

Hartje Paper: The Personal History of Sgt. Robert E. Wilson: Narrative of a WWII Infantryman

Bradley S. Wilson

Caught off guard in his foxhole, staring down the barrel of a deadly German submachine gun, Sgt. Robert E. Wilson must choose either being killed or becoming a prisoner of war. "It was an easy choice... I became a prisoner of war," said Wilson.¹ The 87 year old retired Army infantryman swirls the ice in his drink and stares off into the distance as he remembers the past.

Only three years before becoming a POW Wilson had been in high school. He had envisioned his senior year being spent in the high school halls; instead he spent it on the frontlines of Europe during World War II. "I was a soldier at 18, saw my first combat at 19, and became a POW at 20" said the retired soldier.² Wilson was drafted into the Army in July of 1943, a time when the tide of the war was turning back against the Allied Forces. Instead of training for the usual 21 weeks in basic training, he only trained for 17 weeks before he was thrust into battle.

Wilson landed at Anzio Beach, in Southern Italy, in early 1944. "February 24, 1944— it was my birthday, I was 19 and it was my first time in combat," comments Wilson.³ He was sure that they were all going to be killed on that first day, with bullets raining down from the mountains and artillery shells exploding yards away. One of the giant artillery pieces that the Germans unleashed was nicknamed the "Anzio Express," which could shoot a projectile as large as a 500 pound bomb. "I can still hear that shell coming, even though it has been over 50 years ago" remembers Wilson.⁴

During his experience as the first scout, he was the first U.S. soldier to enter a town in southern France and see the people rejoice at the Americans' arrival. The town had been occupied by Germans for years. It appeared to be abandoned upon first inspection. He described an old man coming out of his house and into the deserted street. When he saw Wilson, he asked him if he was American. "I

kiss first American I see," said the old man in broken English.⁵ He threw his arms around Wilson and kissed him on both cheeks, weeping like a baby. He will never forget the touching reaction of the liberated people. "I was a little embarrassed to have been kissed by that old man," states Wilson, "but also proud to have been the first American soldier these people had seen."⁶

The most difficult memory to deal with is the day his sergeant was killed. After receiving his third Purple Heart the sergeant had returned once again to action. While delivering rations between foxholes, the sergeant was killed by a direct hit from an artillery shell. Nothing was ever found of him. "This was a loss that even today brings tears to my eyes," said Wilson, "they never even found his dog tags or his shoes, there was literally nothing left."⁷

When he later found himself staring down the barrel of that German machine gun, Wilson felt lucky to survive even as a prisoner. "He could have cut me in half," remembers Wilson, "but he held his fire."⁸ The first POW camp was used to separate the Americans from the other nationalities. Wilson's final destination of the war was the Mooseberg Camp, near Munich. Wilson was forced to do hard labor and he constantly struggled to get food and to avoid the bombs of Allied air strikes. Working on the railroad tracks in Munich was dangerous because of constant bombing by the Americans during the day and the British during the night. The prisoners had to manually pump air into the German air raid shelters deep beneath Munich.

One day while working on the railroad tracks in Munich, Wilson saw prisoners with the Star of David on their thinly striped uniforms. They were in very poor health and the Americans tried to share bread with them. The German guards refused, saying that they were political prisoners. Wilson later learned that the Dachau concentration camp was near them, outside Munich. "All those men

were probably on their way to the gas chamber," said Wilson.⁹

By April 1945 the German guards had become friendly because they knew the war was winding down. They stopped making the prisoners work, placed them in a bomb shelter, and said they would supply them with rifles if the dreaded German S.S. Troops came to kill the Americans. On April 30, 1945 a vehicle approached and it was a jeep with a lone American driver. The Americans, laughing and crying, poured out of the bomb shelter that had been their most recent quarters. Wilson said this was the happiest day of his life. He had been a POW for seven months and 18 days.

When Wilson reflects upon his war experience he feels blessed to have survived but bewildered by the fact that he got to come home. "I often wonder how anyone who served in the Infantry could have lived to talk about it," said Wilson reflectively, "it must be plain good luck."¹⁰ When he sleeps he still dreams of the war. "It's like another life," said Wilson. "It's like watching a movie you've seen many times before."¹¹

Bibliography

Wilson, Robert E. "My World War II Journal: A Diary of an Infantryman." *Pickaway Quarterly* (Spring 1996): 4-10.

Wilson, Robert E. "My World War II Journal: A Diary of an Infantryman." *Pickaway Quarterly* (Summer 1996): 4-8.

Wilson, Robert E. "Oral interviews with Sgt. Robert E. Wilson." Interviews by Bradley S. Wilson, Circleville, OH, 1995-2012.

Endnotes

¹ Robert E. Wilson, "My World War II Journal: A Diary of an Infantryman," *Pickaway Quarterly* (Spring 1996): 10.

² Robert E. Wilson, Interview by Bradley S. Wilson, Circleville, OH. 3/18/2011

³ Wilson, "My World War II Journal," 4.

⁴ Wilson, Interview, 3/18/2011

⁵ Wilson, Interview. 3/18/2011

⁶ Wilson, "My World War II Journal," 7.

⁷ Wilson, "My World War II Journal," 6.

⁸ Wilson, Interview. 3/18/2011

⁹ Robert E. Wilson, "My World War II Journal: A Diary of an Infantryman," *Pickaway Quarterly* (Summer 1996): 6.

¹⁰ Wilson, "My World War II Journal," (Summer 1996) 5.

¹¹ Wilson, Interview. 3/18/2011.