



## ***Wilber's War: An American Family's Journey through World War II***

By Hale Bradt. Salem, MA: Van Dorn Books, 2016. ISBN 978-0-9908544-0-1. Maps. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. Pp. cxii, 1,000. \$125.00.

It is rare to find a work of military history that encompasses both the spheres of war and that of the family left behind, yet this is exactly what Hale Bradt captures in *Wilber's War*. World War II dragged on for four long years, and it took its toll on both the individuals caught up in the conflict and their families back in the States. Bradt's work was born out of years of individual research and analysis of his father's letters. What resulted is three volumes encompassing one of the best summaries of the American wartime experience from 1941 to 1945.

Bradt's father, Wilber, is the main subject of the work. Wilber was an unlikely warrior: a chemistry professor from Indiana who joined the National Guard as an officer before the war. He moved to Maine from Washington State with his wife Norma and their children to take a position teaching chemistry at the University of Maine. As part of the process, he transferred to the Maine National Guard's 152d Field Artillery Regiment. In 1941, this unit was called up to active duty for one year as part of the 43d Division, to take part in the Louisiana and Carolina Maneuvers. After the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, the division's orders were extended indefinitely, beginning the Bradt family's saga through World War II.

Readers follow the story through Wilber's extensive and detailed letter writing to his family, and their letters back to him. It is here that Wilber's

journey through the blood and carnage of the Pacific begins. Serving with the field artillery through the Solomon Islands, Wilber witnessed jungle warfare firsthand and put it into living detail in his letters home. As commander of the 152d Field Artillery Battalion in 1945, Wilber led his men during the invasion of Luzon, bringing his guns forward with the first infantry waves. By the end of the war, he commanded the 172d Infantry Regiment, a significant achievement for an artilleryman. Wilber was a humble man, and only makes casual mention of his Purple Hearts and two Silver Stars. His letters, combined with narration from his son, give a unique and honest view of the war on the ground.

The war left scars on the home front, as well, as Bradt relates. In astonishing frankness, he tells the story of his mother's affair that left her pregnant, and how she tried to keep it from her children by sending them off to summer camps and boarding schools. It is a story of human beings, flawed as they are, making the best out of incredibly trying circumstances in wartime.

War does not end when service members return home. Wilber was evidently suffering from his experiences, as Bradt relates the day when he heard that his father took his own life, shortly after coming home. It is a heartbreaking story, but one with contemporary application when one considers the suicide rate amongst veterans today.

Each of the three volumes is broken

into three parts: the first outlining the family's pre-war life, the second with combat in 1943 to 1944, and the last book concluding with the campaign on Luzon, Wilber's return home, and the tragedy of his death. Hale Bradt operates as the narrator, providing historical background and his own personal memories. He did extensive research, travelling to many of the places his father was in combat, and interviewing his father's comrades. He even spoke with one of the Japanese commanders who fought against his father. Each volume is replete with photographs, operational maps, and Wilber's own sketches. It is a gold mine for those interested in the war in the Pacific, specifically the operations of the 43d Infantry Division.

Students of history and casual readers alike will be drawn in by Bradt's engaging and personal style of writing. The story will bring appreciation for all that our veterans and their families have endured.

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