

Reverend Doctor Robert Wildman

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My name is Lorraine Lightcap and I am a volunteer at Midway Village & Museum Center research library. In addition to the many transcriptions of tapes of World War II Veterans' interviewed that were done in cooperation with the State of Illinois, we thought it would be interesting to interview a few other men and women. Today is December 30, 2001. The interview was held in my home.

LORRAINE: Bob, to begin I would like you to tell us a bit about your background, date of birth, place of birth, parents' names and names of any brothers and sisters.

REV. WILDMAN: I was born in Traverse City, Michigan, on April 20, 1924. My parents were Elizabeth Shank Wildman and Frank Wildman. I had two brothers, Richard and John.

LORRAINE: Would you also tell us something about growing up in Traverse City plus your schooling through high school?

REV. WILDMAN: I loved Traverse City and still do. I spent all of my life there until I left for the army. I had a good time growing up, attending school and enjoying visits with my grandmother in a nearby small town of Empire, Michigan. My grandfather, who died a year before I was born, was a doctor in Empire who made house calls with his horse and buggy. One summer, while visiting my grandmother, I picked cherries to earn money to buy a new bicycle for \$25. I worked twelve hours a day and could earn .75 a day. At the end of the summer I still did not have enough for a bike. I enjoyed school, had a great time in high school and graduated in 1942.

LORRAINE: Tell us about your decision to enter military service. Were you drafted or did you enlist? What influenced this decision?

REV. WILDMAN: After graduating from high school, I entered Hope College in Holland, Michigan, with the intention of preparing for the ministry. As a pre-ministerial student, I was enti-

pled to a deferment from the draft. However after a few months I decided I wanted to enter the service and so I informed my draft board. My volunteering to enlist letter crossed in the mail with their draft notice, so I was drafted. Actually I was struggling with whether I should be in college while my country was at war.

LORRAINE: Tell us about your experience when you first entered military service and place of entry and training camps you attended.

REV. WILDMAN: I was inducted at Kalamazoo, Michigan, in April of 1943. From there I was sent to Fort Custer in Michigan and from there was sent to Camp Polk, Louisiana, for basic training. At Camp Polk I was assigned to the 536th Armored Infantry Battalion. Later we were redesignated the 536th Amphibian Infantry Battalion. Fort Ord, California, was to be the site of our amphibian training. At Camp Custer the army decided that my military occupational specialty would be that of a chaplain's assistant. However, the army sent me to an outfit that had no chaplain and had no plans to get one! While at Camp Polk I was sent to the armored school at Fort Knox, Kentucky, for clerical training. Upon my return I became a company clerk and handled all the records for about two hundred men. Eventually I became Personnel Sergeant Major and was responsible for records of the entire battalion. From Fort Ord we were sent to Fort Lawton, Washington. From there we went to the Hawaiian Islands. In June of 1944 we arrived on the island of Oahu. In October we left Oahu for Leyte in the Philippine Islands (via Eniwetok and Ulithi). We arrived in December of 1944 and took part in the Battle of Leyte. In May of 1945 we left the Philippines to take part in the Battle of Okinawa.

LORRAINE: Tell of some of your experiences while in the Philippines.

REV. WILDMAN: I remember the night that I landed on Leyte. We were marching down the beach and finally were told that we would be sleeping on the beach that night. I stretched out

in my sleeping bag and soon was dreaming of water. I woke up to find that the tide was coming in and I was drenched. It was a very wet welcome. The next day I witnessed a Japanese Kamikaze pilot dive into and sink what I presumed was one of our ships in the Leyte Gulf. The 536th was an amphibian tractor battalion, which was like a sea going tank, except the top was open so that we could take troops and supplies from ship to shore, and inland if necessary. They served well during World War II and today there is a monument to the 536th in the Armored Park at Fort Knox, Kentucky. I don't know if amphibian boats are used now.

LORRAINE: How did you get to the South Pacific and how did you return home?

REV. WILDMAN: Both times by naval ships.

LORRAINE: How did your parents feel about your being in the Armed Services?

