GUY FRANKLIN WILHELM SR.

1897–1960, WORLD WAR I

U.S. ARMY, PRIVATE

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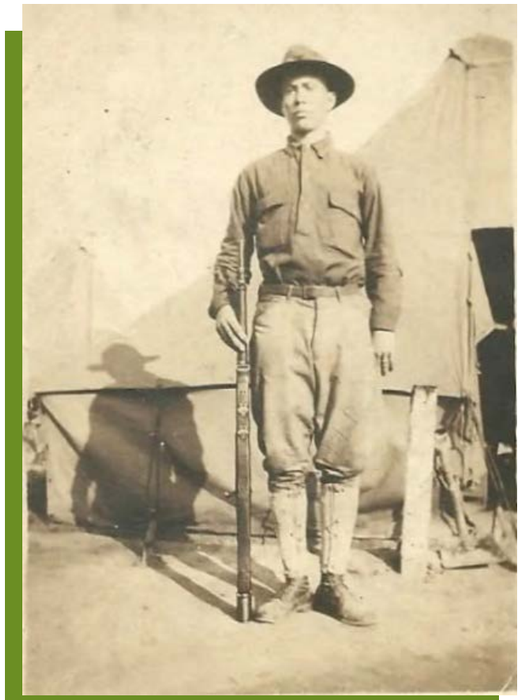
GRAFTON HIGH SCHOOL
INSTRUCTED BY Rebecca Bartlett

Guy Franklin Wilhelm, Sr. was born August 19, 1897, in Lyon, West Virginia, near modern-day Rowlesburg in Preston County. His parents were William and Nancy "Susan" (née Loughry) Wilhelm. William Wilhelm worked as a coal miner and Susan kept the household. When Guy was born, this household also included his brother Ora, who was three years older.

About 1910, the Wilhelms decided to find new prospects in Grafton, the seat of nearby Taylor County. They moved to a rented home on Ona Street and welcomed a daughter, Birdie, around the same time.

Guy's father had left the coal mines of Preston County to obtain employment in a glass factory, where he worked as a presser. One of Grafton's major employers was Tygart Valley Glass, which opened in 1906 for the production of decorative tableware, glass canning jars, and olive bottles. Guy's brother Ora soon followed their father into the trade, leaving school at 16 years old to take work as a gatherer.

Grafton was at nearly its peak population and industrial activity in 1910, teeming with shops, theaters, and restaurants. Though not a large town, its wealth and importance as a Baltimore & Ohio Railroad (B&O) hub rated the installation of a local streetcar system. Ora soon left the glass factory to work as a streetcar conductor. Tragically, he fell ill with blood poisoning and died at age 19.



Guy was only just reaching employment age when Ora passed in 1913. It was up to him and his father to take care of Nancy and Birdie.

As America stood on the sidelines and watched World War I raging in Europe, Guy Wilhelm transitioned into adulthood and found a job

Guy Wilhelm as a child.

Opposite page: Wilhelm as a soldier.

Wilhelm Family collection

as a rail car repairman with the B&O. As 1916 gave way to 1917, however, national sentiment turned increasingly away from neutrality toward intervention. President Woodrow Wilson's administration began quiet preparations for war as thousands of National Guardsmen returned from garrison duty along the border with Mexico. As many of these men demobilized from service, positions opened up in their regiments—posts which urgently needed filling if the United States went to war.

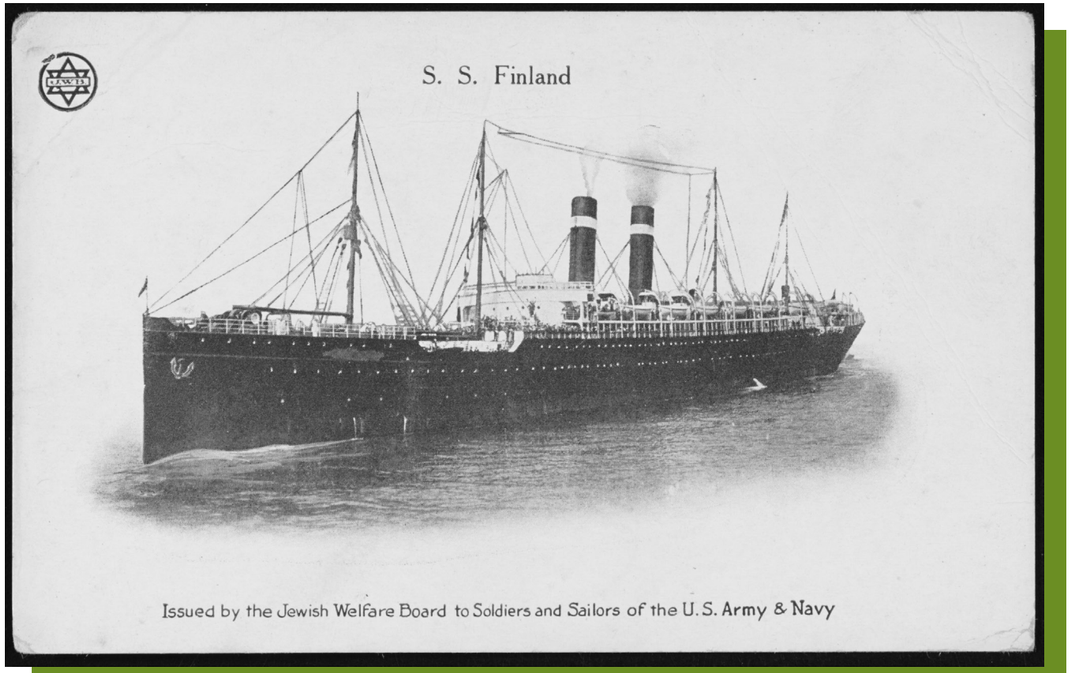
On March 31, 1917, Guy Wilhelm signed his enlistment papers with Company E, 1st Regiment, West Virginia National Guard (WVNG). No doubt he knew many of the unit's members, since Company E was largely composed of Grafton men. The unit went into camp in Fairmont, Marion County, as the regiment gathered together for drills and equipment training. After the United States declared war on Germany on April 6, WVNG detachments were posted at important bridges and depots around the state to discourage enemy sabotage, though none ever materialized. The atmosphere was not one of rigid military discipline, as evidenced by more than one visit William and Susan paid their son in Fairmont during his deployment there.

