

Elmer L. Wilt

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Elmer L. Wilt:

This is February 18, 1994. My name is Charles Nelson. I am a volunteer with the Midway Village & Museum Center in Rockford, Illinois, which is cooperating with the statewide effort to collect oral histories from Illinois citizens that participated in the momentous events surrounding World War II. We are in the office of Midway Village & Museum Center interviewing Mr. Elmer L. Wilt: at 310 North Cherry, P. O. Box 273, Cherry Valley, Illinois. Mr. Wilt was born October 5, 1924. Mr. Wilt served in the branch of the United States Armed Forces during World War II. We are interviewing him about his experiences in that war.

NELSON: Wilt, would you please start by introducing yourself. Please give us your full name, the place and date of birth?

WILT: Well, my name is Elmer L. Wilt. I was born in Atwood City, Missouri, October 5, 1924.

NELSON: We would also like to have the names of each of your parents.

WILT: My dad's name was Charles Elmer Wilt and my mother's name was Flora Green Wilt.

NELSON: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

WILT: I have two brothers, younger.

NELSON: Are there any details about your parents or your family that you would like to give?

Wilt: My great grandfather died of small pox in a Civil War prison camp in Johnsonville, Virginia. My grand dad—never did see him—he died—he was born at ___?__ ser-

vice and he died before my granddad came home. That was before he could get out—and before my granddad.

NELSON: What was life like before the war, specifically during 1941?

WILT: I was in high school. Then and you don't care a whole lot about things but I know my friend and I had considered—we wanted to get involved. We had considered either joining the British-American Ambulance Corps in China. You only had to be 16, which is a good thing it didn't happen because we would have been Japanese prisoners very young. The other thing we considered was going to Canada to the RAF. At that time you still had to have two years of college to get in the Air Force. But anyway, by the time I got out of high school we were involved. We graduated in June of '42 and we were already involved then so going to Canada to enlist was out of the question.

NELSON: What thoughts did you have about the war before United States became directly involved in the conflict?

WILT: Well, I was positive we were going to be involved, I guess and beyond that with the gas rationing and all that, it did curtail my activities. We were living out in a suburban area and there was no transportation and I had to have my own car to go to high school in Rockford. There was no bus service.

NELSON: How did you hear of the December 7th, 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese? If so where were you and what were you doing at the time? What was your reaction or response to this those around you?

WILT: I was at home and I was kind of shocked. My parents were really concerned because I was a little over 17. They knew that we were going to be going because it was going to be not over in a short time. That night we met down at the Cozy Inn. All the guys and girls that used to ride to school with me sat around talking. We were mostly just looking at one another wondering what the next year was going to bring and who wouldn't come home from the war because we all knew that we were going to be involved in the war in some way or another.

NELSON: Had you formed any prior opinions of developed any feelings about what was taking place in Europe or Asia?

WILT: Being idealistic as high student you know, we knew it was wrong and I guess we all felt sure that war was going to happen and it should have happened before that.

NELSON: Do you recall reading newspaper accounts of German aggression in Europe?

WILT: Yes.

NELSON: Did you have any knowledge of Hitler's speeches, ideas or actions?

WILT: No.

NELSON: What events led to your entry into military service? Were you drafted or did you volunteer?

Wilt: I enlisted because I wanted to be in the Air Force.

NELSON: Was your response in entering military service influenced by family and friends attitudes towards the war, respect for national security; or other consideration?

WILT: No, strictly on my own.

NELSON: This next one is on basic training. When and where were you inducted?

WILT: I enlisted at Camp Grant and then I reported—I was sworn in out there then put in standby reserves for almost two months before I was called to active duty. Then I went to downtown Chicago and five hundred of us got on a train for Sheppard Field, Texas. Feeling kind of lost, alone—eighteen years old, among five hundred guys. I didn't know a soul. I wished I were home at that time.

NELSON: What happened after you were inducted?

WILT: We went thru basic training down there in the panhandle in February, ate a lot of dust, march until we got blisters on and learned how to use a gun.

NELSON: What did you think of the training?

Wilt: It was very thorough for the time frame we had and for what they were trying to do for the massive amount of people they were putting in the air

NELSON: Did anything special happen there?