REV. WILDMAN: I believe my parents were very proud that I was able to serve my country but am sure they worried about my safety. My father had been a World War I veteran and had treasured that experience for the rest of his life.

LORRAINE: Was it hard to adjust to military life?

REV. WILDMAN: No. I learned that I could live under many different types of circumstances. When we first arrived at Fort Knox there was no electricity, central heat and not many "good" meals. I was rather amused, one time, when we were finally served steak dinner that some men complained there was no catsup and another time when we were given ice cream and the complaint was there was no chocolate.

LORRAINE: Tell us about the friends you made or any other experiences.

REV. WILDMAN: I made many friends from different areas of the country. Many of the men were from the south and I got an introduction to southern culture and thinking. Many of them were still fighting the Civil War. When I returned home my mother was sure that I had

picked up a southern accent. If I did, I soon lost it. As to experiences, because we did not have a chaplain, a few of us organized occasional religion services for the battalion that never had a chaplain. I also remember, while on Okinawa, that one night I was sleeping in the sheltered doorway of a tomb built into a hillside. As I slept I dreamed of popcorn popping. I awoke and discovered a Japanese pilot had dropped a bomb when he discovered lights. It seemed some men had been playing cards and needed light. This was forbidden but they had ignored the blackout orders that night and the pilot discovered this.

LORRAINE: Do you keep in touch when possible with any of the men in your group and do you attend reunions?

REV. WILDMAN: The major way in which I have kept in touch is through a newsletter that is sent to all members of the 536th about twice a year. I have attended two reunions. They are usually held in Oklahoma City or the south. In addition there is one friend that I have been corresponding with for a number of years. One of my special friends became a Christian clown and enjoyed visiting nursing and retirement homes.

LORRAINE: Where were you on December 7th when the Japanese bombed Pearl?

REV. WILDMAN: I was attending a concert at my high school.

LORRAINE: What about VE Day and VJ Day when the atomic bomb was dropped? How did you feel about this?

REV. WILDMAN: I was on the island of Okinawa when the A-bomb was dropped. After more than fifty-five years it is difficult to reconstruct feelings. I do know there was joy and relief that the war was ending even though rumor had it that we would be a part of the occupation forces in Japan. This later changed and —we were sent back to the States.

LORRAINE: Did you think the United States was capable of fighting wars in Europe and the South Pacific:

REV. WILDMAN: Don't think I thought much about that but I didn't doubt that we would win. I was confident of my country's abilities.

LORRAINE: Were you aware of Hitler's actions in Europe?

REV. WILDMAN: Actually there wasn't much media attention at first as the United States was trying to avoid being involved in that conflict. As the conflict grew, the news became more plentiful. Actually I was still in the United States and news came from radio, newsreels at theaters, and the newspapers. By the time I entered college I was very aware I could be drafted.

LORRAINE: What did you do if you had free time or passes?

REV. WILDMAN: I mostly explored places like Shreveport and DeRidder, Louisiana; Louisville, Kentucky, Carmel, California, Seattle, Washington, Honolulu, Hawaii and the Island of Oahu as well as Leyte, Okinawa plus other places in the Pacific. We really didn't have much free time in Leyte or Okinawa. When in Louisville, I discovered hamburgers!

LORRAINE: Do you remember anything special about Christmas or Thanksgiving?

REV. WILDMAN: I remember special meals prepaid by the company cooks. I also remember spending Easter Sunday loading ammunition onto the light cruiser Birmingham as our outfit prepared to take part in the Battle of Okinawa. Incidentally that Easter Sunday was also "April Fools' Day."

LORRAINE: Were you able to write often to you family? Did you receive letters and packages from them?

REV. WILDMAN: Yes, I tried to write whenever possible and I looked forward to mail from home. Mail call was one of the highlights of army life overseas, whether it was a letter, a package, or any kind of printed material that would remind a person of home.

LORRAINE: Do you have any other thoughts

or memories of those years in service?

