

SAGA OF A WILDMAN

This is the name of Ralph Edward Wildman's notes that he wrote when the doctors told him that he had bone cancer and needed to go home and get his affairs in order. He was encouraged by his wife, Betty Marie (Dawson) Wildman to write of the good memories of his life. As his daughter, Joyce Ellen (Wildman) Robbins, I will try to translate some of the details that he put into print.

Ralph Edward Wildman was born July 30, 1923, when they lived on a farm one mile south of Newtown, Indiana. He was the son of Fenton and Pauline (Greve) Wildman. There were many good memories on this farm. At four or five years old, everything seemed big and beautiful. Dad would stand on the barnyard gate and watch his dad come in from the fields each day. Grandpa had a team of big white horses and Dad liked watching the dust fly up in big clouds from their feet hitting the ground.

Dad talked about their big move in 1928, into Newtown. Grandpa hitched the horses to the wagon and they were off to a long two mile trip. When living in Newtown there were more good memories. They would cut up potatoes, each having an eye. Grandpa dropped the potato piece into the ground and stepped on it. Dad and the other kids were told this was done so the potatoes could see to grow.

In 1932 grandpa and grandma sold the home and truck in Newtown and moved to the farm in March. The drift of snow was so high that several men came out from Newtown to help grandpa dig out so he could deliver the mail. This was a bad year, because Dad was eight or nine and he and his five year old sister played out in the snow barefooted. Dad was home from school with whooping cough, but they went out in the snow anyway, until Grandma caught them. Dad said even though they didn't realize at that age how serious what they done was; Rena died. Dad said that he would have to live with this the rest of his life. Dad said that it was a sad year, because grandma didn't sing all of the time anymore and grandpa didn't whistle anymore.

Grandma taught the five girls good housekeeping and how to cook. Grandpa taught the five boys how to farm and fix any of the machinery, as well as good livestock breeding. In a few years the farm was the second highest producing farm in Fountain County. Dad said that when they were working with the mules in the field and the fire siren at Newtown blew at noon, the old mules would stop and not go another round; the boys had to go in for lunch.

The summer that dad was 16, he sold his dairy cow and bought a 1929 four door Ford. He was the only one to have a car, in his class, that year. The summer between dad's junior and

senior year, he had an ice route. Grandpa helped him set up his ice route, like the one grandpa had a few years before. After the electric refrigerators came out, grandpa bought grandma one. Then they stored a lot of their tools in the old ice box.

December 1942, dad enlisted in the airforce and basic training was at Miami Beach, Florida. After basic dad was shipped to Amarillo, Texas, where he took airplane mechanic school training. He was grateful that his dad had showed him this kind of work on the farm. Because of his good grades, the instructor wanted him to go to pilot training. After graduating he was told that he had a choice of gunnery school or cook school. He knew how to slop hogs, but didn't want to cook, so he got to fly after all. He took his first phase flying at Moses Lake, Washington and this is where they picked up the crew that he would spend the rest of his airforce time with.

At Moses Lake is where he picked up his nickname; "Daddy." He got up each morning at 6:00 a.m. on the farm and this habit carried over and he didn't need an alarm clock. There was only one time it was hard to get one of the boys up. It was cold and as he passed this guy's cot, dad took all of his bed covers with him.

My mother's (Betty Merie (Dawson) Wildman, birthday was in October and he didn't know if they were going to get to go on a furlough, so dad sent her money so she could buy herself a cedar hope chest. They did get the furlough and he gave her an engagement ring while home.

Dad had to take a train back to Moses Lake to pick up what clothes he hadn't brought with him. They were then sent to Soux City, Iowa. They did a lot of flying at Soux City for target practice and done some night flying.

Mother said that she would try to come out to see dad before he went overseas. He told her that if she did, she would not go home single. They were married December 23, 1943, in Soux City, Iowa. Dad's radio man, George Wright and his wife from Pennsylvania, stood up with them. George and Jo had just gotten married the week before.

Christmas morning, two days after the wedding, the crew had to pick up two planes in Nebraska. They didn't get to have Christmas dinner with their wives. They would put five men on each plane. After picking up the planes, they headed for Goose Bay, Labrador. After a couple days there, they took off for England. After taking off, one of the generators regulators quit working. Dad had to ground the plane, because all things had to work before they could cross the water. They were ready to leave for England again, but was held back, because someone with a childhood disease, brought a quarentine; another week.

