

Norman Wilke

Battery B
106th Infantry Division

July 27, 2005 - **A Lasting Impression**

It's amazing how just one man can affect the way an entire nation views itself. But, that's just what Gillespie County native Norman Wilke did during the post-World War II era.

In a much different day and in the midst of his younger years, the Fredericksburg resident was absolutely vital in opening America's eyes to the birth of its space program.

The unassuming "hometown boy" made possible pictures that captured history in the making. They weren't just snapshots of personal milestones such as family outings or birthday parties, but instead, they were lasting images offering insight on a much broader scale.

Anyone visiting Wilke now on a day he's hard at work refurbishing antique plows in the workshop next to his modest ranch home on Six Oaks Farm might never suspect him of playing such an important role in recording America's history.

But, if they watch him close enough, they will see how meticulous he is paying attention to every detail. Just then might they better understand how it all came to be.

Joining Up

Wilke joined the U.S. Army in 1943 at the age of 18 and never once regretted his decision because the service was easier work than that on a farm. He was a country boy, used to rolling his own cigarettes and working from sunup to sundown.

"I always thought basic training was the easiest job I ever had. I know it was easier than milking seven cows every morning and evening, topping corn in the hot summer sun or the back-breaking job of picking cotton and sacking oats in the dust at the thrashing machines, shearing sheep and goats all day -- all much of the other work on the farm," Wilke recalled in a memoir he set to paper for the benefit of his descendants.

After basic training he was assigned to radar watch duty for a coastal defense battery in San Francisco.

In 1944, he was reassigned as a replacement in a field artillery National Guard unit from Oregon. His destination was kept a secret even from him. At the train station, the troops "got assigned to a day car and again headed out to God only knows where," Wilke said.



MAKING HIS MARK ON HISTORY -- Norman Wilke's military service just after World War II evolved at the White Sands Proving Ground, where he personally captured this image of a V-2 missile launch. Wilke's innovative installation of a camera inside the rocket not only helped a group of scientists in their future developments, but it helped serve notice to a nation that its space program was growing into a powerhouse. Standard-Radio Post Photo by Lisa Treiber-Walter

"Every little town we came through we opened the windows and asked where we were ... some fellows wrote letters and threw them out of the windows without stamps hoping the gathering crowd of on-looking civilians would mail them."

Finally, he ended up in Kentucky, where he was assigned to a gun battery. "We trained a few months as a unit to go overseas. Then, I got my first 10-day furlough and got on a train in Evansville, IN, headed for Austin, TX," Wilke remembered.

After reaching Austin, he traveled by bus and got off at Burg's store in Stonewall, where Felix Pehl, the owner of the post office and general store, called his parents on the community country telephone (four long rings and two short rings).

The homecoming would be a memorable one for Wilke since he saved his sister, Melitha, from drowning in a local pond. But, the stay was all-too-short and he soon was back in Camp Brackenridge, Kentucky.

By March, 1945, he was on the ship Queen Elizabeth in New York headed to Glasgow, Scotland.

In The Middle Of Action

He took a train to South Hampton, England, and boarded a ship to cross the English Channel, landing in France.

"It had only been a little over a half year since D-Day and it looked like the war was still going on," Wilke said. "There wasn't a building standing, just huge piles of rocks. The harbor was repaired only to a point where small boats or ships could get into the docks."

After landfall, Wilke was transported to a processing station in Brussels, Belgium -- a pup tent city along the railroad track.

"The first thing I saw and heard came from the sky," Wilke said. "The sky was filled with B17s and other bombers and many fighter planes in groups around the bombers. Their engines were roaring and they were flying very high. Before a wave of bombers disappeared, another wave came from the north to the south. This reminded me of the geese I saw in Texas when they came from the north in the early fall and headed south. Those bombers and fighters flew over all day and every day while I was there and while I was in Germany. After seeing this, I knew this was part of the real war."

He was next assigned to the [106th Infantry Division, Battery B, and the 413th Armored Field Artillery Battalion](#). "Those of us that were assigned to the same unit got on a truck and headed out into Germany and joined our unit in the war zone," he said.

The first thing he found himself doing was unrolling telephone wire, double time, to an observer "beyond our guns".

Successfully reaching that point, he and another man ran most of the way back. "The forest was real dense and I had a feeling that we needed to get out of there in a hurry. As we got closer to our gun battery, the entire gun crews were pointing their carbines down range toward us. Looking back, I saw a large group of German prisoners guarded by some infantry men and bringing the prisoners our way," Wilke said.

The lieutenant asked if anyone could speak German. Wilke, coming from a German-rich community, naturally could. He was pinpointed as an interpreter for the prisoners of war. He quickly informed his commanding officer of their complaints of hunger.

It wasn't the last time his home-grown knowledge of the German language would come in handy for the military.

On Feb. 13, 1946, after two years, seven months and 16 days in the service, he would receive an honorable discharge with a Good Conduct Medal, American Theater Campaign Medal and Europe-Middle East campaign medal with two Bronze Stars, WWII Victory Medal, WWII Occupation Medal, a lap button (the Ruptured Duck) and an Overseas Bar.

