

Roosevelt Battled for Them
(Newspaper article written 1943)

President Roosevelt is “solid” with the Wells family of this community. Fourth term, fifth term, sixth term---they probably would go down the line for him because he found time amidst the vexations and weighty burdens of a global war to go to the bat for a worried war mother.

Mr. and Mrs. Wells who live on Route No. 2 have given three sons to the service. Two of them are nineteen-year-old twins who had never been separated and who betrayed all of the manifestations of affinity and attachment which often is betrayed by twins.

Then the draft came along and picked up the brothers and inducted them the same day. Their only plea was that they be permitted to perform their war service together and they would not be separated. But the induction brass hats could not see it that way, and their pleas were resisted. Robert Wells was assigned to Camp Shelby, Miss., and Ryland Wells was assigned to Plattsburg, N. Y.

Their letters home were brave and assumed a guise of cheerfulness, but the intuitions of a mother told her that the boys, never before separated, were suffering from the dejection of isolation and that service with the forces was not as happy as it would be if they were together.

Mrs. Wells realized her difficulties in effecting a remedy and the, one day, she hitched her wagon to a star, sat down and wrote to the commander-in-chief and asked him if there was anything that he could do about it.

Mr. Roosevelt answered the letter promptly and told Mrs. Wells that he had referred the case of her boys to the War Department with the personal recommendation that the twins be reunited. The President saw a question of morale in their plight and he possessed the human sympathy of a father who himself has boys on the fighting front.

Nor was it long before Private Robert Wells was paraded one day before his commanding officer and was told that he had been reassigned. He was handed travel orders sending him to

Plattsburg. Arriving there, he was assigned to the same company in which his brother was serving in an engineering outfit.

Then they sailed together and are now at a point in North Africa.

They wrote home the other day separate letters each one relating that the twins now have a corporal's stripes and are moving along together in promotion.

They are happier than they were when they first entered the army and they tell their parents not to worry over them and that they hope before long to be home to enjoy the comforts of peaceful life once more. The third brother, Carlton A. Wells is in service, somewhere in England.

Mrs. Wells treasures the letter of the commander-in-chief because it brought her a happy issue out of her affliction. It gave her renewed faith in the processes of democracy and realization that the President of the United States is not immured in an ivory tower, but can be reached directly by the people and that he made a personal issue of a war mother's distress case.

Answer to a Mother's Plea

(Transcription of original letter)

The White House

Washington

April 6, 1943

My dear Mrs. Wells:

In acknowledging the receipt of your letter of March thirtieth, I want you to know that, by the President's direction, the matter about which you write is being brought to the attention of the appropriate officials of the War Department.

Very sincerely yours,

Edwin M. Watson

Major General, U. S. Army

Secretary to the President

Mrs. L. S. Wells,

805 Princeton Street,

Martinsville, Virginia

Letter from a Commanding Officer to a War Mother

July 1944

From 2nd Lieut. George A. Worth (England) to Mrs. L. S. Wells (Martinsville)

I am your sons platoon commander. Thought a few words to their mother would help convey the pride I feel in your two boys...So far I've been able to keep them together, in the same squad, one the leader and the other the assistant. They are a good team, too. I only wish I had all my men as young, capable, and willing to do a hard job day or night as your boys...They haven't any idea of this letter. Today we are resting. Both are in good health, tanned as Indians, toughened for the big job ahead (the letter was written before the invasion in which they are now

participating) and doing excellent on their jobs now. You have reason to be proud of Robert and Ryland...Incidentally, even after a year I still get them mixed up.”

Wells Built Bridges for Allies During War

Friday, June 5, 2009

By Kim Barto – Bulletin Staff Writer

World War II was in full swing when Robert E. Wells of Martinsville turned 18. He and his twin brother, Ryland, both were drafted into the Army on March 15, 1943.

“I had a brief stay in the service compared to a lot of people: 32 months,” said Robert Wells, now 85.

By the time he came home from the service, he had taken part in the D-Day invasion of Normandy, France, and built countless bridges for Allied troops across France and Germany with Company B of the 238th Engineering Combat Battalion.

The 238th Engineers still have a reunion every year, as they have done since 1946, but the numbers of Wells’ fellow veterans are dwindling. His twin, Ryland Wells, died in 2002, and “we lose several a year now,” Robert Wells said. “Now there’s not near as many of us,” he said. Last year, 15 of the remaining members attended the reunion.

