled the world as a frogman and later as a civil servant before settling in Hampton Roads in the mid-2000s with his wife and children.

It was not until 2015 when John's younger brother invited him on a trip to Normandy, France to tour the World War II battlefield that he was finally able to research his grandfather's experiences on the European Front. In the months before the trip he dug into the history books.

"I thought I should take this opportunity to read about him," he remembers. "He was at Normandy, just not on D-Day. He landed weeks later. But the trip was still the impetus to look into all the books that mentioned him. In that process I realized that there was more to this guy than my family ever talked about."

After the Racoosin brothers toured Normandy they rented a car and using Anderson's personal notes and the books that mentioned him, they retraced their grandfather's path through France, Belgium and into Germany.

"I realized on that 10 day trip that there might be enough here for a book, at least one for the family," he remembered.

When Racoosin returned from France he set out to make a record for his family. As he researched he began to find out that Anderson played pivotal rolls during the Battle of the Bulge and the invasion of Germany as the commander of the 1111th Engineer Combat Group.

"As I got more and more sources I started seeing that there was more to this story beyond just family," he said. "So it was really a gradual thing. From 'I'm just going to read up on this,' to 'This is something my family needs to know,' to 'Wow there is enough here for a book.'"

That became John's mission statement, to meld the story of his grandfather with a history that would capture the interest of the general public. Using both history he was able to glean from family stories and records, along with official military reports, academic articles and history books, Racoosin was able to tell the story of an American who accomplished more in one life time than most people could hope to do with two or three.

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