

## Willard L. Nelson

422 INF/B

Stalag XII-A (12-A)

Interview with T/Sgt Willard L. Nelson

Interviewer: Jeff NELSON, his son.

Jeff - What do you recall about what you and your unit did in the Battle of the Bulge?



Willard - Well, we didn't do a hell of a lot. Tried to get our ass out of there. I specifically remember the morning, it was either a Sunday or a Monday morning, December 16th. Seems to me like it was Sunday morning and very foggy, very foggy. We heard the bombing, which was uncharacteristic, much heavier than normal. Then about that time I seen (unintelligible), we lost, see, we had these field telephones was all and then, I remember this, I was going to shave and somebody said 'well, you better not take the time, it looks like there's an attack'. So, we were, I can't remember, it seems like we were in a dug out, like I was in an area that was clean and relatively warm at that time. Or a building or something of that nature, like a dug out. I remember going out and looking and seeing about a quarter of a mile away or, maybe, a little farther, soldiers dressed in white. I took field glasses and looked and god-damned if they were Germans.

Jeff - At that point, nobody in your vicinity had been notified that ....

Willard - No, we didn't know they were that close, no. So, right next to me was one of our sharpshooters and (I thought) I'll get hit. I had my glasses pointed on this German sergeant who was walking and the rifle cracked and almost simultaneously the bullet hit the tree that the guy was walking by and this German just looked, it missed him by about a foot, didn't drop, just kept right on walking. Jesus Christ...(laughter). My reaction was 'God!'. So, then, of course, we had troops that started shooting and then they did back off for a while, meaning the Germans. So then there was shooting and we got the order to withdraw, which is the same thing as retreating but they call it withdrawing. So I got all the company records, I was company supply, we put them on a jeep and we headed out of there. Then there was complete chaos. There was no communication. Finally we regrouped about 3 miles away. And then...the day went by somehow. See, we didn't get captured for 3 days and I'm not too sure in my mind just where all we were in those 3 days cause we sure as hell didn't sleep very much. Then, on the day that we finally got captured, that morning, I remember, I slept in a ditch that night, with the jeep parked with the hood, the thing over it. I slept in the ditch because if the bombs went over and the shrapnel went over I didn't want to be on the level. About 10 o'clock in the morning, some sergeant said 'say, the tanks coming, we got help'. See, tanks sound like a million mice screaming, they squeak. So, they came

up over the hill and 'Jesus Christ, that's good, here's the tanks' and about that time the tanks started shooting at us. (laughter) They were German tanks. We surrendered.

Jeff - When you saw the Germans coming at you, your unit was positioned there, was it a company or a whole battalion?

Willard - Well, it was probably a company. See, there's 200 people in a company.

Jeff - How far would the next company have been from you?

Willard - Oh, not very far, oh, like, to Dunn's (?) house.

Jeff - That's kind of like a line...

Willard - It was a line, sure, but it was a very thin line.

Jeff - Because there wasn't anybody behind you.

Willard - No, nobody expected anybody to come. We were in a forest. See, Jeff, a real forest, they'd find roads. In other words, if they're going to invade, they'd try to come down roads with tanks and stuff, cause even a tank has trouble going over some obstacles. It can be tipped over and if a tank gets tipped over, it's helpless. You've just got to abandon it. So, we were in an actual forest, dug in a forest. We weren't supposed to be advancing. We were just to hold the position. Of course, we were embedded in foxholes and stuff like that so the Germans attacking us were at a definite disadvantage.

Jeff - Now, was this, as far as you know, the very first day of the battle?

Willard - Uh-huh, as far as I know. I know because of the history I've read. It was simultaneous, all along, at 6 o'clock in the morning, 5:30 or 6, whatever it was. It was simultaneous all along the Ardennes Forest.

Jeff - About what time was it that you saw this guy sneaking up on you?

Willard - About 6 o'clock. It was just getting daylight. Yeah, he was sneaking up, he was walking. I mean, he had no pretense. He had a squad behind him, all dressed in white because there was snow on the ground and that was camouflage material.

Jeff - So you pulled back about 3 miles...

Willard - Well, we didn't pull back right then, we pulled back, that's right, we pulled back a day or two later, a day later. I think we stayed there the whole day. But, you see, the

tanks. There were tanks that went through, not our line necessarily, but maybe 2 miles down. The tanks break through the lines and the troops went on. So they were behind us. See, it ended up, the Germans were behind us and when we got the order to withdraw, we were withdrawing toward Germans who were behind us.

