

Commemoration American Christmas Eve 1944 – December 24, 2012

Dear Friends,

My name is Robert Wisler. I was one of more than 16 million Americans who served in the U.S. military in World War II. I was born on Christmas Day – December 25th – 1924 to Oscar and Jeanette Wisler in the small town of Galion, Ohio, USA. It was here, in this cave outside of Maastricht, that I celebrated my 20th birthday at the Christmas Eve 1944 Midnight Mass, made possible by the Brothers of the Immaculate Conception. It was a memorable evening and a moving tribute to the US military. I have thought about that Mass and the men that I shared it with on many occasions. Most of those that were here served on the front lines. Many of them lost their lives shortly afterwards in the war. Most of those that did survive the war have since passed. It has been said that I am one of the last, if not the last surviving soldier from that evening. I am very honored to provide some thoughts about that evening in 1944.

When Germany invaded Poland and Europe went to war to defeat Hitler, I was a junior in high school. At that time, there was no TV and we only had the radio or newspapers to let us know what was happening in Europe and around the world. My dad had our family listen to every radio broadcast by President Roosevelt and any news about the war. By 1941 we knew that the U.S. might soon become involved. My older brother, Chuck, had enlisted in the Army Air Corp early in 1941 and trained as a pilot, flying a P39 airplane. We were all very proud of him when he earned his wings, but worried about his safety. I can clearly remember how difficult it was on our family, especially for my parents, when he was killed on October 26, 1942 in a training accident in Florida. Before his death, I had wanted to join the Air Corp as well to be a pilot, but when Chuck died, I promised my mother that I would not.

On March 8, 1943, I was drafted into the U.S. Army. Eventually, I was assigned to the 154th Anti Aircraft Artillery operations detachment of the 55th AAA brigade in the 3rd army. Our unit landed at Normandy six days after the start of the invasion. As the allied troops pushed Hitler's army back toward Germany during the summer and autumn of 1944, our unit advanced through France and Belgium. The Netherlands were liberated in September of 1944 and our unit arrived in Maastricht sometime in late November or early December. Our operation was set up just outside a cave on the property owned by the Brothers of the Immaculate Conception. There was a retreat center in the middle of the grounds that was used by some of the men as a dormitory and the mess hall was in that building as well. I was the supply sergeant for our unit. Because part of my responsibility was to keep supplies secure, my partner, Joe Dzomba, and I slept in the supply tent every night that winter, just outside one of the entrances to this cave. I remember that winter to be very cold.

I have forgotten most of the men in our unit, but remember John Konchack, Joe Moschel, Bill Kerr, Bill Fuchs, Gordon Cree, Jim Erb, Wayne Edgington, Tom Costello, Snider, Fox and Roth. I saw a few of these guys a couple of times after the war, but really lost touch with all of them within a few years. One of the guys in my unit, Sal Barravechia, was a quiet guy and a bit of an artist. Shortly after we arrived on the property, he began drawing a mural on one of the walls in the cave.

As Christmas approached, the Brothers posted a notice that there would be a midnight Mass for the troops in the area on Christmas Eve. They made a space on one of the walls for those attending the Mass to sign their names. A few days before the Mass, a couple of guys from our unit and I hung an American flag. Most of the men in our unit were not Catholic, but, from what I recall, there were about 200 people that attended the Mass that evening, including Dzomba, Fuchs and myself. What became known as the Battle of the Bulge was taking place at this time in Belgium. Although I did not know any of the infantrymen that were there that night, there were many that came in from the front lines, only to return a day or two later. We were all very grateful that the Brothers had organized this Mass. Even though the Allies had pushed the Germans back, the outcome of the war was still uncertain. All of us, especially those on the front lines, were tired, cold and far from home. Mass was familiar. It helped us think of family and home, yet realize how important and serious our job was. I have little doubt that some of those that attended lost their lives a short time later in the war.

After my discharge from the Army in October, 1945 I came back to Galion, happy to be with family and eager to start my new life. A short time later, I met Carol and we married on June 5th 1946. Together, we had 5 sons – Don, Jim, Chuck, Jerry and Bob. Our family has been very blessed. All 5 of our sons have done well, and each has been married between 25 and 40 years. Today we have 15 grandchildren and 13, soon to be 15, great grandchildren.

In 1974, Carol, three of our sons (Jim, Jerry and Bob) and I visited Maastricht. After an adventurous search, we were able to find one of the brothers who took us to the cave. I recognized a number of the names on the wall. The kids were surprised when we found my signature and the American flag, still in good condition. Don and his wife visited the cave in the summer of 2012.

As I look back over my life, there is much that I am grateful for. Carol and I are in good health for 88 and 87 years of age. We have had a good life and for that we thank God. I was fortunate to have served in the Army and able to return home to my family and then start a family of my own. So many were not so lucky.

Unfortunately, war is sometimes necessary. I believe WWII was one of those wars. I am proud to have been a part of the U.S. military and the allied efforts to stop the aggression. It is my sincere hope that someday we are able to learn to get along and war becomes unnecessary. Until that time, let us never forget the suffering and hardships that it causes. There were an estimated 72 million people, soldiers and civilians, who died during this war, including over 400,000 American servicemen and women.

Time passes all too quickly. It has been 68 years since that Mass and 38 years since my return to Maastricht and my last visit to this cave. I am very grateful for the Dutch people and their heroic efforts during the war, as well as the Shak 1944 committee and all who have helped these past several years to restore this cave and keep alive the memory of the American soldiers, especially those who attended that midnight Mass in 1944. It will help future generations better understand what American soldiers did and how the world came together to restore peace to Europe in the mid 20th century.

I hope that you say a prayer this evening for all those who served. Merry Christmas. May God bless you all.

Sincerely, Robert Wisler (December 2012)

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