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## Review Essay

# A Soldier, His Family, and the Impact of the Pacific War, 1942–1945



William S. Dudley

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*Wilber's War: An American Family's Journey through World War II*, 3 vols. By Hale V. Bradt. Book 1, *Citizen Soldier*, xxii, 333 pp.; Book 2, *Combat and New Life*, xxxviii, 343 pp.; Book 3, *Victory and Homecoming*, xxxix, 319 pp. Salem, Mass.: Van Dorn Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-990854401. Charts. Maps. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. \$125.00.

This is a fascinating, original biography of a World War II artillery officer in the Pacific War and his family's lives on the home front. Hale Bradt tells a complex tale of the son of a midwestern farming family caught up in the early twentieth century's upheavals of World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II. This lengthy account is contained in three volumes, totaling about 1,000 pages of text. It's a time-consuming but rewarding read for its tolerance and understanding of the family members who at the time were under considerable stress.

The biographer is the son of Wilber Bradt, a graduate of Indiana University who became a college chemistry professor and later a much decorated artillery officer. He survived all the risks of war only to confront apparently insurmountable family problems coupled with postwar readjustment on his homecoming. The

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William S. Dudley served as the Director of the Naval Historical Center (now the Naval History and Heritage Command) from 1995 to 2004. He was the original and series editor of *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History*, 3 vols. (1985–2002). Since retirement in 2004, he has written "United States Navy, 1775 to Present" in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Maritime History* (2007) and co-authored, with Scott Harmon, *The Naval War of 1812: America's Second War of Independence* (2013).

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narratives of soldiers of World War II who came home to disrupted homes are not uncommon, but the detail and depth with which these issues are treated, through hundreds of family letters and oral history anecdotes, make this story unique. In fact, the final act of this drama is nothing less than a tragedy that plays out in the heady days of postwar America.

Rarely do we meet such sexual frankness and emotional pathos as are presented in these family letters from Wilbur Bradt to his wife Norma during his three years absence in the Pacific. Likewise, he diligently wrote to his father Hale Bradt, a retired high school teacher. There is a tortured correspondence between Wilber and his mother Elizabeth who felt he should have paid back the money they had loaned him for college before he entered the service, and who had disapproved of the way he and Norma had married hastily without introducing her to the family. Letters between Wilber and his children Hale, Jr., and Valerie show how the absent father tried to counsel and entertain them to make up for his absence half a world away. Interesting, too, are the letters he exchanged with his brother, as well as colleagues and superiors at the University of Maine, trying to ensure he would have a job there after the war. The author reproduces portions of many letters as illustrations and others are transcribed when they are germane to the story.

In the research and writing of this account, the author followed his father's footsteps based on his extensive family correspondence, and the record of his service in prewar National Guard artillery and infantry regiments while he taught at Indiana University, the University of Cincinnati, Washington State University at Pullman, and the University of Maine at Orono. Wilber Bradt was a solid, hard-working working chemistry professor who could have remained in civilian life to pursue a successful academic career, but he chose to follow the path for which he had prepared through years of National Guard service. As his son wrote, Wilber felt this was to be "an adventure in historic times that he was not about to miss."

Wilber Bradt's remarkably detailed letters give voice to his career as an officer in the U.S. Army's 43rd Division, Field Artillery, under the immediate command of Brigadier General Harold R. Barker. These men first served under Vice Admiral William Halsey's South Pacific Area Command and later under General Douglas MacArthur and General Walter Krueger in the Southwest Pacific Area. Bradt rose in the ranks from captain to lieutenant colonel through grueling jungle warfare as he and his men confronted the Japanese Imperial Army in the Solomon Islands, New Guinea, and the Philippines. Until the publication of this biography, Bradt was virtually unknown among the thousands who served in the Pacific War, but his letters demonstrate the essential role played by this brave, intelligent middle-ranked army officer and many others like him.

The author provides readers not familiar with the role of artillery in World War II with enough information to understand what Wilber Bradt experienced, what his duties were, and how he led his men. He started out as a second lieutenant in the 161st Infantry Regiment in the Washington State National Guard, and was promoted to first lieutenant in 1933. The governor activated the National Guard to quell the timber workers' strike of June and July 1935. In a long letter

to his father and mother, Wilber recounted his handling of the unit during the rough and tumble mill worker' strike in Tacoma, where he ended up in charge of the military police. Though this military activity was used to counter the violent activity of unarmed civilians, it was Bradt's first opportunity to lead troops and added to his self confidence in commanding his men. Shortly afterward, Bradt was invited to Orono to assume his next teaching job as full professor and head of the Department of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering at the University of Maine. He continued his National Guard activities in the 152nd Artillery Regiment. By the summer of 1940, Wilber believed his unit would be activated, so he drew up instructions for his wife on handling all sorts of emergencies that might develop in his absence.

