



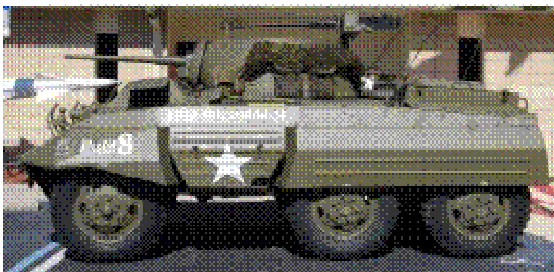
Orin Perry Wilkins

103rd Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop

Tech 4th Grade – 37062403

By Son – James Wilkins

Orin Perry Wilkins was born in Williston North Dakota in 1915 and spent his early childhood living in the upper Midwest before moving south to attend Texas Military College in Terrell Texas and then the University of Texas in Austin. He entered the Army in March of 1941 and underwent basic training at Fort Bliss, Texas and Fort Lewis, Washington. He spent the first two years of the war in the Aleutian Islands, arriving three months before the Battle of Midway. While in the Aleutians he served as a radar operator and with the coastal artillery until early 1944 when he was sent stateside to retrain for the European Theater. There he trained as a radio operator, First Aid Instructor, qualified as a Rifle Expert and had German language immersion training in preparation for the invasion. After shipping to Europe on the Queen Mary in late 1944 or early 1945, Orin was at a train depot in La Havre, France waiting for transport to his unit. A jeep carrying an officer approached and asked him what his specialty was, to which he replied "radio operator and infantry rifleman." "Get in soldier, I need a radio operator" the officer said, and thus Sgt. Wilkins became a member of the 103rd Infantry Division, Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop (Mechanized). He was a crewmember of an M8 Armored Car, commanded by Lt. Clarence Allen of Bryan Texas, doing double duty as radio operator and gunner, manning the M8's 37 mm cannon. In the following



months the 103rd was an important part of VI Corp's drive across the Moselle River, breaching the Siegfried Line and crossing the Rhine. During this campaign one of the 103rd Reconnaissance Troop's jobs was to conduct night patrols to find the enemy positions, which essentially meant creeping along in the darkness until contact was made, sometimes by drawing fire. This was a particularly dreaded job

and one of Orin's most vivid memories from the war. A somewhat humorous incident also occurred on one patrol. Orin's commanding officer Lt. Allen had a fondness for collecting firearms. He had gathered a good number of rifles, which he kept wrapped in a piece of canvas and tied to the deck of the M8 because there was no room in the cramped interior. One night the patrol came under enemy fire and Orin attempted to swivel the turret around to return fire with the 37mm cannon but the bundle of rifles prevented the turret from rotating to the necessary position. Orin reached out, cut the ropes and pushed the rifles off the armored car and began firing. It was a running fight that lasted a while and when it was over Lt. Allen

noticed his rifles were missing. Orin told him what happened and Lt. Allen, upset with the loss of his collection, took the patrol back to retrieve them.

Another noteworthy incident occurred at Brenner Pass, a key mountain pass through the Alps between Austria and Italy. On the evening of May 4th 1945 elements of the Seventh Army roared up out of Innsbruck Austria south through Brenner Pass to link up with the Fifth Army that was advancing northward in Italy. The eight mile-long armored column of the 103rd, moving swiftly with their lights blazing, was led by an American-flag-draped M8 armored car containing Sgt. Orin Wilkins, Lt. Clarence Allen, Cpl. William Burch and Pvt. Lee Smith. The German soldiers guarding the bridges were so surprised they simply saluted and continued guarding. Upon arriving in the town of Brenner Italy the 103rd raised the American flag and Orin's M8 crew was ordered to remain in the town with part of the column while the rest continued down



the other side to meet the Fifth army. Unbeknownst to the men in the lead car, an American businessman named Toby Brenner was offering a \$1,000 reward to the first American soldier to cross the pass that shared his name. Once it was verified who had been the first to reach the pass Orin and the other three men in the group received \$250 each from Mr. Brenner.

At the end of hostilities Orin worked with the Counter Intelligence Corps hunting members of the SS in Germany who were trying to melt into the general population.

After the war Orin returned to the University of Texas to finish his B.S. degree in biology and then entered graduate school at UT earning a Masters and PhD in biology. In 1947, he met and married Johnnye Carroll Gillespie from Bartlett, Texas and their first child, a son, was born in 1949. After finishing his PhD he taught biology at Texas Western University (now The University of Texas El Paso) and worked in the medical parasitology laboratory at Brooke Army Medical Center, Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio where a second son was born in 1954. In 1956 he joined the faculty of Centenary College in Shreveport, Louisiana and spent the rest of his career there. He passed away in 1990. Johnnye Carroll lived until 2009.

Like millions of other soldiers, WWII was a defining event in Orin's life. He reminisced often about his former comrades in arms and lamented the currents of life that scatter people. He felt a special attachment to the men he served with as only those who have faced such peril together and depended on each other for their very lives can. It should be no surprise that I think my father was the best man I ever knew. Sons tend to idolize their fathers but I saw him from all sides. He loved his family deeply but he was flawed like all men and I watched his sensitivity and weaknesses almost destroy him. He survived a ten-year battle with alcoholism that cost him a great deal, but he emerged and carried on with a toughness and wisdom borne of experience that allowed him to survive the vicissitudes of life and still keep his faith and sense of humanity.