That wouldn't be his last tour in the military either.

"I learned a lot in the military and learning never stopped," he said. "Things I never dreamed of away from the farm were so new, different, exciting and awakening -- it was like opening up a new world right in front of my eyes and I enjoyed every bit of it. I saw much of the United States and the world through the windows of a train and sailed to Europe on the largest troop ship, the Queen Elizabeth. I didn't see much front line action which is something you don't see from behind a 155 MM Howitzer unless someone else is throwing some shells or bombs at you. Like many others, I left as a small boy and came back a grown man."

A Second Go Around

After a short stint farming at home for someone else, he decided to go back into the service in 1947 and regained his rank of corporal. He reenlisted at Kelly AFB as a radio operator and within three months was shipped to New Mexico, assigned to radar maintenance at Holloman Air Force Base.

On Feb. 8, 1948, Wilke's history would change when he was assigned to explore some boxes of cameras stored in an empty building. He discovered they contained big German-made Askania cameras and he took it upon himself to study the lone foreign-made manual on how to operate them.

"I soon found myself the only GI knowing anything about the Askania camera and in a few days the cameras and I were assigned to the Photo Lab at Holloman," Wilke said.

He left the world of radar behind and became an integral part of the photo documentation crew, training the military photographers on the use of the very different cameras. After that, the cameras were taken out into the field to capture the beginnings of America's space program.

American Involvement In The V-2 Rockets

It was an exciting time at the White Sands Proving Ground in New Mexico.

At the conclusion of World War I, the Treaty of Versailles prohibited Germany from developing long-range artillery. However, the treaty did not predict rocket development and the Germans pursued this avenue with the help of rocket scientist Wernher von Braun.

His team created the A-4 rocket, which was ultimately renamed the Vergeltungswaffe-2 (Vengeance Weapon 2) by a German propagandist. Nearly 3,000 of the rockets landed in England and Western Europe during the war, but at the end of the war, the United States and Russia raced one another to collect the German technology and expertise to advance their own programs at home.

General Electric was contracted to fire captured V-2s at White Sands. Experts converged on the area, bringing with them 300 railroad freight cars of V-2 components, 14 tons of documents and 118 German scientists, including von Braun himself. The endeavor was dubbed "Operation Paperclip".

All the research that followed on the V-2 rockets launched in America led to the development of the intercontinental ballistic missile and the U.S. Space Program and the launch facility was later named a National Historical Landmark for its part as America's first major launching site.

Gillespie Native A Key Part Of V-2 History

As all the testing was done on the V-2, Wilke served an integral part by making sure the Askania cameras were in working order.

"Upon return of the cameras, it was my job to service them, which consisted mostly of cleaning. Being fourth generation of German descent, it was unbelievable to me to see these fine machines exposed to such a dusty windstorm in the New Mexico desert," Wilke recalled.

Putting Eyes Inside The V-2 Rocket

"One day, a master sergeant by the name of Lewis Crews (NCOIC) told me to go check out a Jeep, go to White Sands Missile Range and install a mount in a V-2 Missile to adapt a Robot 35 mm camera and a 16 mm motion picture An-N6 gun camera. Then, when I was finished, I should take a picture with a Speed Graphic camera," Wilke said.

"Wow! This broke the ice. A job for a country boy who grew up on the farm, farmed with a pair of mules, served in the Artillery during World War II, was now nervous and honored to be trusted with this assignment," he said.

Wilke's resourcefulness in installing the camera inside the rocket would allow researchers to witness and study essential elements of its launch, including the separation of the nose cone in great detail. It would serve as the eyes for the scientists and eventually the nation witnessing history in the making.

After completing his first camera installation, Wilke took the picture he was ordered to capture. "This was the first picture I ever took in my life," he said.

Later, he would find himself on the control side of the shutter more often as he went out on the range with some of the documentation crew and stood on top of trucks to take his own pictures of launches and even of a V-2 missile that burned up on the launching pad.

"It was exciting just to be there," Wilke said.

Now For Others To See

A series of 10 pictures Wilke shot of a V-2 launch in action, as well as a display of a V-2 warhead n complete with side panel missing so visitors can see Wilke's camera mount -- were recently installed as part of the V-2 Annex of the White Sands Museum.

The display was dedicated in November, 2004, to coincide with the 60th anniversary of the White Sands Missile Range, otherwise known as the "Birthplace of America's Missile and Space Activity".

Wilke and his wife, Mildred, were there to witness the event, since he is considered a charter member of the White Sands Pioneer Missile Group.

The V-2 program ended in 1952 and Wilke was there for 10 years. He then did a tour of duty for a year in Korea, 15 months at Parks AFB in California and then he was back where he felt the most at home, at Holloman for another five years.

But, when remembering his military career highlights, Wilke fondly goes back to the V-2:

"I was most excited. I can't forget how nervous I was on my very first V-2 assignment, how huge the V-2 missile was and the roar from the blast off. The little part I played -- pre-NASA, pre-Sputnik, pre-orbits, pre-man in space -- how lucky I was to be a part of it all."

Lisa Treiber-Walter, Fredericksburg Standard - Fredericksburg, TX, USA



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James D. West

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