WILT: In Texas?

NELSON: Yes.

WILT: No, not that I can think of. I know we were—the barracks were so crowded, we had one hundred twenty guys living in barracks basically designed for sixty-five.

NELSON: Tell us about any other training camps you attended.

WILT: When we were ready to ship out we lived in a hangar. We had fifteen hundred guys under one roof waiting for shipping orders. That's how busy the base was. I went through a lot of training bases in the States there, college training, and preflight training in Santa Anna. I jumped in all over the country.

NELSON: Did you have any leaves or passes?

WILT: I had one leave before I went over seas. I had a sick leave when I was in advanced flight training I come down with virus pneumonia. It was just a month before graduation. I got back to class to go to night school so I went down and talked to my captain and he said my grades were high enough and I told him why don't I have a sick leave instead and go home. He said it sounded like a good idea so I bought a round trip ticket for \$21 from Texas and come home for a week.

NELSON: What was your military rank?

WILT: Eighth Air Force, First Bomber Group, 612th Squadron.

NELSON: What were your assigned duties?

WILT: I was a copilot on a B17.

NELSON: If there were any transfers to other units please give the details— There probably wasn't . . .

WILT: No. No.

NELSON: Where did you go after completing basic training?

WILT: Well, we went to Las Vegas to— I learned to fly B17s. Then we went to a base training center in Tennessee to get a full

crew together. But we didn't know each other. Each one to work as a unit and then they shipped us overseas via New Foundland and Ireland. I mean Iceland and then to England. Finally we got to our base there about seven miles north of London.

NELSON: What were you assigned to do after arriving?

WILT: Our first week was kind of indoctrination. We checked out a plane and flew around the area and then met our commanding officer, the squadron commanding officer and the flight personnel that we would be involved with.

NELSON: What did you think of the nation's war effort up to this point?

Wilt: It was very much involved I worked as a heat treat apprentice that first summer out of school and I was really doing so much at Woodward Governor. We had clout because Woodward Governor had a lot of clout. They wanted something, they got it.

NELSON: If you did not immediately enter the combat zone, where did you go before entering combat?

WILT: When I went to finish my training and was shipped to England after we had a week in a base there we did go into combat and start flying missions.

NELSON: Tell us about your experience of entering your first combat zone.

WILT: My first one? At that time they would train copilots A green copilot went up with an old experienced crew The experienced copilot was a sportsman He had to go up with eight guys who didn't know what they were doing, on their first mission and scared witless On our first mission we got

hit just at bombs away over Cologne and we lost both one and two. We had a devil of a time getting back to our base. I was a fatalist because at that time the Eighth Air Force was losing more people than anybody else was, you know. All of us expected not to come home. I just put that in my mind and didn't worry about it. Then after that the crew looked at me as a good luck piece because usually you only had one bad mission and I had mine.

NELSON: How many missions did you fly?

WILT: Actually thirty we got credit for. We went out almost thirty-five times but if you didn't drop a bomb on target, it didn't count.

NELSON: How did your mental attitude change as combat continued?

WILT: Well, when we first started flying combat, like I said, we really didn't expect to make it through because the losses were quite heavy. So we were rather nonchalant about when the flack started coming in the area, waiting 'til it got close to us before we put our flack suits on. Well, I'll never forget the day we were getting like twenty-five missions and we thought we were going to make it. The war was winding down. There was one burst of flack about three miles ahead and Steve and I bumped heads trying to grab that flack helmet. We thought we was going to make it so we weren't going to take any chances, you know. The whole crew became that way. Before that, you know, put the flack suit on when we got in close to the area. No, boy, we put the flack suits on the moment we took off. They thought we were gonna home.

NELSON: What did you think of the war so far?

WILT: Something we probably should have been involved in earlier although we weren't ready for it. Might have saved a lot of innocent peoples' lives and a lot of damage to England, France and Germany and the low land countries, Russia but we weren't prepared any sooner and it took something like that to shock the nation into a massive effort.

NELSON: Did you write many letters home?

WILT: Yes I did. I wrote probably once a week or so.

