

WPW

By Ginny Zellner, SHS Board Member

WPW, stands as the tag ending to each article Wilson Ware wrote for the Sherman Sentinel spanning twenty-five years, as both an editor and contributor. The initials appear quite humble and unassuming. Add to the written work of WPW, try hundreds of pen and ink drawings of houses, barns and buildings. A Sherman legacy, pure and simple, Wilson captures the feeling of a rural Sherman, a time when you knew your next-door neighbor and you could just pop in unannounced for a cup of coffee. And today the school chums of then still look out for each other or are finding their way back to these small town roots. Wilson's drawings reflect unabashed love for the town he lived in.

Each image is intense, familiar and often taken for granted these days. Maybe it's time to take a closer look at this tall, athletic man with his dry sense of humor, walking with a slight limp and chugging around in his old VW camper bus.

Wilson wrote the record himself, 'Italy: The Riva Ridge'. One of the most compelling stories of WWII belongs to our own, Captain Wilson Ware an S-2 Intelligence officer, 1st Battalion, 86th Infantry, 10th Mountain Division. The U.S. Army's 10th Mountain Division was organized in 1942, Camp Hale, Colorado. The division was an experiment to train skiers, and climbers to fight as ski troops in the mountains of Europe during WWII. Some were accomplished skiers, others not so much. They were mountain men and all were volunteers. Together, in 13,000 feet altitudes, survival skills were honed. These recruits lived for weeks in brutal, towering snows and slept in temperatures dropping to 20 degrees below at night.

"Everyone knew the equipment intimately; he ate it wore it, lived in it, and mainly grouched about it, for any of a thousand reasons." WPW p44, Italy: The Riva Ridge.

The 10th Division was deployed nearing the end of 1944, to the northern Apennine Mts. of Italy. Wilson is about 30 years old when, here, they begin to plan assault tactics against the German Army, which had blocked the U.S. Army for months in the mountains. From Riva Ridge, a natural defense position, the Germans had complete surveillance of U.S. troops. In addition, they were confident that the ridge was totally secure because the snow conditions were treacherously difficult. No American unit could possibly manage assault.

On February 18, 1945. In the dark of night, 700 men from the 86th Regiment, silently climb five different routes of the 2000-foot mountain, a vertical assault of Riva Ridge. They used coils of ropes, pitons, and piton hammers wrapped in cloth to muffle sound. Two of the routes required fixed ropes. The assault plan, as outlined here, appears easily done. But of the five and then eventually four trails or routes taken, each are themselves, mini-stories. Fear of discovery, apprehension and the technical climb itself, gripped the minds of the soldiers. The 86th secures and holds the entire Riva Ridge line. This was and remains an impossible accomplishment.

"Our men, with training not equipment, did remarkably well. What skis and snowshoes we had were exchanged from platoon to platoon and company to company (irrespective of size or fit) Warm camouflaged clothing was exchanged as needed, and given this barest of

equipment patrols started to operate. Miles of country were covered; small groups crossed mountain ranges to contact our next battalion eleven miles away, took prisoners right out of the German front line, finally climbed Riva Ridge itself and killed the men encountered on the top, and stirred up such a row that agents reported the arrival of two mountain-trained battalions in enemy reserve. "WPW, p 40 Italy, The Riva Ridge.

Wilson's story does not stop. Mount Belvedere, the last ridge, is the final critical objective.

"Whoever held Belvedere held not only a cornerstone of German defense, but also a height of land between central Italy and the Po valley." WPW p36, Italy: The Riva Ridge.

April 14, 1945, the 10th Mountain Division attacked toward the Po Valley. The fighting was fierce, 553 mountain infantry killed, wounded or missing in action the first day. The Germans counterattacked for three days.

"The fight for control of the Mount Belvedere had cost the division 926 casualties. Even the most optimistic generals had hoped the mountain troops would take Riva Ridge and the Belvedere massif in two weeks. They had done it in five days." M. Jenkins p196, The Last Ridge.

"And there were plenty of dead men. Among the badly wounded was Wilson Ware whose patrolling and intelligence expertise had been so critical to the Riva Ridge climb." M.Jenkins p225, The Last Ridge.

Wilson, severely wounded, loses his right leg below the knee. He is eventually awarded a Bronze Star.

Today's motto of the 10th Mountain Division is "Climb To Glory"

Searching through the archives of the Sherman Historical Society, I discovered a personal tribute to Wilson Ware. It was written by Justin Hartman, Minister, Sherman Congregational Church as part of a Memorial service for Wilson. He talks about the production of *OUR TOWN*, written by Thornton Wilder in 1938 and directed by Wilson in 1952. Emily, played by Tippy Ward, is granted the privilege of living one day of her life over again after her death. Emily, "Mama, just look at me one minute as if you saw me. Let's look at one another". Then Emily turns to the stage manager who is the narrator and asks him, "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it, every, every minute?" He replies, "No," but then he qualifies it, "The saints and poets, maybe they do some."

Minister Hartman tells us in his tribute, "I believe Wilson did realize life to the fullest while he lived it. Because he was wounded in the war, he realized the precariousness of life more than most of us do.

I agree. This is the man we remember.

Wilson P Ware
1913 - 1997

Notes:

Sherman Historical society - Archives Wilson Ware

American Alpine Journal 1949

Italy: The Riva Ridge Wilson Ware

Ski The High Trail WWII Ski Troopers In The High Colorado Rockies 1991

Harris Dusenbery

Illustrated by Wilson Ware

Dusenbery credits Wilson with completing the drawings used in his book from memory after their Division completed training at Camp Hale in 1944. He says "Whenever I look at them I think that more than my words they tell how it really was." p. ix

The Last Ridge

Mackay Jenkins 2003 Random House

And personal, contemporary recollections from:

Betsy Scholze, Gloria Thorne and Grace Hotchkiss

The three books mentioned above will be in our Library for reading

POSTSCRIPT

Wilson Ware

Excerpts from: 'A Tribute 'by Betsy Scholze given at the Memorial Service for Wilson at the Sherman Playhouse.

An artist really sees things and Wilson's powers of observation were finely tuned. Attention paid to minute detail and love of subject, that's what made Wilson so skilled with a pen, so entertaining as a storyteller, so inspiring as a teacher. I'd like to add a personal note - my gratitude for all opportunities I had to work with Wilson. To share in the creation and implementation of ideas and plans - big and small - to delight in his whimsical stories, funny tales of Sherman's notable characters, to enjoy his gentle understated wit and wisdom that made him a public treasure. I will dearly miss him.