The 43rd Division's activation for national service became effective on February 24, 1941. By this time Bradt was a captain in the 152nd Field Artillery Regiment. His unit departed for initial training at Camp Blanding, Florida, in March 1941. The next step in training was Camp Shelby in Mississippi in February 1942, a site for battalion level maneuver training. Soon after this move, the Army announced a reorganization of the 43rd Division from "square to triangular"; in other words, they converted from four infantry regiments and three artillery regiments to three infantry regiments and four artillery battalions. Three of the artillery battalions would be attached to a particular infantry regiment and the fourth would be held in reserve for use where needed.

The goal was greater mobility of artillery for the regimental combat teams. The three light battalions were equipped with 12 - 105mm (4 inch) howitzers; the medium battalion was equipped with 4 - 155 mm (6 inch) howitzers. Each battalion travelled with its own equipment, e.g. 75 trucks, 12 towed howitzers, ammunition carriers, jeeps, maintenance vehicles, and approximately 500 enlisted men and officers. The four field artillery battalions of the 43rd Division were under the command of Brigadier General Harold R. Barker. By the time Bradt and his unit had completed training at Camp Blanding, Camp Shelby, and the eight-week field officers' course at Fort Sill, he had been through the Louisiana and South Carolina maneuvers, and had been promoted major and acting executive officer for the 169th Field Artillery Battalion. By May 1942, Wilber was back at Fort Shelby working as Plans and Training Officer for the 43rd Artillery Division.

In September the orders came through for the division to ship out to join the fighting in the South Pacific with a first stop as Fort Ord, California, and then on to board the Army Transport *Maui* at San Francisco. The voyage to Auckland, New Zealand, took three weeks during which Bradt had the unaccustomed leisure to write seventeen letters, mostly to his wife and children, reflecting on the past, describing the ship, and trying to keep up morale on the home front. The transport arrived in late October, yet the troops were scheduled for an additional six months of training in New Caledonia before reaching the Solomon Islands.

The author follows Major Bradt's increasingly active combat role as an artillery commander in the 169th Field Artillery Battalion from its quiet landing in the Russell Islands in June 1943, to its baptism of fire on New Georgia as the

43rd Division assaulted the Japanese airfield on Munda Point. Bradt was among those wounded in an enemy bombing attack on Pavuvu before he embarked for Rendova. From there, Bradt's field artillery deployed to soften up the Japanese defenses around the airfield. This was no easy task as the batteries had to be placed on islands surrounding Munda Point to gain a clear field of fire. Bradt's artillery observers had to find forward positions from which they could observe fall of shot and communicate by radio to order adjustments in range and bearing. As this evolved, the 169th Infantry Regiment moved slowly and painfully through the jungle, probing the Japanese positions, calling for artillery support, and taking them by attrition. This operation took a solid month of trial and error as the troops gained experience and confidence.

Later operations followed, on Sasavele Island and Baanga Island, near Munda Point, and then on to Arundel Island, as the U.S. forces approached Kolombangara, a major Japanese stronghold. The Japanese infantry fought savagely to hold ground and at each encounter they would either be reinforced or retreat, if they could be evacuated, to the next most defensible island. For the artillerymen, it was heavy labor under dangerous conditions, moving guns, transporting artillery shells to new gun positions, and stringing wire on steep hillsides, through swamps, and enemy-infested jungles, not knowing where the next sniper or machine gun would be hidden. It was Wilber's job to keep the men on the move, anticipate the enemy's artillery tactics, and plan where to place his own batteries for the next infantry push. His efforts earned a promotion to lieutenant colonel and a Legion of Merit award, usually reserved for senior officers.

