

## A Visit to War Horse Garage

by Rob Haldeman



(shown left to right, brothers Erick, Nate & Parke Oehme)

I recently had the pleasure of meeting Parke Oehme, pronounced "A-me", and his brothers Erick and Nate who are the guys behind Oehme Bros., War Horse Garage. Their facilities are located in the Lititz area of Pennsylvania and they are in the military equipment business, capable of complete restorations but primarily focused on the mechanical and fabrication portions of the process, keeping some 100+ year old equipment, in tip-top shape. Parke has been dabbling in this type of work for over 20 years but it wasn't till about a year ago that he and his brothers went into it full-time. Their interest in the military goes back to their grandfather, William, who served in the South Pacific during WWII, with the 4<sup>th</sup> Naval Construction Battalion, commonly referred to as the Seabees. Their father Tom, a Vietnam veteran also served in the Seabees with the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Battalions. The brothers regularly attend the WWII Weekend at the Reading Airport, dress as Seabees and are equipped with the same equipment the Seabees would have used, including a Caterpillar bulldozer, grader, International truck,

auxiliary equipment and a full mobile barracks with kitchen. These are all items they have collected over the years.

Their interest and hobby has now turned into a successful and very busy business including a long-term arrangement with the Wheels of Liberation collection, from Adams County, PA. That collection features approximately 80 pieces, including personnel carriers, trucks, artillery and 15-20 tanks. War Horse Garage will be working on many pieces from the collection, keeping them not only looking good but also in good running condition, which is the way the owner wants them.

Parke gave me a tour of their facility, which includes all types of fabrication machinery and a large assortment of military pieces in various stages of refurbishment. Each of the brothers has their own special skills, which helps them keep most of the work in-house. Throughout the pandemic, their progress wasn't hindered too much and they hope to do some of their own foundry work in the near future.

My special interest was with the M18 Tank Destroyer they had onsite for some tune-up work. The M18 is part of the Wheels of Liberation collection and while doing some research on lettering for another project, Parke found our website and contacted me. Since we are located only a few miles away, he didn't feel right not letting me know there was a running M18 just around the corner. I really can't describe the excitement I felt, knowing that I might soon be up close and personal with something I didn't know I would ever see. Many years ago, I had seen a non-working M18, along the "Mile of Tanks" located at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Maryland. As far as I know, the tanks and tank destroyers in that display, have since been removed, along with the many other units on display at the US Army Ordnance Museum also located there.

Parke invited me to visit their facilities and both my older brother and I stopped by. Not only were the three Oehme brothers very welcoming to us but I really felt at home since I could tell they had a passion for what they are doing and for the history behind the machines. I spoke at length with Parke who seemed to know the story of each piece including some odd Canadian-built Staghound they were currently working on. The M18 "Hellcat" itself was special and I had an extended opportunity to photograph the unit. Then it was time for a ride and what a ride it was! The start-up process took about 15 minutes, having to let the unit warm up. I was told that it takes about 3 gallons of gas for every mile traveled. My brother and I climbed into the turret and Parke

nestled into the driver's compartment. The M18 was fast, if not the fastest WWII vehicle, with its Wright 350-400 hp radial engine, capable of powering the unit up to 55 mph. I was told that our ride was only about 25 MPH but it seemed twice as fast with the engine roaring and tracks spraying mud and stones behind us. Parkes's driving skills were top-notch. After about four laps around the perimeter of their buildings, Parke asked, "do you want to drive?" I was a bit hesitant but after some coaxing, I agreed and he talked me through the steering controls, mounted in my new position, the Auxiliary Driver's seat. Two drop-down handles, one on right to turn right and one on left to turn left. Parke kept the unit at a reasonable speed and after we stopped, I could tell he appreciated that fact that I didn't run into anything.

I was also privileged to meet their father Tom as well, when he stopped off briefly and welcomed us. I was very impressed by the family's easy-going nature and entrepreneurship shown over years in their numerous business ventures. Their grandfather William, started the Oehme Bakery in Lititz, with his brother and Tom later went into the trucking and truck leasing business under the name Oehme Carrier Corp. Each of the boys had worked not only in the trucking business but also in the bakery.

We left after about 3 hours and I can't thank them enough for their hospitality. I'm looking for big things to come out of the War Horse Garage and I expect they will only get busier as their name and work becomes more widely known. I wish them much success and hope to get back to visit them again soon. My TD interests were further aroused when they mentioned they own an M20 Armored Car and hope to have an M10 Tank Destroyer coming into the shop this summer. I can't imagine a much more exciting day.

