

## **One Soldier's Story** – *by Kirk Filbey (US & Canada Correspondent)*

Over the last few years I have been researching my grandfather's service during World War 2. Starting with some initial research done by my uncle and a pile of assorted paperwork from my grandfather's belongings, I have slowly pieced together a detailed, but still incomplete record of his activities. This project has been an enlightening experience involving multiple visits to record archives, interviews with men who fought in my grandfather's unit, and countless hours pouring over faded reports, memoirs, and historical accounts. While this is par for the course for any genealogical research project, my quest has also revealed a completely new side of my grandfather, which had been a mystery to me for such a long time.

My grandfather, Robert Wesley Filbey, was born in 1924 in South Milwaukee in Wisconsin. Bob and his younger brother, James, were very active boys and grew up in a typical middle class family. In high school my grandfather seriously injured his back in a sledding accident. While he did recover, this injury would end up impacting the rest of his life. Meanwhile, far away in Poland, German troops moved across the frontier kicking off the start of World War 2.

In the fall of 1942 my grandfather was a freshman at the University of Illinois; the US had been at war for less than a year. In November 1942, Bob Filbey, along with most of his fraternity, enlisted in the military. Bob initially wanted to join the Navy but his back injury kept him out. In the end he joined the Army, but was placed in the enlisted reserve and received a deferment. I'm not sure if this deferment was also tied to his back injury, however he was able to complete his first year of college before being called to active duty in June 1943. Leaving his home in South Milwaukee, he traveled by bus to Camp Grant in Rockford, Illinois for in-processing and then was quickly put on a train bound for the Infantry Replacement Training Center at Camp Wolters in Mineral Wells, Texas. This would be his home for the next several months.

On 14<sup>th</sup> June, 1943, Bob Filbey was assigned to 4<sup>th</sup> Platoon, D Company, 60<sup>th</sup> Training Battalion and began his training to become an infantryman. The standard training program at Camp Wolters was 17 weeks however my grandfather did not leave the training center until March, 1944. I'm not sure why he was there for so long; it's one of the mysteries I'm still working on. I do know that he was in the hospital for a few weeks in July 1943 and again in February 1944 (once for a bad case of poison oak and again for his back I suspect). I also know he was a proficient marksman because he qualified on 5 or 6 different weapons. In any case, he finished up the course of training and finally received movement orders on 10<sup>th</sup> March, 1944, for Ground Forces Replacement Depot #1, Fort Meade, Maryland. My grandfather was given about a week of leave so he caught a train from Texas and made his way back to Milwaukee to visit with friends and family. During this visit he also got engaged to Lois Wilson (my future grandmother).

After arriving at Fort Meade, Bob spent a few weeks waiting for orders. The United

States was building up forces in England for the planned invasion of Europe that summer and so most troops expected to be sent to that theater. My grandfather was no exception; in early April he was sent to New York City and departed via ship for England on 6<sup>th</sup> April, 1944. He arrived either in Liverpool, England, or Clyde, Scotland, around 19<sup>th</sup> April, 1944, was placed on a train, and soon arrived at a camp near Treborough, Somerset, England. He was assigned to the 487<sup>th</sup> Replacement Company, 89<sup>th</sup> Replacement Battalion. Troops assigned to replacement camps continued with infantry training because eventually they would be assigned to combat units to replace casualties. Bob trained with the 487<sup>th</sup> from 21<sup>st</sup> April to 31<sup>st</sup> May, 1944. I don't have information on specific training he did however he may have taken part in some of the invasion practice exercises during that time. Unfortunately he was injured around 31<sup>st</sup> May. I don't know the nature of his injury, however I suspect it was associated with his back.

On 1<sup>st</sup> June, 1944, Bob was admitted to the 185<sup>th</sup> General Hospital in Bishops Lydeard, Somerset, England. On 9<sup>th</sup> June he was transferred to the 184<sup>th</sup> General Hospital in Mansfield, England. He was released from this hospital on 9<sup>th</sup> July, 1944, and reported on the following day to the 10<sup>th</sup> Replacement Depot in Lichfield, England. Sometime in the next two weeks he crossed the English Channel and landed on Omaha beach in Normandy, France. Once in France he was assigned to the 41<sup>st</sup> Replacement Battalion in Trevieres, France. The unit moved to Berigny, France and on 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 1944, Bob Filbey was assigned to K Company, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 38<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division.