He has not returned to England or France since the war, but Wells said he has visited the National D-Day Memorial in Bedford “a lot of times” and plans to attend the 63rd reunion of his battalion this summer.

When they were drafted, Robert Wells was sent to Camp Shelby, Miss., while Ryland Wells was sent to Plattsburgh, N.Y. Back home, the identical twins attracted stares when they were together in public, so “when they separated us, we didn’t mind it,” Robert Wells said. However, “my mother wanted us to be together,” he said, and “without us knowing anything about it,” she wrote a letter to President Franklin Roosevelt asking that the brothers be placed together.

Wells said he doubts the president himself ever saw the letter, but someone granted their mother’s request. He had been at Camp Shelby for two or three weeks when the Army transferred him to his brother’s unit in New York.

The engineering unit first was deployed to Algeria in Northern Africa in the fall of 1943, he said. They originally were supposed to be sent to the Eastern Theater, but more engineers were needed for the D-Day invasion. After a month or two in Africa, the battalion traveled through Casablanca Morocco, to Liverpool, England, where its members started extensive training for landing on Utah Beach in Normandy.

On D-Day, June 6, 1944, Wells said, “The big casualties were in the 29th Division.” The 29th Division, which included soldiers from Martinsville and across Virginia, landed on Omaha Beach, which had “a big seawall” the troops had to surmount, he said, whereas the seawall at Utah Beach was smaller.

Wells’ engineering battalion was assigned to support the Fourth Infantry Division during the landing. Over the course of the war, Wells said, the battalion supported “20 to 30 different divisions, wherever they needed engineers.”

The engineers’ main tasks were “bridges and minefields,” he said. They were responsible for building bridges for troops and vehicles to cross as well as laying anti-tank mines.

Wells was wounded by a bullet on June 15 or 16, 1944, in France and was awarded the Military Order of the Purple Heart. He was evacuated to England and spent three months recuperating before meeting up with his company again in Aachen, Germany.

“I told my buddies from the company I’d been on vacation for three months,” Wells said with a laugh. When he was strong enough, he said, he was allowed to get a pass to leave the hospital and visit nearby English towns.

“I learned to drink hot tea over there,” Wells said. “I never even liked iced tea, but they do their tea like we do our coffee, with cream and sugar.”

After Wells recovered and was fit for duty, he was supposed to be assigned to a new unit. It was unusual for soldiers to return to the same unit after a long absence, he said. Instead, they were supposed to be sent wherever replacements were needed.

However, Wells’ lieutenant insisted on taking him back, so he returned to the same company and same platoon.

“I often think about that. I was lucky to go back to the same company,” Wells said. “If I’d gone to another company, I might’ve been in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

The 238th Engineers followed the Autobahn highway across Germany, building bridges behind them,” Wells said. “We built I don’t know how many bridges on the Autobahn.”

Most of the danger came from artillery or small arms fire as they were trying to build, he said. “If we didn’t have any interference, we could build a (small) bridge in less than an hour and have vehicles going across it,” Wells said.

Meanwhile, “the Air Force saved a lot of lives” by taking out German tanks and convoys from the air, he said. “Without the Air Force, we would’ve had many more casualties than we did.”

Toward the end of the war, the Germans “used older people, any age” to fight because so many of their men had been captured or killed, Wells said. Even 14-year-olds were fighting as part of the Hitler Youth.

Wells still has an intricate wooden model of a Sherman tank made by two German prisoners of war. He calls it one of his “curiosities.” Built into the tank is a calendar of dates from 1945 to 1950, and the date can be changed by moving the gun shaft.

Before he was discharged from the service in December 1945, Wells received quite a birthday present.

“My birthday was on the ninth of May. The war ended on the eighth, but we didn’t get the word until the ninth,” he said.

By that time, the battalion had made it almost to Berlin. They stayed in a little town and “operated as a military government until local government got situated,” Wells said. “I was just glad it was over,” he said.

Wells met his wife, Juanita, after the war, and they have been married almost 60 years.

Word Count 1749 (4 articles minus titles)

Submitted by Robert E. Wells

Sources Newspaper articles from 1943 and 2009; original letters written 1943 & 1944

Photo caption Corporals Robert E. Wells and Ryland T. Wells

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