

1. Expectations

By Wally Nelson

Recounting the trauma of combat is painful for the veteran returning from war. That is why most all veterans who have seen combat do not speak about their experience and it leaves family and friends at a loss when trying to share in and help with the healing of the trauma. It took this veteran over sixty-five years to tell his story for the first time. Hopefully it will encourage other veterans to learn to do the same and gain some relief from their suppressed tensions.

My name is Wally Nelson. I am a WWII veteran and an ex-prisoner of war. For the next 25 minutes I want to tell you the story of how I got involved in WWII, how I survived, and how that experience affected my life. Now all war teaches us a lesson. So in conclusion I want to tell you my belief of what that lesson is and what my hope is for all future generations. **PAUSE**

2. As we live our lives we develop expectations that continuously change. When we are born we cry for milk. **3.** After we obtain our education we expect to find gratifying work. **4.** When we marry we expect a loving partner and wonderful children. **5.** We aspire for our children to be President. **6.** We pray and strive for happiness and we expect to be buried in dignity. **7.** Now after having lived out most of my life I reflect on how my expectations have evolved and at the same time I wish to honor those who died for our country to help the rest of us enjoy the fulfillment of our own expectations. So let me tell you how my expectations have been fulfilled. **PAUSE**

8. My Danish immigrant parents met and married in this country and raised a family of fifteen children. I was born on a farm in Wisconsin. There was no indoor plumbing and the house was lighted with kerosene lamps. When I was 7 years old the family moved into Racine and then we had electric lights and indoor plumbing. In 1941 the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and World War II broke out. Conscription and rationing became law, everyone was very patriotic, and most men had feelings of guilt if they weren't able to serve in our armed forces.

9. By that time the boys in our family became eligible for military service and six sons served in the Army, Navy, and Merchant Marines. One son died in service and so my mother hung a service flag in the window with one gold star and five blue ones.

I enlisted in the Army at age eighteen. Eventually I was sent to a port of embarkation at Newport News, Virginia where I boarded a troopship. **10.** It was a warm, sunny day and long lines of troops moved slowly toward the gangways as USO ladies cheerfully handed each soldier a goodie bag stuffed with candy, cigarettes, toilet articles and a small New Testament. In spite of wearing a grateful smile I was churning inside with fright.

11. This is when I made my contract with God. I was only too conscious of the fact that I had no collateral to seal the deal and all I had to offer was a promise never to forsake Him. What I asked in return was survival from the war I was getting into. So the deal was sealed. I kept my part of the bargain and He kept His part only he has been far more generous about the expectation I had in mind at the time and that is what I want to tell you about. **12. PAUSE**

13. When the ship arrived in Italy in the fall of 1944 we were taken to an infantry replacement depot. It was cold and raining and it continued to rain as we left the depot **14.** to join a rifle company encamped in a muddy field somewhere behind the front lines north of Florence.

There they armed us with rifles, ammunition, and hand grenades and the platoon sergeant said we would soon move forward. He also appointed me as scout and I trembled because I knew that being assigned scout duty was tantamount to a death sentence. During basic training we had joked about that among ourselves saying, "Scouts out! Bang! Bang! Two more scouts out!"

The next night we moved forward on trucks to a place where the trucks could go no farther. From there we slogged through knee-deep mud and several men fell by the wayside in tears before we arrived at a shelled out farmhouse. **15.** Two of us were taken to a foxhole about a hundred yards forward of the farmhouse where we stood guard for the remainder of the night. We returned to the farmhouse before dawn. This routine took place daily. I can never forget a nightmare I had in that foxhole. Germans had overrun our unit and one of them was cutting my throat.

A couple of nights after arriving on the front two of our men were killed by friendly fire. A green replacement like myself mistook a returning patrol as the enemy and opened fire with a machine gun. The next night I watched as the bodies draped over the backs of mules were hauled away. **PAUSE**

Now our only connection to the outside world was through the weekly edition of the Stars and Stripes. **16.** In there Bill Mauldin cheered us up with Willie and Joe. Here they commiserate saying, "Do retreatin' blisters hurt as much as advancin' blisters?" Soon it started to snow and it turned bitterly cold. Many of us got frostbite before supplies of warmer clothing arrived.

