

Captain Wilson— Brief Acquaintance, Lasting Impact

by Ken Brown, 397-I

Ken was a part of the ASTP group that joined the 100th in the spring of 1944. During combat, he served in the 397th Infantry Regiment as the liaison between the 3rd Battalion Headquarters and Company I (liaison—a dressed up description for “runner.”)

When, in March 1944, we newly arrived ASTP refugees lined up behind the Company I, 397th Infantry barracks at Ft. Bragg, we were greeted by an officer of broad, sloping shoulders and quizzical face. After giving us “At Ease” and a few words of welcome, he started moving through the ranks, speaking in a voice too low to give me any hint of its import. Accustomed to the cool aloofness of the Ft. Benning officers and the gruffness of the non-coms, I heard strange sounds coming from the mouth of this Captain when he got to me. After looking me over as he asked a couple of routine questions, he said, “I think you have the making of a good soldier.” Then, with a smile and a friendly nudge to the ribs as he turned away, “But we need to put some meat on those bones.”

The Company Commander occupies a special place in the Infantry command hierarchy. He is the highest ranking officer with still a fair chance of getting to know all of his men individually. Whether he makes this happen, whether he decides to be leader or martinet, whether he chooses to be engaged or to remain aloof are all part of an authority over nearly two hundred men rarely paralleled in civilian life. Pretty heady stuff for a person in his twenties, as was usually the case in wartime.

Although I soon came to admire Captain Wilson on all counts, it is for the little touches that I remember him so fondly. For instance, he was not one of those officers who found reason to lag behind and arrive in the field in the company Jeep. He marched with the men. During one of those marches on one of those hot Ft. Bragg mornings, some of the guys began to gripe—quietly at first, then loud enough for the Captain to hear. He ignored this for a few minutes, and then, as it continued, he halted the Company and told us to gather round. Addressing his remarks to the little knot of complainers, he reminded them that this training was not intended to be easy or pleasant, but to toughen them and help them get ready for hard days ahead. After a few more remarks in similar vein, he offered a final observation, “Just look at me,” he said. “Here I am an old man, and you don’t hear me complaining.” That seemed reasonable to me—when you are eighteen, someone twenty-three, especially with bars on his shoulders, can seem pretty far along. (I have since learned that he was even older—in fact, twenty-four.)

On another march, I happened to be at the head of the column on the Captain’s left. After an hour or so, he looked across at me with a slight grin and said, “What’s the matter, Brown? Getting tired?” I thought I knew the kind of answer he would appreciate, so I grinned back with what I hoped was my most inoffensive look and said in a low voice, “I can outwalk you, Sir.” He laughed. I have thought of this fifteen-second exchange many times. It typified, I think, the camaraderie that drew me and the young soldiers around me to this officer—in this small example, the one with rank extending to the one without an invitation to assert his own ability. Would I have ever been able to carry out such a boast? Strong walker that I was, still probably not.

Company I did much of its training in a space between the regimental compound and Pope Field, known as the “impact area.” It was a flat, treeless, grassless expanse of several acres, divided roughly into two levels by a nearly vertical, dirt bluff, reaching in most places to as much as eight or ten feet high. One of our training exercises consisted of running full tilt off these parapets and landing with a roll, something I approached with a certain dread because I had sprained my rib cage the spring before in a similar stunt. One day during a ten minute break below one of its highest points, a few of us decided to try running up the wall and scrambling over the top. All of us failed on the first tries, but most made it eventually.

As the break time was ending, the Captain turned away from a conversation and noticed what we were doing. Instead of falling us in, he came over to our group and watched while a couple of others were

trying. As he sized up the wall, we knew he couldn't resist, and fell back to watch. He stood there another moment or two, squared off, and rushed it. His first try failed, which pleased us mightily, since none of us had come even close to making it the first time. At this point, the whole company, of course, had begun to watch. With shouts of encouragement and some friendly heckling, he tried again, and then again, making it probably on the third attempt, but making it, I do remember, in as few tries as the best of us had done and getting a resounding cheer from the company for his performance. And with that we got back to serious matters.

Although these few glimpses fall short of a portrait, they do suggest something of the man and why we had such high regard for him. We never needed reminding that he was our commanding officer; his bearing and strength of personality took care of that. But the special appeal we felt came from his preference for reasoning over blind orders, his obvious love of competition, and his human concern—demonstrated many times—for the worries and well-being of his men.

There were two times at Bragg when gloom overtook the Company. The first came with the news that a popular young Lieutenant from the Company, sent to Italy as a replacement, had been killed in action. This was our first encounter with an occurrence that would later become commonplace. The second time came in August when Captain Wilson left the Company. We had taken it for granted that he would be the one who took us overseas, and then suddenly he was gone.

Wartime is a time of brief acquaintances, sudden departures, and no looking back. Then peacetime turned out to have its own urgencies. Over the years I had had no hint of what might have happened in Captain Wilson's life, and I often wondered, hoping that he had fared well.

I had never thought of trying to locate him until the Internet phone directories came along. These directories, available through several search engines, allow searches ranging from local to nation-wide and even into a few other countries. Eventually I decided to try. Knowing that millions of people share the Wilson name and many his first, I simply hoped that his middle initial and perhaps some other clue would give me a lead. Going through all the possibilities, finally I hit what I thought might be a bull's eye. There was a matching name, with a military title, in a town with a major military base—just the place where a retired officer might decide to settle down. I made no move at that point, preferring to enjoy my sense of success for a while before testing the possibility that I might be wrong.

On a Sunday afternoon a couple of months later, I felt the time was right and dialed the number. And it was indeed our Captain—now retired Colonel—Wilson. He didn't remember me at all. He had once granted me a kind of amnesty with a personal problem that had left me feeling forever indebted, but he didn't remember that either. None of this surprised me. Company I was early in his career, and he had seen tens of thousands of men pass by since then. And his act of mercy was too much in character to have much significance to him.

Still, for three-quarters of an hour we compared notes on people that we remembered and values we shared. I told him a little about what had happened to the Company and some of the people I thought he might remember and filled him in on some of the Division Association activities and officers. In turn, I got a brief rundown on his career. He said that upon leaving the Company, he was given two hundred prisoners from a stockade to take to the ETO, where he had considerable trouble getting anyone to accept them. He said he had gone onto serve out the war, then serve in Korea and Vietnam, had done a five year tour in Germany, and had been on the staff of the Infantry School—had, in fact, spent all of his career with the Infantry. I gathered that he had had a good career and was having a good life. Before hanging up, I enjoyed a few minutes, chat with Mrs. Wilson, who said that she had been with her husband until his transfer to Ft. Bragg, where the housing problem forced her to return home.

Later I sent him a letter to alert him that a copy of the Company I WW II Combat History I had promised to send was on its way (thanks, especially to Paul Mosher and Keith Bonn), along with a few other small items. In the letter I also tried to sum up some of the feelings I had expressed on the phone, "We appreciate that your time with us was brief and that the years since have brought associations, and probably loyalties, that leave Company I in the distance. Our own memories of military service, on the other hand, are more compressed and focused. Company I was the very center of our experience and for many of us has remained as close to our hearts as a military organization can be. And for us, you were the

exemplar of a fine officer, a gentleman, a strong and compassionate leader, and the one above all who got us started. Not surprisingly, we remember you well.”

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