

War Era Story Project 2012

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Age: 63

In 2006, I interviewed my father, Ray Wissel, for six months to get the story of his service as a minesweeper in Italy during World War II. I can't begin to tell the whole story here, so I've written a summary. The complete true story is an e-book on Amazon.com called "The Minesweeper: A Cincinnati Teenager Serves in Italy During World War II." This book is written simply so that middle-grade children, as well as adults, can learn more about Ray's service and the Italian Campaign.

Summary of Ray Wissel's story – "The Minesweeper"

In June 1943, seventeen-year-old Ray Wissel enlists in the Army, eager to serve his country. His mother, Catherine, doesn't want to lose her youngest child, since an older brother is already serving with the Marines. But Ray is determined.

Ray is sent to basic training at Camp Croft, South Carolina. After thirteen weeks, he goes by train to San Antonio, Texas, to become part of the 88th Infantry Division, the Blue Devils. In Texas, Ray meets Wesley Cobb, a strong, bible-toting southern farm boy who becomes Ray's best friend. Arriving in Norfolk, Virginia by train, the boys help load Liberty ships with war supplies. They are shipped out to an unknown destination. After a round-about journey to avoid German subs, they finally land in Casablanca in December, but are quickly transported via '40 and '8 trains to the cold Atlas Mountains.

Wesley and Ray, part of the Ammunition and Pioneer platoon, receive training in explosives in North Africa. Then they are sent to Italy. They receive more training in anti-tank and anti-personnel mines. Ray mine sweeps for three months near Minturno, crawling on his belly feeling for trip wires, cutting them, then using his sweeper to find and defuse mines. The work is slow, tedious and nerve wracking. When Ray is not defusing mines, delivering ammunition to the front lines or blowing up bridges, he writes letters home - 244 in all. He doesn't want his folks to worry, so he makes light of the dangers of war. But Ray and Wesley have several close calls.

Since Ray is so thin, Wesley always offers to carry the heaviest part of the mortar equipment to the front lines. Ray and Wesley participate in the Rome-Arno campaign, walking for six days through the rugged Arunci Mountains, the last three without food. They are one of the first units into Rome in June, 1944. With casualties mounting, the Army needs someone to calculate the number of soldiers available for combat. The Army discovers Ray can type and he is transferred to the personnel unit to create the "morning reports." Wesley and Ray are separated for the first time since Texas. In October, while reviewing the list of the dead from the previous day, Ray sees Wesley's name and the names of three other men from his squad. Had he not been transferred, Ray would have been with them. Grief stricken, he vows never to forget his friend.

Ray is sent to Leghorn to help clear the port of mines. Then he goes back to the personnel unit. In early December, Ray takes a flesh wound from an exploding shell in northern Italy. When the war in Europe ends, Ray is assigned to guard the German prisoners. He writes a letter home, the first without censorship, and expresses his anger when he sees the Germans still using the Nazi salute.

Ray finally has enough points to return to the States in November, 1945, after being away from home for two and a half years. He is awarded the Purple Heart, Bronze Star, Good Conduct medal, and three Battle Stars.

Sixty years later, after undergoing heart bypass surgery, Ray knows he may not have much time left and wants to visit Wesley's grave. Ray and his wife begin searching in South Carolina. They are about to give up when a genealogist finds Wesley's family tree in North Carolina. Ray is able to locate Wesley's sister. Together, they visit the cemetery where Wesley Cobb is buried. True to his word, Ray has not forgotten his fallen friend.

Epilogue: On Christmas Eve, Ray tearfully gives his six children a letter in which he recalls the hardships of the infantry. He does not claim to be a hero. The true heroes, he says, are those who gave ALL. Ray asks his children and grandchildren to always remember them. "Don't ever forget them, I won't."

To this day, 87-year-old Ray still carries a picture of his squad in his wallet. Nine of the twelve soldiers died before the end of the war.