Jeff - They had broken through the lines.

Willard - Oh, they had broken through. Not at our point but at other points where there was roads.

Jeff - So, it wasn't your fault, it was the other units' fault that a (laughter)

Willard - Well, my unit didn't do too much to stop them, I'll tell you that.

Jeff - Did you have any way to stop a tank at that time, bazookas or anything like that?

Willard - We had bazookas, that's right, but not very many of them.

Jeff - You'd have to have a pretty accurate bazooka to knock out a tank.

Willard - Well, you're right. In other words, you take a company of 200 men. Then there's a platoon, there's 4 platoons in a company and 4 squads in a platoon. Then you got administrative personnel so you end up with about 12 people to a squad. I think you've got 1 bazooka to a squad. One machine gun to a squad. And they're not very concentrated. You've got a mortar squad. I mean, really, you don't have much firepower in an infantry company.

Jeff - You were a...were you a machine gunner or a bazooka gunner or were you just kind of a...

Willard - I was nothing. I was supply sergeant. I had a carbine. A carbine is just...

Jeff - Is that an M1?

Willard - No, an M1 is a good weapon. In fact I threw the carbine away and took an M1 from a guy that got killed, cause an M1 was a very good gun. But a carbine wasn't really very much.

Jeff - You were just a supply sergeant anyway. (laughter)

Willard - Yeah, that's right, we weren't supposed to fight. I wasn't intending to fight.

Jeff - Did you do any fighting?

Willard - Well, to the extent, I shot a 30 mm machine gun. Didn't I ever tell you this? See, I had a jeep driver. One time when we felt we were really going to get our ass out of there. You know what a jeep is? It has 2 seats and a little seat back but right between the two front seats, the driver seat and the front seat passenger there's a standard where they can put a machine gun. Then the machine gunner can sit kind of on the back of the 2 back seats and operate the machine gun. So, I was going to operate the machine gun. So, we were tearing ass, trying to get through the German area.

Jeff - During your retreat?

Willard - Yeah. So, I had this machine gun and we saw a German squad down in the ditch to our right and the driver says "lookout!" So I swing the gun around, there was a couple of Germans who were going to shoot at us. So I swing the machine gun around to hit them and when you got the gun that far, it snapped past the windshield. So, I shot and knocked out the windshield. (laughter) But, of course, it sure scattered the Germans and we got through.

Jeff - That flying glass...

Willard - That poor driver, though, here, he's driving like this and I shoot and the windshield comes out. (extended laughter) At that time it wasn't humorous but it sure as hell is...well, then, about 2 miles later, he went around a corner too goddamned fast, tipped the jeep over. It was upside down and we got thrown out and I got thrown into a ditch. That was the night before we got captured because I remember spending that night in the ditch.

Jeff - You didn't move from where the jeep tipped over?

Willard - No, hell no, cause there was Germans all around there.

Jeff - What happened to your driver ?

Willard - He was with me. But, it scared me and to this day I don't like to ride with somebody else, I really don't. I prefer to drive myself. The way he went around that damned corner. I saw him, Burks, was his name. One time when we were down, this is after John Woods' father died, in Houston, TX, I telephoned him. Burks, Dave Burks...

Jeff - Whatever became of him, anyway ?

Willard - I have no idea but I did talk to him then. He worked in Houston. That was 25-30 years ago.

Jeff - You were captured together. Did you spend your time as POWs together then?

Willard - Well, no. There was, like, 5 of us captured. He and I were captured but we then ran into some other Americans, well, I told you the story of the tanks coming up and the lieutenant says "hey, we're saved."

Jeff - Oh, yeah.

Willard - Well, there were probably 8 or 9 of us together at that point and then we surrendered as a unit. Then when we surrendered, of course, we, they searched us and took most things of value off of us and then herded us back to an area. We eventually ended up about 100 miles, no, 75 miles away. We walked for... see, we were captured on the 19th and I know we were... Christmas Day was the 25th. Six days it took us to get back to a place called Limburg (12-A), which is about 40 miles east of Koblenz.

Jeff - At this point how many GIs are there...?