REV. WILDMAN: My thoughts of army life as I experienced it were good thoughts. I felt that I could have made a career of the army if it hadn't been for my sense of call to the Christian ministry. My memories are many, both good and bad.

LORRAINE: When and where were you discharged?

REV. WILDMAN: I was discharged at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, January 27, 1946, having served over two years and nine months. When I was discharged I was asked to stay in the Army Reserves. I declined, as I wanted to get back to Michigan again and enter college to prepare for the ministry. I had had this sense of call when I entered the service and even thought I tried to talk myself out of the ministry, I couldn't. As someone said, "God had His hand on my shoulder and wouldn't let go."

LORRAINE: Where did you resume your college education?

REV. WILDMAN: I entered Hope College in Holland, Michigan, to complete four years of college and then I entered Western Theological Seminary in Holland for three year of preparatory studies for the ministry. Years later I continued my theological education by taking a Doctor of Ministry Degree from the Louisville Presbyterian Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. While at Hope College I met my future wife, Lois, and we were married upon graduation from college on June 29, 1948.

LORRAINE: What churches did you serve after graduation?

REV. WILDMAN: My first church was the Reformed Church in Hopkins, Michigan. From there I moved to Bethel Reformed Church in Harvey, Illinois. Next came Calvary Reformed Church of Southgate, Michigan. Finally I came to Illinois to the Hope Reformed Church on Spring Creek Road in Rockford. I served there twelve years and retired in 1989. Since then I have conducted services in churches of many

Denominations in and around Rockford. After I retired I became active in the Alpine Kiwanis Club of Rockford and also in Kiwanis International. For six and one-half years I headed the Kiwanis International's First World Service Project. This project was designed to work with UNICEF in ridding the world of the leading cause of preventable mental retardation plus a host of other physical problems. In 1994 I was able to go to Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries in the world, to look at this problem. There I saw for myself how a little bit of iodine in salt can make an unbelievable difference in the lives of people. Today this project can deliver ninety-one million children from mental retardation and the number is growing. Kiwanis International is involved in this outreach. There is still a ways to go, before the job is complete, as there are still millions to be helped. This too is a ministry.

LORRAINE: Many people from area churches have been challenged by Bob's preaching and his Bible classes. Both he and his wife, Lois, a former teacher, are active at Midway Village & Museum Center plus having time to enjoy their children and grandchildren. A book on the history of the 536th Amphibian Tractor Battalion has been written and I am including some interesting stories written by its author Caldwell Smith that Reverend Wildman does not recall.

Comments by Lorraine Lightcap

A book on the history of the 536th Amphibian Tractor Battalion was written by a member, Caldwell Smith. Some of the stories he tells, Reverend Wildman does not recall. Smith tells of

the train ride to the West Coast that was so crowded with soldiers that meals were brought to them. This train ride from Camp Polk via Houston, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and then on to California took ninety-nine hours.

At times while at Leyte and Okinawa, Smith said they ate in the rain as there was considerable rainfall in that area.

It was at Fort Ord that the battalion first learned they would be trained as an Amphibian Tractor Battalion. It was there they began training to land troops and supplies on beaches. Reverend Wildman had some training for this.

Smith, in his history of this group, mentioned during the two thousand-mile trip from Hawaii to Leyte, fresh water was rationed and salt water showers were not very pleasant. He also wrote that seven hundred ships converged at Leyte along with Admiral Halsey's 3rd Fleet. This included battleships, cruisers, ships, carriers, escort carriers, destroyers, transports, cargo ships, plus LPs, LCDs, PT boats plus the 536th "A" battalion. Smith also stated this battalion traveled 5,404 miles from Hawaii, around Leyte, Okinawa and back to the States.

Smith wrote many stories of soldiers adjusting to military life; what they did to relieve the tension (sometimes boredom) of life in Leyte, Okinawa. Winthrop Rockefeller was part of the Battalion but Rev. Wildman never met him.

Fortunately, Rev. Wildman did not succumb to any tropical diseases—nor can he recall hearing the voice of Tokyo Rose.