We came off the front on New Years Eve for rest and rehabilitation. Then we ate hot meals and we were able to get undisturbed sleep. **17.** This picture was taken of me standing in front of a cathedral in Florence. **18.** Having survived my first trip to the front I got a battlefield promotion to Private First Class and they issued me a Combat Infantry Badge. That badge was good for ten dollars a month more pay. **19.** All too soon we were back up front with no place to spend my newfound wealth.

As offensive operations resumed in March of 1945 our platoon was ordered to occupy the village of Cavallina inside enemy lines about 25 kilometers north of Florence. The operation began well after dark and the platoon moved single file down into a canyon laying a phone wire as we moved slowly, pausing every 10 minutes to whistle softly into a sound powered phone that everything was OK. When we reached the bottom of the canyon Lt. Decker, the platoon leader, positioned me and another scout out in front and then returned to the main body of the platoon. Suddenly we heard grenades explode and a flare illuminated the canyon to our rear and we heard the rat-tat-tat of a burp gun. The other scout facing the opposite direction said, "Do you see the German up there?" As I turned to look the flare went out. Suddenly Lt. Decker appeared saying, "We got to get to hell out of here." and began leading us up a steep embankment. **20.** Then Germans herding captives before them appeared and fired a burp gun in the direction of the fleeing Lt. Decker at the same time shouting "Hands up!" "Hands up!" My rifle slipped off my shoulder and I raised my hands and joined the march with the other captives. The platoon had been ambushed and 32 of us were captured or killed. Because I was captured my death sentence as scout was repealed. Being attacked from the rear scouts escape an otherwise certain death. **PAUSE**

The Germans began marching us toward a nearby building and as they did American artillery shells began bursting all around our location. Evidently the fire was intended to distract our captors and create opportunity for escape. It didn't work.

As we were being marched away, a flare was tripped illuminating the entire column and with

artillery shells bursting all around, I fell to the ground in terror up against a low wall thinking this was the end. Then as the flare burned out the Germans directed us into their command post where the officers were gloating and laughing about the success of the ambush telling us they knew we were coming. With a big smile on his face, one officer announced, "You are Co. I." It was clear that he had good intelligence.

The officers questioned each of us asking where we were from and what we did before the war. I answered that I was a student. One of them said he thought so. After all, I looked the part in my circular steel rimmed spectacles that were issued right after induction.

However, not all the Germans seemed happy. I was toward the rear of the room where an enlisted man sat nervously on some sand bags. He knew a little English and we conversed as best we could. It appeared he was only too conscious of the fact that Germany was losing the war. We compared our daily food rations and I told him that we had eaten peaches and cream the day before.

The next day the Germans moved us further away from the front lines to a group of houses where further interrogation took place. A guard escorted us individually into an office where two German officers sat. They wanted to know more than my name, rank, and serial number. When they asked me questions about my organization, I reminded them that I could not answer because of the Geneva Convention. They changed the subject and asked me if I had seen any poison gas shells stored in any American ammunition depots. I answered that I wouldn't know if I had. They tried to refresh my memory by telling me the color markings on our poison gas canisters. Still, I knew nothing. Then they dismissed me saying they had other ways of getting the information they sought. It was clearly a threat.

After interrogation they moved us to a schoolhouse and as we moved farther and farther from the front lines food became scarce and the quality was terrible. We talked incessantly among ourselves about food and female companionship **21.** comparing which appetite was most important. At the time, there was no doubt in my mind that I craved a ham sandwich far more than a romp in the hay.

23. As time went on they loaded us into boxcars, each with forty-eight stinking, starving men and shipped us to Stalag VIIA in Bavaria. **24.** Lying down to sleep, no one could turn over without everyone doing the same. The daily ration was a piece of pumpernickel and a small piece of sausage. Water was scarce. Crapping in a wooden box and pissing through the crack in the door of the boxcar was not my idea of how a guest of the German government should be treated.

25. When we arrived at Stalag VIIA there was no room in the barracks, so we slept on the ground in tents. **26.**

More than 100,000 prisoners of all nationalities occupied the prison and everyone was cold, hungry, and infested with lice and fleas. **PAUSE**

I interrupt my story here to tell you about a POW friend named Rusty Swarmer, who at this time, was being marched from another German prison, Stalag XVIIB, to the gas chambers at Mauthausen. **27.**

Rusty wrote in his memoir:

*The war was going very badly for the Germans. They blamed the American Air Force for destroying their cities, and called us murderers of women and children. Goering referred to us as "Luftgangsters" (luft being the German word for air), He ordered every airman to be killed. **28.** It was that order that caused us to be evacuated from Stalag XVII-B and put us on the march to the gas chambers at Mauthausen.*