They took off and landed at Nuts Corner, Ireland, 8 ½ hours later. The next day they went by boat from Belfast to Liverpool, England. They then took a train to their base at Horham, England. Dad and Earl had to take the planes up for test flying.

March the 4th was the real first daylight raid over Berlin in 1944. Dad said, "How well he could remember. That was his first mission. That was also his mother's birthday and she was 44."

Dad said that the weather was so bad that day, that with a full load of bombs they couldn't get over 27,000 feet. They tried it three days before all three fields made it. The weather was so bad that the German fighters wouldn't come after them until the 8th. When they would come out of the clouds there would be a bunch of their own bombers; how did they not crash into each other.

Dates from Dad's notes

1942	December 5	Left for airforce from Lafayette, Indiana
	8	Sworn in airforce at Indianapolis, Indiana
	12	Basic training at Miami, Florida
1943	January 1	Airplane Mechanic training at Amarillo, Texas
	31	Gunnery school training at Las Vegas, Nevada
	August 5	Salt Lake, Utah for overseas physical
	10	First phase flying – Moses Lake, Washington
	Nov. 2	2 nd and 3 rd phase flying
	Dec. 25	Pick up planes for overseas at Kearney, Nebraska
1944	January 12	Trouble after take off at Goosebay, Labrador
	17	Landed overseas at Nuts Corner, Ireland
	19	Went on train to Stock-on-trent, England
	20	Went on train to Stone, England This is where they had to serve until records were cleared. After Leaser convinced them that their whole crew was there and accounted for, then they let them go.
	February 15	Learned of their base assignment when they went to Hemstead and Boxmore, England
	21	New home base from Horham, England
	March 4-7	Tried to get to Berlin; bad weather – Only made it to the I.P. the fourth – Browney and his plane went on in.
	8	Berlin again – made it this time; Plane #882 first sight of German fighters
	19	Bordeaux, France Lost 5 planes

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| March | 22 | Berlin plane @999 | Lost 64 planes; could have walked on the flack it was so bad |
| | 23 | Burnswick plane #876 | lost 33 planes – almost crashed in air do to the vaper trails |
| | 27 | Bordeaux, France plane #869 | lost 15 planes, but did good on the rail yards |
| | 28 | Chateaudum plane # 869 | lost 6 planes; did good job |
| | 31 | Scrubbed plane #320 | one man killed by a prop after landing |
| April | 1 | Ludwigshafen plane #320 | Scrubbed 30 minutes from target do to bad weather |
| | 10 | Paris plane #320 | lost one plane; Had 3 engines ready to quit any minute when they landed; full of flack |
| | 18 | Berlin plane #320 | lost 10 planes |
| | 19 | Werie plane #999 | lost no planes; Dad's plane was lead plane that day. Carried 500 pound bombs under each wing besides having a bombay full of bombs. |
| | 20 | Cherbourg plane #882 | lost no planes |
| | 21 | Lepzig plane #882 | lost no planes was called back because of weather |
| | 22 | Hamm plane #882 | lost 2 planes |
| | 24 | Fredrichstrasse plane #882 | lost 2 planes; two went to Switzerland, because were in to bad of shape to make it home |
| | 25 | Dijion, France plane #054 | lost no planes good job |
| | 28 | Cherbourg plane #320 | lost no planes |

April 29

plane #320 lost 66 four engine bombers and 11 fighters; Lost two engines over Berline, ran out of gas and crached in the North Sea

The day they went down a shell had gone through the number 2 engine, taking the left landing gear with it. With only two engines, the pilot was having a hard time holding the plane at 6000 feet. Dad told the crew to throughout all the guns, flack suits, and ammunition to make the plane lighter. The pilots handled the plane very well as it hit the water at 90 MPR. All but the pilots set on the floor in the radio room, with their backs to the bombay door. Dad was last in line, which put him over the camera hatch. Being the lead plane, they had the camera with them. When they hit the water, the water came through the hatch and dad went up in the air and came down on the radio table. When he got up he pulled the two levers that put a rubber raft on each wing. Dad had forgotten the S,O.S. machine and had to go back into the radio room to get it.