NELSON: Did you receive many letters or packages and if so, how often? What types of things did you like to get in packets?

WILT: I never received much. I could get most of whatever I needed. I was a young guy with—when I went out, I would go out looking for girls or have a few drinks with the guys. Drink for today or we'll all be dead or something like that. That was our attitude. The only thing I couldn't get was film. I liked to take pictures and I couldn't get the film for that purpose. ___?___ sent me cigarettes once in while if they could get them. The Post Mistress in Cherry Valley, Mrs. Hyland, she'd get the names and addresses of all the boys in the service in Cherry Valley. She sent them all cookies at least once a year or more so she must have been baking all the time. (Laughter).

NELSON: Did most the other men write and receive letters?

WILT: Yes, We were in a small—just a pilot, copilot and navigator shared a cabin room at least by ourselves over there. Steve was married and Bob was engaged and I had met a lot of girlfriends in the States at different bases so I wrote to all of them be-

cause I didn't know where I was going to be after the war. I wrote a lot of short letters and I received quite a few letters and I received quite a few letters. For the guy who was married why you could tell what his wife was doing by his face when he was reading the mail.

NELSON: Did you forge close bonds of friendship with many or some of your combat companions?

WILT: Some. Steve, the first pilot and I are going to a reunion in England this summer. We get together once in awhile. Last year we had a reunion in Norfolk He came out and picked me up and we flew into Chicago down to Northbrook.

NELSON: That's good. Have you remained in contact with any of your World War II companions?

WILT: Yes.

NELSON: Besides your pilot.

WILT: Oh, yes, the engineer and both turret gunners. I talked to them. We have another reunion in Omaha this summer and we expect to see a number of them. The first pilot worked for United Airlines and he got all around the country free He has kept in contact with every member of the crew but the tail gunner. He had never been able to get ahold of him.

NELSON: What was the highlight occurrence of your combat experience?

WILT: (Long pause). I remember one day we had—we got bombed through by our own squadron and looking up to see those bombs coming down. They missed me, I guess. (Laughter). It did hit one plane though—knocked the engine off.

NELSON: Tell us what you and the other men did to celebrate America's traditional family holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas

WILT: You mean in the service?

NELSON: Yes, in the service.

WILT: Christmas of '44 I was in Section K getting a new plane, going overseas. Steven's wife was there and we weren't that well acquainted yet so I had known some friends in town because I had been there before. And there was another pilot I had been trained with so he and I ran around together. It was really laid back. We were kind of apprehensive. We were separated—Joe and I were from these in friends in town. We didn't know what was going to happen and we were going into the unknown—into combat. It was kind of a melancholy time. The USO, some of the colleges had parties and dances for us but—it was kind of hard to unwind and loosen up We were all tense

NELSON: When and how did you return to the United States after the end of the war.

WILT: Just like we went over. We flew back.

NELSON: What happened when you arrived in the United States?

WILT: Well, we got into—let's see, Boston. We flew into there, turned the plane over and spent a night at Miles Standish Army Base. We got on a train and came back home for thirty day leave. I was the only guy home.

NELSON: Please tell us about your military rank and your decorations especially your campaign decorations.

WILT: I became a 1st Lieutenant while I was overseas. I had the Air Medal with six oak leaf clusters. That's all with my active duty.

NELSON: How many campaigns were you in?

WILT: Just thirty missions. That was—we were on our way to China. Our Commanding Officer was just made full Colonel. He was taking the whole group to China. We got our leave and we were regrouping in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. We knew something was up because the base kept getting more and more people returning from England. We couldn't find out anything going on. One day we were standing in line to go to a movie, eleven o'clock in the morning this major, who was in our barracks—I didn't know who he was before that time and he came over the speaker, "They dropped the bomb, you know". I can remember we went and got a beer. We were sitting on the running board of a car and looked at each other and we knew the war was over. Who knew what was going to happen after that but we sat there for about 15 minutes, nobody said a word

NELSON: How did you get along with the men with whom you had the greatest contact?

WILT: We got along great.

NELSON: Were there things you would do differently if you could do them once again?

