

Donald E. Camp met his wife Marie-Jo when he was a GI at the American base in Chambley. He has since become a renowned photographer and teacher. At 84, he lives in Philadelphia with his fiancée from 1967, whom he met in Jonville-en-Woëvre, in the Meuse plain.

The former GI who became a committed photo artist



Don E-Camp et son épouse Marie-Jo Camp, Meusienne de Jonville-en-Woëvre. Photo DR

Donald and Marie-Jo were 26 years old in January 1967. Almost kids. He is black as ebony and reconditions parachutes at the American air base at Chambley (54). Marie-Jo is a young Meusienne from Jonville-en-Woëvre, the older sister of Jean-Louis Dumont who became mayor of Verdun and was a socialist deputy

for thirty years. What did it take for these two to meet and still be together at 84? What coincidence pushed them towards each other?

“We saw each other on Saint-Etienne, December 26, the patronal festival in Jonville-en-Woëvre. Don rented a house in the village with other GI'S from the Chambley base. I worked as a childcare assistant in Darney, in the Vosges, and I came home for the occasion...,” confides Marie-Jo. When asked if the meeting was love at first sight, she questions her husband who is driving next to her on a road in Philadelphia: “Don! The journalist asks if it was a “love at first sight” for you and me? » We hear Don E-Camp laugh and respond: “In any case, everyone was dancing except us, we talked a lot, a lot!” » And the complicit dialogue never stopped. Even the departure of the Americans, kicked out of France by General de Gaulle, will not separate Donald-E Camp and Marie-Jo. Better yet, in January 1967, in the middle of the NATO retreat in France, the two lovers got married in Colmar. By dint of packing parachutes, Don packs up, not without taking Marie-Jo with him: “My mother didn't appreciate such a quick departure...,” confides with mischief the one who now speaks French with a delicious American accent.

From Chambley to Philadelphia

The story of this couple is also that of young people who will grow up together in the racist America of the sixties. Donald, who started photography when he was in France, deepened his passion in Vietnam. Not on the front line, but in front line management, where he met Philip Jones-Griffiths, a promising young shoot that Magnum sent to cover the war. Jones-Griffiths, whose shocking photos are very well known, takes Donald under his wing: “He invited me to join him in Saigon. For two days, we took photos, he gave me the virus that will never leave me, to the point that we stayed in contact.” Jones-Griffiths encourages Donald-E Camp to

push the doors of the written press. What the GI, converted into photo-re- carry, go “And then I went back to school with a scholarship to university at 42. “That’s where I started a more personal search.”

Political portraits

Donald-E Camp graduated from Fine Arts and became one of the most brilliant and recognized photo teachers in the northeastern United States: “I also worked a lot in the lab. At the same time, newspapers of racist opinions often mentioned the call for the extinction of the black race, a race of slaves, not of citizens. I started taking portraits of black subjects often at very close range,” explains Don E-Camp. As if in a symbolic reaction to the feeling of erasure of the black American people, the photographer developed his own technique based on the use of casein and rare pigments: “I wanted no one, for a hundred years, to erase these faces. The pigments I use come from the south of France, the same as in Lascaux. The exhibitions keep coming. Notoriety was not long in coming, and while Marie-Jo was still a childcare worker, Donald began to make a living from his courses and his work as a photographer and he became a laureate of the prestigious John-Simon-Guggenheim foundation. However, so far from France, Don-E Camp has retained a form of nostalgia for his years in Lorraine: “I like the calm, the serenity of the Meuse, there is something that does not exist with us. And then in France, I feel like a complete person. In the United States, at home, I will always be black. And then something else too: having a family in France is very important to me...,” explains Donald. With his wife Marie-Jo, they plan to return to the Meuse in 2025: “We are not young anymore! » The perfect opportunity to set up an exhibition in Verdun? ● **Pascal Salciarini**