My grandfather didn't have much time to get acquainted with his unit before being thrown into combat. On 4<sup>th</sup> August, Bob took part in an assault on the town of Vire, France. He was slightly wounded and received both a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star for the action. The 38<sup>th</sup> next attacked the town of Tinchbrey, France, on 14<sup>th</sup> August. This was a chaotic fight with changing battle lines. Bob was listed as missing in action for a few days before turning up in the 5<sup>th</sup> Evacuation Hospital severely wounded. I have no information on where he was from 18<sup>th</sup> August to 23<sup>rd</sup> October; however I suspect he was evacuated back to London to receive medical care and recover.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 1944, my grandfather reported back to his combat unit, however this time he was assigned to L Company. At this time the company was stationed in Buchet, Germany in a defensive position along the Siegfried Line. Unfortunately, the Germans decided to extensively shell this position on 24<sup>th</sup> October resulting in numerous casualties, however Bob emerged unscathed. L Company remained in this area from October to early December, rotating from the front to rest areas in Born and Vielsalm, Belgium. This part of the front was relatively quiet but both sides continued to exchange fire and the weather was cold and snowy. It was certainly no vacation spot.

In early December the 38<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment was pulled out of this part of the front to begin another combat operation to the north. Around 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> December, 1944, L Company left their positions in Buchet and moved to an assembly area in Kahlterherberg, Germany, not far from Camp Elsenborn, Belgium. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division was ordered to attack and secure the Roer River dams to the north because the Allied command feared the

Germans would release water from the dams and flood large areas as a defensive measure. From 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> December, the three regiments of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division were involved in a battle near the Wahlerschied Road junction. Terrible winter weather moved in, denying air cover for the US troops and allowing the Germans to continually shell the troops. Men on both sides of the conflict lived, fought, and died in absolutely horrible conditions before US troops secured the crossroads. The victory was short lived however as the Germans began their long planned counteroffensive, also known as the Battle of the Bulge on 16<sup>th</sup> December, which caught the Allied forces completely by surprise.

General Walter Robertson, commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division, quickly recognized the German attack in his sector was part of a larger offensive and quickly surmised the road junction running through the twin villages of Krinkelt/Rocherath; Belgium were key to controlling movement in the area. He immediately ordered the division to begin a pullback to the twin villages on 17<sup>th</sup> December. Since the 38<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment was closest to the villages, they were ordered to take up defensive positions in and around the villages. The regiment's mission was to hold the villages at all costs and allow the rest of the division and any other scattered US units to pass through and reorganize further back from the front lines on Elsenborn ridge. Despite being on the move, living out doors, under fire since the 13<sup>th</sup>, the 38<sup>th</sup> held the villages for the next three days, allowing the rest of the division to pull back. More importantly, the stand at the twin villages completely disrupted the northern half of the German's counterattack, helping doom the overall operation.

The 38<sup>th</sup> held off numerous German attacks on these critical villages. The US troops lacked air and armor support but they did have exceptional artillery support from the division. The battle in the villages was fought house to house with many areas being retaken by both sides. The fight went on day and night. The lack of armor support was particularly painful for the regiment, forcing the men to sneak up on German tanks at night to take them out with explosives. Late in the evening of 19<sup>th</sup> December, the regiment finally got orders to pull out of the villages. Sometime during this movement on the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup>, my grandfather was badly wounded from either German artillery or tank fire. Bob earned yet another purple heart and the entire battalion earned the distinguished unit citation. Bob was now out of the shooting war but next he had to fight to stay alive and recover.

After being patched up in Eupen, Belgium, my grandfather was evacuated to England and admitted to the 216<sup>th</sup> General Hospital in Longleat Park, Warminster, England. He remained there until 6<sup>th</sup> March, 1945, when he was transferred to the 316<sup>th</sup> Station Hospital in Cowglen Hospital, Glasgow, Scotland. On 13<sup>th</sup> March, 1945, he departed Gourock, Scotland, aboard the RMS Queen Elizabeth, arriving at Halloran Hospital, Staten Island, New York, on 20<sup>th</sup> March. Bob's next hospital was Kennedy General Hospital, Memphis, Tennessee and eventually in early 1946, Wakeman General Hospital, Camp Atterbury, Indiana. He was finally discharged on 17<sup>th</sup> August, 1946, having been promoted to private first class. He made it.

My grandfather was disabled for the rest of his life, walking with braces on his legs and a cane and carrying shrapnel in his body to the very end of his life. But he never gave up.

He married Lois Wilson and together they had four sons and a daughter. Bob had a long, successful career in the phone company, was extremely active in the Boy Scouts, and eventually retired to Florida. He lived to see all his children succeed, and his grandchildren start their lives. We have all inherited his stubbornness!

My grandfather was a regular guy who stepped up to defend his country and was thrust into the most significant event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He did everything that was asked of him and overcame every challenge to succeed in life. I wrote this account not to brag about my grandfather, but rather to show the fruits of my research over the last few years and perhaps inspire others to investigate their own families. We can't all be related to kings and queens and other famous personalities, but the "regular" people we are related to can be quite extraordinary.