



The Rev. Donald Williams

Life on Italy's front line

The following article comes from interviews with residents at the Concord Deaconess and has been put into a book titled "Memories of World War II." This is the Rev. Donald Williams' story:

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My early education took place in a one room school house in Wisconsin, but I was finishing college when the war overtook the country and the military ramped up. After being drafted in 1943, I became an infantry lieutenant in Italy, and spent the last winter of the war (1944-45) on the front lines there.

By that time, the balance of air power had changed and the Allies did not need so many people in anti-aircraft so we were moved over to an infantry company. The Brass realized that they would lose lots of infantry officers going over the beaches at Normandy, so they put us in as replacements.

We went over in November 1944 as part of the 91st Infantry on the front lines in Italy and served there until the war was over. We often hiked all night over mountains.

I was a Forward Observer with a heavy mortar platoon. It was my group's job to go out before daylight in front of the front lines and hide where we could see over the hills. Our platoon's weapons would shoot over our heads and down. We would watch and tell them (on the radio) how to adjust their aim. Then we would wait until sundown, and crawl back across the front lines to our platoon at night. It would start all over again the next day.

In Northern Italy, an attack was about to happen, and the Chaplain was not around. So I offered to read the Bible. The Captain blew his whistle and Catholics and Mormons and Baptists all came up. I led a time of worship and prayer, reading a passage from Ephesians about putting on the "full armor." The front lines had very heavy casualties, because the Germans had dug in all winter. But once we broke through the front lines, the Germans had no air support, no trucks or ammunition or food.

One German Captain surrendered 100 soldiers to us to get food for them. Most were gray old men and little boys who appeared no older than 11 or 12 years old! The surrender of the German Army came soon after.

After the end of the war, we were in Northern Italy, near Yugoslavia. It was feared that Tito, Yugoslavia's leader, would try to acquire northeastern Italy, so the Allies put 3 divisions in that area between Venice and Trieste. That prevented the region from being assimilated by the Communists.

In Italy, we saw lots of destruction from earlier battles. Naples was badly damaged and Florence too, but not Venice because the war ended. In Florence, the buildings were destroyed and in rubble all around us. But the instruments and sets and costumes of the Opera House had all been hidden, and were brought out to stage "La Traviata." My first grand opera!

The war changed me because we had contact with people from all parts of our country and I saw other parts of the world when I had never been across the state line before college. It made me grow up — I never had much responsibility before then. I had received my education, including religious education, from people after World War I, when pacifism was a major reaction to that “War to end all wars.” Yet, what other way could we have brought an end to World War II and Hitler? My attitude changed from the pacifism I had been taught.

In college, I was thinking about becoming a minister, and got 3 years in the service to think about it! I went right into seminary in 1946 when I got out. After being single during the war, I got married in 1946 after discharge. My wife died very young. Adelaide was also married then widowed, when her husband died at 30. We met some time later and have been blessed to have more than 50 years together in Methodist ministry.

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