Meanwhile, all was not going well on the home front for the Bradt family. Wife Norma had fallen in love with an older divorced man, a family friend known to Wilber. Apparently, normal restraints no longer mattered, for she became pregnant and decided to keep the baby when it was born in October 1943. This led Norma to spin an elaborate web of lies in order to keep the child's birth a secret from friends and family, especially Wilber. This becomes evident as the letters she wrote him, formerly open and loving, became restrained and lacking in the kind of detail Wilber enjoyed and expected. His responses soon showed his increasing concern that he might have a competitor for her affections, and he tried all the harder to elicit the kind of responses he wanted. Author-son Hale Bradt alternates Wilber's letters with his own comments on developments within the family, although as a teenager at the time he did not understand all that was taking place.

After their work in the Solomons Campaign, the 43rd Division enjoyed a nine-months break for rest, recuperation, and refresher training in New Zealand from fall 1943 to summer 1944, but then it was back to the jungle to take part in the New Guinea campaign, in battles on the north coast around Aitape to seize airfields that would cover allied forces in the Hollandia area and to block the Japanese forces from moving westward. In December 1944, the Australian 6th Division relieved the U.S. 43rd Division at Aitape, freeing Bradt and his men for the invasion of Luzon in the Philippines. There he took part in the attack into the

Central Plains, the fight along the Shimbu Line, and the taking of the Ipo Dam as artillery commander of the 152nd Field Artillery Battalion.

In mid-May 1945, Maj. Gen. Leonard F. Wing, having noticed Bradt's performance in the field, awarded him a Bronze Star medal, and appointed him the executive officer of the 172nd Infantry Regiment, an unusual step for an artillery officer. This put him in line for command of the regiment, which he evidently did not relish, but it soon fell to him, anyway. In this capacity, he would have the job of preparing the regiment for final mopping up, rehabilitation, and training for the anticipated invasion of Japan.

With the surrender of Japan, on September 2, 1945, there was great relief among the troops of the 43rd Division as they would have taken part in the invasion of Kyushu in the home islands. Those not selected for duty as occupation troops were soon on their way home. Wilber's departure took place in late September, but his homecoming was not the one he expected. His children were overjoyed to see him, but his wife was reserved, lacking the warmth he so anticipated. The commander at Fort Meade ordered him to Walter Reed Army Hospital where he underwent treatment for malaria, his shrapnel wound, and depression. He was uncertain about his future, had doubts about wanting to return to the University of Maine, was confused about his wife's attitude (withholding intimacy), and suspected her estrangement. The culmination of this family drama occurred on December 1, 1945. Lt. Col. Bradt was at home, sorting through war souvenirs as presents for his family, when he took out a Colt .45 handgun and ended his own life. These unfortunate events reflect the physical and psycho-social effects of war on those who wage it and the spouses they leave behind.

The author's research, including travel (during the 1980s) to the sites of battles and the rest & recreation areas visited by his father was exhaustive. Included as principal primary sources are official journals, histories, and operational documents such as the 43rd Division historical report for the Luzon campaign, and those of its individual units, as follows, the 172nd, 103rd, and 169th infantry regiments; the 152nd, 169th, 103rd, and 192nd field artillery battalions; and the History of the 103rd Infantry Regiment, 43rd Division for January 1-May 31, 1945. The bibliography includes the Pacific War volumes of the "Green Books" histories of the U.S. Army Center of Military History and pertinent volumes of Samuel Eliot Morison's *History of U.S. Naval Operations in World War II*, as well as memoirs by veterans of the Pacific campaign and relevant secondary, self-published, and unpublished works. The author also consulted pertinent newspapers such the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Washington Star*, the *Wellington, N.Z., Evening Post* and the *Bangor, Maine Daily News*. Other valuable sources were oral histories gathered from 1981 to 2012, notably that of Col. Seishu Kinoshita who commanded the Japanese 13th Regiment opposing Bradt's unit in the Battle for Munda Point, New Georgia.

Hale V. Bradt has done a superb job of disentangling the confusing threads of this story which is as much about himself as other family members. He is an 85-year-old Professor of Physics, Emeritus, an M.I.T. physicist who specialized

in x-ray astronomy. In the 1980s, having lived long enough with the tragic demise of his father and the divisions within his family, he decided to confront the past by writing this biography. The author has done an excellent job of providing the historical context of the events of *Wilber's War*. Having read the letters, the reader becomes involved in the lives of the personalities even while trying to remain aloof. If there is a flaw in this trilogy, it is in its great length and the large number of letters reproduced and used as part of the text. But, the reward for military historians and students is found in learning more about the demands that World War II made on soldiers and their families, with its extended absences and the ever-present anxieties this produced.

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