

Wilbur L. "Willie" Williams United States Army Air Corps 451st Bomb Group WWII



It was hard to believe that this vibrant man nicknamed Willie who takes care of his home, played softball until he was 62, mows his four acre yard, drives, bowls, plays golf is 90 years old. Wilbur L. Williams, the fifth child in a family of 8 children, was born to John and Lillian Williams in Reisterstown on September 23, 1925. He grew up on the family farm near where Rt. 795 starts now. His father worked at Mt. Pleasant, a TB hospital. As a child he attended a one room schoolhouse on Deer Park Road for grades 1 – 3 and then finished his education at Franklin Elementary/High School. His first job was an office job at the B&O Railroad and he didn't like working inside.

Willie's brother, Harry, already in the service was flying B-17's in the 463rd Bomb Group logging a total 203 missions. That's what Willie wanted to do, so he enlisted into the United States Army Air Corps as a fighter pilot. After basic training at Keesler Field in Biloxi, Mississippi his group was told that they didn't need any more pilots and that if they didn't want to go into the infantry that they should volunteer for gunnery school. So it was off to Tyndall Field in Panama City, Florida. After his training there were several stops before they reached their destination; the first was Charleston, South Carolina, then it was off to Mitchel Field on Long Island, then to

Canadian Forces Base at Goose Bay, Canada, then to the Azores (nine volcanic islands) in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, then to Marrakesh, Africa and on to their final destination at Foggia, Italy where they were to be based. Willie had heard that his brother was only 6 miles from there and he managed to get over there to see him. The rains had been heavy and the tents were flooded. When Willie arrived he wanted to surprise his brother and he jumped from behind the tent as his brother was bailing water. Needless to say it was a nice but short reunion. After Willie surprised his brother, he and Harry took his B-17 up and buzzed Willie's camp getting so low they blew all the tents over. They looked back and all the guys were running after them shaking their fists.

Willie was called to report to the order room where he was asked; "Do you want to fly?" He said "Yes Sir". He would be a tail gunner on his first mission. When the plane returned that day, there were 163 flak holes in their plane from anti-aircraft guns.

Willie says that the number 13 is his lucky number and when we heard the story we knew why. On his 13th mission on August 23, 1944, they shot a plane down and then they were shot down. He was 18 years old. The nose of his plane was blown off by anti-aircraft fire. Willie made his way up through the bomb bay where the bombs were still intact as they had not yet reached their target of Markersdorf, Austria. As he reached the front of the plane, he found the pilot, co-pilot, top gunner and nose gunner all dead with the plane on automatic pilot. The others had parachuted out. When he made his way back to the rear of the plane he knew he had to use his parachute. He noticed that the oxygen tanks were on fire. He grabbed his parachute and jumped at 25,000 feet. His parachute was burning. He managed to grab 9 shroud lines on his chute and was able to beat out the flames. Willie knows that landing in a snow bank is what saved him. He was in Yugoslavia with his arms and face burned. German reconnaissance planes were flying all around and in about an hour he was picked up by the Germans who told him that he was lucky that the villagers didn't get him first with their pitchforks. Some of his fellow airmen's chutes got hung up in trees and those men were shot while they hung there. On this day 79 planes went out and 60 were shot down. The 451st suffered their heaviest losses of the war on August 22 & 23, 1944.

Willie was held prisoner and first taken to a little shack with two women sitting at a desk. They asked "What are you doing here?" to which he answered, "What do you think I'm doing here?" The SS boys (an elite corps of the Nazi Party) hit him over the head. He was taken to a hospital in Budapest for his burns and on the second day there, he was blown out of his bed by a blast from a plane that missed their target. When he came out of the hospital, he was put into solitary confinement. They would give him a small bucket of warm water, salt and pepper and a cabbage leaf. He was there for 11 days. After 5 days he kicked the bucket in the guards face and was beaten.

He was then crowded onto a train with cars about 4 ft. wide and 15 ft. long and it rocked back and forth as it rode on wheels in the middle (probably a cog train). There were close to 3,000 Americans crowded in those cars on the train. They figured that the Germans would strafe them, but somehow the Americans found out and everyday American planes flew



Willie, left w/brother, Harry

over to protect them. They were being taken to a German prisoner of war camp known as Stalag #4 located in Gross Tychow, Pomerania (now Tychowo, Poland).

It was cold with the temperature between 10 and 20 degrees. The prisoners had nothing but a shirt and pants and there was no bedding so sleep was on the bare floor. Food for the prisoners consisted of a 3 gallon bucket of silver dollar sized potatoes for each barrack. When Willie was captured he weighed 162 pounds and when he was liberated he weighed 92 pounds. While they were held prisoner, they did everything they could to upset the Germans. Every day they had to line up and be counted. There was an Italian boy who was only 4 foot tall. They would place him behind one of the taller guys and then the Germans would count again and again and finally those in Willie's building would take him from behind and place him at the end and the Germans got the correct count. The prisoners did this every day and the Germans kept counting and recounting. Willie remembers that there were about 10 buildings in his camp with about 65 men each building.

On February 19, 1945, they were told that the Russians were coming. The men of Stalag Luft IV camp set out on a march, with other Stalags along the way, towards Germany that would be called the "Death March", the idea being to delay liberation. The march from Gross Tychow lasted approximately 86 days. They were forced to march under guard about 15-20 miles per day. There was much zigzagging, to escape the encroaching Soviet Red Army from the east. At one time, they traveled 40 miles, only advancing a few. Willie especially remembers that on one of the walks, they were taken through Nuremburg where they saw the horrors of the concentration camps with bodies all around. It is something he wishes that he hadn't seen. About 200 men died during these walks due to sickness.

On these walks or marches as they were sometimes referred to, prisoners far outnumbered the guards. Germany could not spare many regular soldiers which is why some of the guards were older. One of his guards was about 70 years old who wore the Iron Cross from WWI and carried a MG-42 gun on his shoulder. He and Willie became pretty close and though there was a language barrier, words were still understood. One night when Willie was sitting in a ditch, he felt a tap on his shoulder and his guard whispered to him, "This is senseless" and he walked away. A little while later he came back, tapped him on the shoulder again and said "Me sorry", disappeared into the woods. Willie heard a gunshot and he never saw that guard again.

His camp was liberated on April 25, 1945 by the 104th Infantry. He remembers that there were 4 roads leading to a central location where the prisoners would wait to be picked up to head home. Seeing prisoners running down these roads was a sight that is still very clear to him. Finally they heard the roar of 3 or 4 C46's & C47's coming to take them to Le Havre, France. From there they came home on a Liberty Ship with a capacity of 1500, but there were at least 2500 men on his ship. Two days out they lost a motor; got it fixed, then after 3 more days, two motors went out and they were finally able to get them fixed. It took 10 days to reach their destination of Hampton Roads, Virginia. Willie tells that they were about to dock and the captain sounded his horn and it scared them so bad that 15 of the soldiers fell overboard. Ropes were thrown over the sides to pull them back onto the ship.

After Willie returned home, he went to work as a pole climber for C & P Telephone for 32 years until retiring. He and his wife have a son and a daughter and two grandchildren. His wife passed away in 2003. Willie said that while he was over there, he made up his mind that he was going to return home to his family and he did. Willie is a close friend of Post 200 member, Tommy Wickline, Jr. and a member of American Legion Carroll Post 31. He is proud to have served his country, and for his sacrifice and his service, we sincerely thank him.