The raft that the officers were in had a few flack holes in it. It turned over and dumped them into the very cold North Sea. Dad said that he didn't even think he would get his breath back. The pilot was the last to get back into the raft, froze his feet and they had to help Leaser walk for two days.

The S.O.S. had been picked up and two P-51s circled over them and relayed their location to the rescue group in England. The Germans fired at the P 51s and one got hit, but it didn't bring it down.

The Germans came out and picked them up off the coast of Holland. Dad said that there were acres and acres of beautiful tulips in bloom.

April 30, 1944 Germans took them as prisoners after 25 hours in a rubber raft

May 8 Got to Luft prison camp #6 in east Prussia; Got first food since being shot down, only boiled grass. The interrogators were taking them into a building, one at a time. It was raining and cold and a guard at the door was standing on a roofed four by four stoop. Dad was next in line and went to step up under the roof and the guard said, "nix, nix." Dad didn't know that he could speak English and said something unclear. Dad ended up in the mud at the guard's feet and was beat with the butt of a gun. Dad didn't ever think he would get up, because it felt that the gun butt went clear through him the first time. When they wanted to know anything, dad would just give them his dogtags. They got mad at him and put him in the cooler for three days and nights. They would turn the heat up until he sweat and then make it so cold that he thought he would freeze. Dad could hear water dripping all the time, but never knew where it was.

July 15 Left Luft #6 on train, then boat across the Baltic Sea and the march down through Poland

16 & 17 Down in a hole of a ship of some kind.

Then they put them in chains and handcuffs and left them standing in the noon sun until the guards from Luft #4 came for them. Still handcuffed, a tall man like dad and a shorter man, were expected to run to camp #4. If the dogs that the guards brought with them, got close to them, dad would drag the guy handcuffed to him, to the other side of the road. One police dog started to bite a guy and the man had a guitar and made a collar for the dog. The dog went mad and the guard had to shoot the dog.

Got to Luft #4 in Pomeraina. The commander of the camp was an old Prussian Col. He would search until he found our radio, then take it. He would give it back for so many chocolate bars that were given to the men by the Red Cross. While in that camp they were given a bowl of cooked barley, two potatoes and a loaf of bread. Each one got two slices of bread a day. The guys called it sawdust bread, because it was rolled in sawdust instead of being put in a wrapper. It was so cold there that their shoes would freeze to the floor. They were each given a blanket, so they slept two together to have two blankets on them for warmth.

A guard that they called Pop, said that they were just waiting on American officers in a jeep to come and get them. Pop said that they were trained men from American's death row and that they carried knives and could take your head off with a piano wire. Just before noon here come the officers in a jeep. They led them through a big woods full of German tanks who had put all of their ammo on the ground. A little farther on they saw American trucks lined up to take them to a camp somewhere. Dad was so overjoyed that he didn't remember the name of the camp. He thought it might have been called, Lucky Strike.

Three or four weeks went by and General Ike told the guys that he was going to put them on a boat; you are going home. They were moved from one place to another in semi trucks. M.P. went down each side of the semi so they didn't have to slow down on the way to the ship.

Dad weighted 180 pounds the day they were shot down and he weighted 111 pounds when liberated. He was a tall 6 foot man, I can't even imagine how gaunt he must have looked.

Got back into the United States on June 18, 1945 and given 30 day furlough. June 24, 1945 got back into Crawfordsville, Indiana U.S.A. Betty (mom) was in hair curlers and it was after 11:00p.m. Dad had not heard from her in 7 months and didn't realize she had moved to Indianapolis and given up her Crawfordsville apartment. She happen to be out at her folks for the weekend. This was called Smartsburg, which is 4 miles east of Crawfordsville.

Dad received his discharge October 15, 1945. The folks lived a mile south of Newtown, where dad had lived from 8 years old until he went to the service. Their first child, Joyce Ellen, was born while living there.

Mother had saved up her allotment checks and Dad's back pay for the year in P.O.W. camp, so they were able to start up farming on a small scale. They bought the farm at Smartsburg, Indiana, that belonged to my grandparents.

Joyce was their only daughter and Fredrick Karl (German spelling) was their only son. He was born in Crawfordsville September 22, 1947. When they moved to Crawfordsville, giving up farming, mother's dad, Grandpa Dawson, gave dad his first job; Dawson and Sons roofing and building. Dad lateer went to R.R. Donelly Printing until he broke out with ink allergies. Dad had worked in grain mills, but most of his life was in construction; remodeling old homes and building new ones.

