



Burnell Wollar interview -- May 16, 2011

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Burnell Wollar was 17 years old, living with his parents on Main Street in Barrington when he enlisted during World War II. "It was the thing to do," he said. "Everybody was going into the service."

The complexity of a teenaged boy marching off to save the world was lost on Wollar. "Everybody that was in service was my age or a couple of years older," he observed. "At that age you were able to do those things, but to even talk about it today...we just shake our heads."

His original intent was to join the Air Force, but an unknown disability stood in his way. "They said I was color blind to red and green," he said. "But they still wanted me so they put me in the Army."

He was soon off to Fort Benning in Georgia where he would undergo basic training, which was to take place over 13 weeks. However, after 10, the training was halted and the soldiers were dispatched to join regiments. "I wound up in the 343rd, Regimental Combat Team, part of the 86 Blackhawk Division in Louisiana," he said. "Then we continued our training all across the US."

There was a lot to learn about the military and not just about battle. After distinguishing himself by means of a screening test used to detect officer potential, Wollar was summoned for an interview. He found himself being questioned by a Commander who seemed to be a little confused. After noting Wollar's affinity for math, the Commander rattled off the Pythagorean Theorem, incorrectly. Wollar saluted and apologized to the Commander and respectfully corrected him. That action caused Wollar to be immediately dismissed as officer material. "I had questioned him. You don't do those things in service," Wollar recalled with an edge in his voice. "But I questioned that because he was wrong."



Wollar returned to his regiment which was soon shipped out to France. "We served in France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, crossed The Rhine River, fought the Battle of Rurh Pocket; that's where the largest number of Germans captured in the entire war. We captured 340,000 German troops," he said matter-of-factly, counting off the historically bloody battles.

"Then we were sent to Bavaria where we released a bunch of prisoners from Stalag 11, a Prisoner of War Camp," he continued. "We fought our way through Austria and Hungary and crossed over the Border of Czechoslovakia when the war was almost over."

The regiment was sent back to America, but not for long. After crossing the country, east to west, the soldiers were shipped to Luzan Island in the Philippines. "We were slated to be the second wave to go into Tokyo Harbor if necessary."

But the war was to end in an historical and decisive way with the dropping of Atom bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. According to Wollar, the news was a great relief to those preparing to overtake Japan. "Thank goodness they did or I wouldn't be here talking with you today," he said. "They told us flat out, if we had to invade the mainland of Japan we could expect 80 percent casualties."

The men had little understanding of the magnitude of destruction involved at the time, but have revisited the topic over the years. "At the reunions we've talked about this and we've all drawn the same conclusion: that we're sorry that it had to be done, but it was better than if the enemy had won."

Whatever the implications of the decision, the platoon's mission changed from invading to informing. They were told to make their way from the north end of the island to Clark Field where there were rumored to be 40,000 Japanese that didn't know the war was over. The men, along with two interpreters, yelled the news into every cave they came across. If there was no answer they were to close the cave entrance. Eventually, there was a response.

"A Japanese Major had come out, spoke fluent English; he'd been educated at Harvard," recalled Wollar. "He said he would surrender their troops provided they could carry their weapons."



Naturally, Staff Sargent Wollar wasn't willing to arm his former enemies, so he came up with a compromise. "I said, no knives or ammunition. So, we buried the ammunition or knives and had no problem. There were 240 men and six nurses."

Finally, the mission changed to one of mercy. "There wasn't a one that weighed more than 85 pounds. They hadn't had food for weeks." Over the course of three months the Japanese soldiers whose mission was to annihilate the Americans, were fed and tended to. "I think all of us felt we had a job to do, just as the enemy has a job to do," The 86-year-old Wollar recalled. "You do it the best you can."

It's not surprising that many of those that withstood the trials of that time remained life-long friends. "We have army reunions everywhere in the country every two years since World War II," Wollar said, and then after a beat, "There are only six of us left."

Despite the friendships made, Wollar makes no bones about the terror of waging war. "When you're on the front lines and someone's shooting at you; I don't care what anybody says you're scared and you're scared every day. All you can think about is, when's this going to end or when is the bullet aimed at me that has my name on it. But you do your job."

"You get a good feel for the mass destruction and mass death that took place and with a modern-day weaponry we have now, if a similar situation should arise, we could wipe the human race off the earth," Wollar said. "Anything we can do to prohibit it would be the way to go."