Willard - Well, we were collecting GIs all the time. We had probably 1500 when we got back to Limburg. They would put us all together, in other words, there was 50 from here, 20 from there, that sort of stuff.

Jeff - Did you renew any old acquaintances amongst the POWs there?

Willard - No, no. We didn't eat for about a week, we did have a little water. We went almost a week without eating. But we were healthy at that time. It was not eating later that was the worst.

Jeff - How many thousands of GIs were captured at the Battle of the Bulge, do you know?

Willard - Well, there were 15,000 in our division and practically all were either captured or killed. There were 1600 of us when we were in a concentration camp in Gorlitz in Czechoslovakia. There were 1600, that was in February 13, 1945. The Russians were coming from the west by Breslau and we evacuated the camp, started walking west.

Jeff - The Russians were coming from the east ?

Willard - The Russians were coming from the east. Of the 1600, 650 of us were left, 950 died.

Jeff - Did most of them die from malnutrition, maltreatment...?

Willard - Malnutrition and dysentery, we all had lice all over us.

Jeff - Is that going to kill you?

Willard - Well, it will kill you if you don't have any food. See, your resistance is way down. Well, I weighed 93 lbs. when I was liberated.

Jeff - Do you recall the Germans being particularly nasty or cruel?

Willard - No, no, I did not. They were not. Here and there, there was a guard or 2 that was a sadistic bastard but not as a group, no.

Jeff - Do you recall them picking out any GIs and just murdering them on the spot?

Willard - Well, Malmedy, at Malmedy they did. We had a couple of melon heads, loudmouths that said 'Jesus Christ, I know how to take care of these bastards' and then some German would say 'vas you say?' In other words, the GIs were stupid. They thought that because they couldn't speak German, none of the Germans could speak English and a hell of a lot of Germans speaks English. They learned to keep their mouth shut. We were about 7 miles from Malmedy and that's where they had the massacre.

Jeff - What was that there?

Willard - Didn't you read about the Malmedy massacre? They had about, I'm going to say, 60 Americans they just slaughtered. They took machine guns and turned them on them and killed them all. Later the Americans found the bodies there. We were only 7 miles from Malmedy. We weren't aware of it at that time. We found out about it later.

Jeff - Do you remember any incidents where there were GIs murdered in front of your eyes because they got smart or tried to escape?

Willard - No but I heard there were instances later when we were liberated where Americans murdered Germans. I did not see any of those.

Jeff - Would they put you up in a barn or something like that?

Willard - Yeah, yeah, barns was the typical place. See, have you been to Germany?

Jeff - No.

Willard - Well, in Germany, they don't have farms like they do here. They'll have a town like Round Grove and all of the farmers live in Round Grove and they have their barn and their houses and then 3 miles down the road there will be another Round

Grove. Now the farmland is out in the middle. The farmers go out to the fields during the daytime but they come back at night. It's the old history of the fortresses, they're there for protection against outlaws and stuff like that. So, we would come into a little village, you know, when we were on this walk, when we started out there were 1600 of us, and they'd put 50 of us in one barn and 50 of us in another barn in the hay mound. We would go in there and sleep and then in the morning at daybreak they would come in and roust us out and we'd get up and walk.

Jeff - You never tried to dig a tunnel for freedom or anything like that?

Willard - You didn't have to. If you wanted to escape it cost about 3 cigarettes. You could give a guard 3 cigarettes or 5 cigarettes and, hell, he'd just let you...but where were you going to go?

Jeff - Did some people take them up on it?

Willard - Oh, yeah, but they'd find them a few days later, they'd come straggling back. (laughter)

Jeff - You probably were just about better off being in captivity.

Willard - Well, sure, hell, we got a little soup now and then. Sure, we could escape but I'm amused by these people who say they escaped from a prison camp. Escape from a prison camp was the simplest thing in the world. What the hell do you do once you escape?

Jeff - Were those who died in captivity buried?

Willard - I don't know. I really don't know. The closest I ever came to it, my feet got swollen, and I couldn't walk so I fell down and they had a horse, a couple of horses and a wagon behind the group and they would pick us up and put us in the wagon but they beat us a little and I can see why, because they didn't want us to do it if we weren't really sick. The next thing, I woke up and I was in the damned wagon. Luckily, my feet got better so I was able to walk the next day. That was the only time I couldn't walk.

Jeff - That's about enough for today.

Willard - OK, very good.

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