WILT: Probably stay in the service

NELSON: What was the most difficult thing you had to do during your period of military service?

WILT: I don't know When you are 18 you're pretty pliable. I don't know if there is any one thing more than another challenging. I wanted those wings and that commission so I eat whatever they told me to eat, you know We were all in the same outfit there

NELSON: Is there anyone thing that stands out as your most successful achievement in the military service. Probably your wings

WILT: That was my—I figured I had two things that mean, or three things—my wings, my wife and my kid. That was my big achievement, you know. There is one other thing. When it was my turn to take a green crew out to war, I hoped my crew wasn't as screwed up as they were because we didn't think we could go the whole dog-goned eight hours in the air. They were bugging the heck out of me. Well, then what was unique—it didn't happen to me but on their 7th mission they got shot down. Five of them were injured No They didn't get shot down, they got shot up. They landed behind the lines in Germany. Put the boys in the hospital and they were captured. Three days later they escaped and their story is rather amazing. They wound up driving across the lines in one of Goring's personal cars. That's when Patton was on the way to Berlin Get out of my way __?__. They drove that car direct to Paris

NELSON: How did you learn about VE Day and what was your reaction to it?

WILT: I had—Let's see, VE Day Well, I guess we were in line down at the mess hall or something and I knew it was getting close I had come down with dysentery so I couldn't move around much. We had—After every mission we got a two ounce slug of medicinal rye. We put that in a bottle. We were going celebrate when we got our 35th

mission in. I had this dysentery and the war was over and I watched these guys drink every dog gone bottle and never saved me a drop.

NELSON: I asked you about VJ Day. What was your opinion of the use of the atomic bomb when it was used against Japanese civilians in August of 1945?

WILT: I think it was well put to use and probably saved a million Japanese lives and probably a half million or two hundred thousand American and Allied lives.

NELSON: Has that opinion changed over the last fifty years?

WILT: No. It has been reinforced.

NELSON: When and where were you officially discharged from the service?

WILT: Dayton, Ohio.

NELSON: When?

WILT: That was in...

NELSON: Approximately.

WILT: Well my terminal leave was up the 5th of December of 1945.

NELSON: Do you have any disability rating or pension?

WILT: No.

NELSON: Do you have any opinions or feeling about our Nation's military status or its policies?

WILT: I think some of the generals that chiefs have tried to create little ___?___ and they're overlapping like when they went

down to Grenada there was some of these general that got left out. Everybody wanted to get in on the act so they had thing split up more than they should have been instead of having one supreme commander and this was because there isn't enough action and their jealousy. They want the glory, you know. Like in Iran over there or Iraq, they want the glory or the Desert Shield of being involved in becoming a hero because well it's like even back in the Indian wars. If you don't be in combat well you're not going to get the top promotion

NELSON: Do you have any contact with the Veteran's Administration?

WILT: No, only when getting my GI Insurance.

NELSON: What is your opinion of the Veterans' Administration if you have had any contact with them?

WILT: Other than that I have not had any contact with them? As far as I know they're all right.

NELSON: Never gone to a VA Hospital?

WILT: No.

NELSON: Or had medical services?

WILT: No, never had occasion to.

NELSON: Would you like to tell us about how your family supported you during your military life?

WILT: One thing when I enlisted I thought my Dad was on cloud nine because he liked the Air Force and wished he could have been in. When I went out there to take the test, he took the day off. He was going to sit there with me and they said "No, you can't"

I'll never forget that day. He was so proud he was walking on air. He couldn't have been any happier unless he was in there. He really—when I got my commission he was on cloud nine, he was so proud of me. My mother, of course, she was turned the other way around. She wanted me home and everything else.

NELSON: Over the subsequent years, what has this support meant to you?

WILT: Well, it was a feeling of security, I guess and continuity. Growing up all my life except for a few years in a small town And I,—our family has always been involved in serving their country all the way back to the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, Spanish-American War. My son was in Vietnam. He was in combat. Both my brothers—one was in the Korean War. The other was in the Navy, World War II, you know. So it's a tradition. When the world has something come you go in and serve your country

NELSON: That's good. Well, thanks a lot. That was great.

WILT: Okay.