When he bought a new 1969 Grand Prix Pontiac, he cut the top of the steering wheel off, so it would look like the ones they had on their B-17 Flying Fortress.

After we kids were gone from home the floks traveled a lot. They went to San Francisco. At noon one day they met Diane Leaser (Dad's pilot's daughter) for lunch. She took them to a quaint Italian restrant. By this time Earl and Gerry Leaser had been transfered to Washington D.C.

Another trip was out east where they visited Earl and Gerry Leaser. Earl was still stationed in the Pentagon. They took the folks on a tour of the Pentagon and they got to sit in Earl's big chair in his office. Before Earl went to Washington D.C., he was commander of Travis Air Force base in California. In 1973, mother went to Tony Hulaman and ask him if he could send some 500 race tickets, because the Leasers were coming to town; he obliged.

August 16, 1989 is the end of dad's notes and the last paragraph says: Here is wishing everybody many more beautiful days like today. May all of our grandchildren raise their children the way God would have them to be.

Dad always honored his parents, because they taught right from wrong. They did not yell at any of the kids or tell them but once. They told them in a quiet voice. The kids done what they were told or suffwered the consequences.

Ralph Edward Wildman died September 17, 1994 and Betty Marie (Dawson) Wikldman followed him in death on September 27, 1998. They are buried together in the new Crown Hill Cemetary south of Crawfordsville, Indiana U.S.A

9. Joyce Robbins (daughter of Ralph Wildman)



Betty and Ralph Wildman Wedding Picture
Taken 1945, Indianapolis, IN



Ray and Atlyn Mueller.
Ray was B-17 bomber's navigator

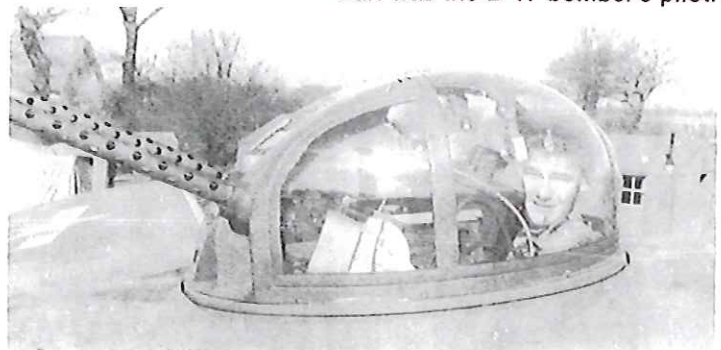


Col. Earl and Gerry Leaser
with sons Scott and Steve
Earl was the B-17 bomber's pilot.

Service and Friends

Crew: - Horham, England 1944

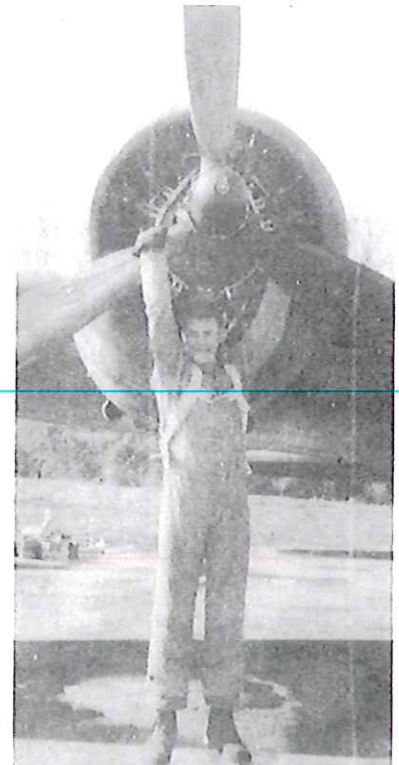
Back Row: Bill Glass (Ohio), Howard Ericson (Iowa), Bill Miller (PA), Ralph Wildman (IN), Bill Hollman (Texas), George Wright (PA), Owen Irby (ARK), Earl Leaser (PA), Kenneth Broden (WASH), Ray Mueller (WIS)



Ralph, Engineer and Top Turrett Gunner,
in the top turrett of the B-17. England, 1944



Ralph E. Wildman B-17 Bomber
before a mission in England, 1944





T/Sgt. Ralph E. Wildman,
London, England 1944