One day we passed about 300 Hungarian Jewish political prisoners going in the opposite direction. 29. Of all the horrors of the war this was the worst. They were staggering four abreast, holding each other up. Our doctor told me to notice their eyes. Most were blind, having been kept in dungeons for years. They were the walking dead skeletons with skin each too weak to stand or walk by themselves, but holding on to each other for support. If one staggered out of line he was given a brutal rifle-butt blow to the side of his neck. As he staggered from the blow his whole row would be staggered. If one fell to the ground one of their SS guards would walk up to him and put a pistol bullet in his head. We counted 23 bodies in less than two kilometers -- their brains blown out on the ground. PAUSE

At the head of this gruesome procession marched a very tall well-built man. He carried himself with great dignity, in contrast with the other bent wretches. Instead of rags he wore a black coat and top hat! As he passed us he called out: "Good morning, boys. A fine day isn't it?"

PAUSE

30. All American prisoners of war were on Hitler's hit list, but Stalag VIIA was liberated on April 29, 1945, before executions took place. I learned this a few years ago after meeting the tank commander from Patton's the 14th Armored Division that opened the main gate of Stalag VIIA.

31. After telling me that he beat the SS executioners to the prison he said I owed him a cup of coffee for his valorous deed. To which I replied, "Will you settle for a bottle of scotch?"

32. Our liberators flew us to Camp Lucky Strike near the French port city of LeHarve. When we arrived there, everyone was issued new uniforms and given medical examinations. Our service records were brought up-to-date so that we could begin to get paid again. Then after a few days we boarded trucks that took us to the port in LeHarve. It was a pleasant sunny day as we rode through the city. Rubble was piled high on both sides of the streets. The bomb devastation of that harbor city was complete.

Ten or fifteen ex-prisoners rode in each truck and we were exhilarated knowing that we were on our way home. The ex-prisoner standing next to me had a big smile on his face and there was a sparkle in his eye as he reached into his shirt and pulled out two brassieres waving them overhead in the wind. His anticipation was evident. When I spoke to him he told me that he had been carrying them ever since he left home. I didn't ask if he had one or two sweethearts.

33. A ship took us into New York City and newspapers around the nation published the names of the returning ex-prisoners. **34.** That was how my family came to know that my Missing In Action status would not become Killed In Action.

After arriving home the family gathered around expecting me to relate what the fighting was like and how I got captured and liberated. **35.** I wanted to forget the whole dam thing and couldn't or wouldn't say anything about what had happened. When I do, it awakens the pain I feel about man's inhumanity to man and it causes me to weep spontaneously. Repatriation eventually led to reassignment in Washington DC as an MP. **36.** Then VJ Day took place and I was discharged in December of 1945.

PAUSE

So God kept his part of the contract. I got through the war without getting scratched and without firing a shot in anger. His blessings have continued to flow.

37. Congress passed the GI Bill; I enrolled in the University of Wisconsin, graduated, and got my first job as a rocket scientist with the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics.

Since then I've had nothing but fun working on things like:

- 38.** The Seamaster minelayer
- 39.** The Canberra light bomber
- 40.** The Lacrosse missile
- 41.** The Apollo program
- 42.** Spy in the sky satellites
- 43.** Raising cattle and citrus
- 44.** Matchbook advertising
- 45.** Payloads for the Space Shuttle
- 46.** The Hubble Space telescope
- 47.** Writing books

And now I'm making movies

48. In addition, I have a beautiful daughter who is a professor at the U of Wis. Along the way I have narrowly escaped death on the highways no less than four times. My heart once stopped on the operating table and I survived heart surgery for almost 20 years.

49. At the turn of the century I moved into a retirement community in Florida where I met and married a lovely widow named Dot Clausen.

50. We are still on our honeymoon and leading a truly idyllic life. Both of us are physically and mentally active and there is no doubt in our minds that we have been blessed beyond our expectations.

World War II happened. But note, Hitler, Stalin, and Hirohito never granted their citizens human rights. Those of us who survived World War II are grateful and the experience has engendered the expectation in us that our service should not have been in vain. It will not be if all the people in this world learn to embrace the expectations derived from the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule is the foundation of our Nation's commitment to human rights. So, if we can engender this spiritual commitment in others we will be good patriots and it will help everyone to fulfill their expectations of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.