

# 70 years later, we remember

A son to remember division of late WWII-veteran father on V-J Day anniversary

I lost my father, Lt. Col. Wilber E. Bradt, to suicide shortly after the end of World War II. He had been called into Federal Service with New England's 43rd Infantry Division in 1941, months before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

Nineteen months of stateside training preceded a full three years overseas with combat in the Solomon Islands, New Guinea, and The Philippines. And now, 70 years after V-J Day, on August 15th, the 43rd New Englanders are being honored in Texas.

Wilber was the commander of a field artillery battalion of about 500 men during the aforementioned combat. He was wounded twice and earned a silver star for personal heroism three times in the Philippines.

If America had invaded the Japanese homeland in November 1945, as planned, he would have commanded an infantry regiment that would have landed in the first wave on southeast Kyushu. That landing was a guaranteed bloodbath.

But it never happened; the two atomic bombs dropped on Japan cities and the entry of the Soviet Union into the war against Japan brought the war to a close.

The relief was palpable but quiet and restrained, "no promiscuous firing [of guns] no one hurt, and no regrets

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**By Hale Bradt**  
GUEST COLUMN

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[unlike.] the hysteria elsewhere," he wrote.

Of course, at home, we were elated that we would soon see him again. But then, we—my sister Valerie, our mother Norma, and I—were stunned to suddenly lose him shortly after his return home.

He was 45, I was one week shy of my 15th birthday and it was the day after Norma's 40th.

Thirty-five years later, on my 50th birthday in 1980, I came across a dozen letters he had written to me during the war. I was smitten by how well they were written—they were descriptive, vivid, poetic, loving and insightful.

This sent me on a search for more and soon I had accumulated about 700 of them. They sent me on a quest for more information about his wartime experiences and his relationship with Norma.

I visited archives, interviewed his military colleagues and siblings, and even visited the Pacific battlefields he had written about so vividly. This was all in the 1980s when many of the wartime participants were still alive.

Norma's story is dramatic and heroic in its own right. When Wilber's national-guard unit was called to active duty in 1941, she moved with her

two preteen children to New York City to further her career ambitions and faced her own personal challenges there. Her story exemplifies the hurdles military families face when a loved one is deployed overseas into combat.

It is now another 35 years since I first discovered those dozen letters and a full 70 years since the war's end and the loss of my father. In the past few years I have finally cast the family story into a form for the general public. It is fortunate that I am still here to tell the story, as I am now 84.

New England's 43rd Infantry Division, Wilber's unit, was only the third army division to reach the Pacific during the early frightening months of the war—the Japanese were still on the march—and the 43rd was the only one of those divisions to go all the way to Japan.

I was saddened on a recent visit to the National Museum of the Pacific War in the Texas Hill Country at Fredericksburg, to note that there was no memorial to the 43rd Division, although its beautiful memorial garden featured thousands of memorials to individuals and other military units.

Hence I commissioned a large 43rd division memorial plaque and four smaller individual memorials, and they have recently been mounted

in a prominent place in the museum's memorial garden.

Those memorials will be dedicated at the Museum at 11 a.m. Saturday, Aug. 15 (with refreshments and conversation at 10), the day after V-J Day. (There is no charge for the dedication and the associated talk.)

The dedication service will be followed by an illustrated talk by me about the saga of the 43rd Division in the Pacific Theater and by an opportunity to visit the impressive museum displays.

There aren't many 43rd Division WW II vets still around, so the dedication event is likely to be sparsely attended.

We would welcome other military supporters in the area who wish to join us in honoring that New England outfit 70 years after the war's end.

Hale Bradt served in the U.S. Navy during the Korean War. He is Professor of Physics, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he specialized in astrophysics as an x-ray astronomer. He is the author of "Wilber's War: An American Family's Journey through World War II," which is being published on Aug. 14, the 70th anniversary of V-J Day. See [www.wilberswar.com](http://www.wilberswar.com)

