

WORLD WAR II STORY

On Dec 7, 1941, my mother was driving to the old Wilson Country Club when a news bulletin came on the radio announcing the shocking news that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. Mother drove directly out on the golf course to find my father to tell him what had happened and told all the golfers that she passed driving down the fairways the grim news.

My father was 37 when the United States entered World War II, far beyond draft age or normal enlisting age, but in the words of boxing great Joe Louis when he enlisted, Daddy did what every red-blooded American would do and joined the army. I asked him once why he had decided to serve, and he said, "Son, either your mother was going or I was going, and it just seemed more appropriate for me to go."

He was first stationed in Miami, Florida for Officer's Candidate's School. One day he encountered a large crowd standing outside a shoe store. When he asked what was going on, he was informed that Clark Gable, who was also an Officer's Candidate's School, had gone in the shoe store and the crowd was waiting for him to come out. Daddy was also stationed in El Paso, Texas and Alma Gordo, New Mexico during his training and then was shipped to Italy.

He was a reconnaissance officer in Italy, and among his duties was writing the family of flyers who did not return from missions. I asked him if this was a difficult responsibility, and he said yes, but would never elaborate.

One Italian term that Daddy picked up while in Italy was "capishe" which means "do you understand." We were not allowed to use the term "shut up" in my household, but when Romaine and I were growing up, we learned that when Daddy said "capishe", the time for talking was over, and we had better do what he told us to do.

A story Jim Ellis told me many times involved bumping into my father in Italy. Jim was probably 14 or 15 when Daddy enlisted, but the boy my father had left in Wilson had later entered the service himself at age 16. They crossed paths in Italy; and when my father saw Jim, he was shocked and said, "Jimmy, what in the Hell are you doing over here?"

After Germany had surrendered, my father was at a movie in Italy when all of sudden all sorts of sirens started blaring. His first thought was that there was some sort of rogue air attack, and everybody left the movie to see what was going on. It turned out that Japan had finally surrendered and the people were celebrating VJ day.

I don't think many people take into consideration what a huge commitment service in WWII involved. Many soldiers were away from their families and away from their jobs for three to four years. It affected how the participants measured time. When I'd ask my father when something happened in his life, the answer would be either before the war, during the war, or after the war. Of course, he is among the fortunate soldiers who returned.

WORLD WAR II STORY (continued)

While my father was gone for over 3 years, someone had to manage his farms. Paul Darden, Sr. agreed to do this for my father. Mr. Darden not only made money for my father, but he actually used the profits to buy an adjacent farm for Daddy that he knew daddy would buy if he were home. When I was a little boy, Daddy had an office in the old Center Brick Warehouse on Goldsboro Street and Mr. Darden had an office there as well. When he'd take me down there, he would always tell me what Mr. Darden had done for him during the war. Needless to say, my father always felt greatly indebted to Mr. Darden.

Over the years I would periodically get calls from men passing through Wilson who said they had served with Daddy during World War II. The last one I received the man asked me if Daddy was still alive, and after I said he had died, the man said I'm not surprised, he was a great guy but he smoked too much. Sadly, these calls are getting fewer and farther between.

JIMMY WHITEHEAD STORY

Jimmy Whitehead, the father of Peter Connor, was head of Wilson County's home relief efforts to support our forces during WWI and WWII. One day while walking down Nash Street after WWII had begun, Mr. Whitehead encountered Wilson's legendary madam, Mallie Paul. Mr. Whitehead said, "Miss Mallie, I'm heading up the home relief efforts again in WWII and we are hoping that your girls will be as helpful in WWII as there were in WWI, knitting socks and toboggans for our soldiers." Miss Mallie responded, "Lord, Mr. Whitehead, I got the laziest group of whores you ever saw working for me right now. I'll be surprised if I can get them to knit a damn thing."