Regimental muster rolls from Wilhelm's time in Fairmont—particularly in June and July—show huge numbers of personnel transfers between companies. New men joined, while others waived their service for health or family reasons. Wilhelm's notes are silent until early August, when he was docked pay and sentenced to two days hard labor for going Absent Without Leave (AWOL) for five days.

With only a small regular U.S. Army from which to begin preparing the nation for war, the country's National Guard units contained its largest pool of potential military manpower. The National Defense Act of 1916 had strengthened total National Guard figures to 225,000 men.

Guy was still a lowly private in September 1917 when the 1st Regiment WVNG was sent to Camp Shelby in Mississippi to integrate into the 38th Infantry Division. At Camp Shelby, the Army broke up the 1st and assigned its men to four different engineer, ammunition train, and machine gun companies. The 1st Regiment's commander vociferously objected, but to no avail. While not necessarily rare, it also was not standard practice: the 2nd Regiment WVNG was kept mostly intact as the 150th Infantry Regiment.

Of the four companies, Guy Wilhelm found himself in the 113th Engineers. At the very least, he had other West Virginians in his unit and scattered throughout the division in the sprawling camp of 36,000 men. For another year, Guy's fate would be drills, exercises, digging trenches, and



LEFT: SS *Finland*, the converted passenger ship that carried Wilhelm and the 113th Engineers to France. *Naval History & Heritage Command*

RIGHT: Tygart Dam, on which Wilhelm worked, under construction. *West Virginia & Regional History Center, WVU Libraries*

confinement to military life on the huge campus of Camp Shelby.

The base was notorious for its size. Men who wanted to go to the closest post office would have to request 24-hour leave and take food rations along with them because the camp was so large and remote. Sometimes they even lost their way in the vast woods and wandered for hours, reporting back late to camp. To make matters worse, such high concentrations of people invariably led to health hazards. In April 1918, a mild version of the influenza pandemic quickly struck down 2,000 men, overwhelming the base hospital and requiring barracks to be converted into makeshift infirmaries.

Guy Wilhelm took at least one important break from the remote monotony of Camp Shelby. During a furlough back home in Grafton, he married Elsie Pearl Rosier on October 15, 1917. There was no time for a honeymoon, and Guy returned to Mississippi in a matter of days. But he now he had a new kind of family to return to when the war was over. Until then, he would have very few chances to see his new bride.

Much of the newly hitched private's 38th Division—dubbed the "Keystone Division" for its high proportion of Pennsylvania men—moved to Camp Mills, New York, in September 1918, their last stop before embarkation to Europe as part of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF). The health situation was even worse than at Camp Shelby—the influenza mortality rate at Camp Mills was higher, and thousands of troops were hospitalized with the illness.

Fortunately for Guy and his 113th Engineers, the division passed through New York relatively quickly. In fact, the 113th Engineers were the first unit out, departing from New Jersey on September 15, 1918, aboard the SS *Finland*, a private passenger liner commandeered by the government as a transport vessel. They arrived in Brest, France, two weeks later. The soldiers were probably relieved to have no run-ins with German submarines—called U-boats—which had been the terror of the seas for much of the war. The previous year, U-boats had sunk Allied shipping at a terrifying rate, and the 113th probably did not find it comforting that the *Finland* herself had been struck by a torpedo. By this time, however, new Allied naval tactics and Germany's dwindling resources had made the Atlantic passage safer for American troops—whether the doughboys knew it or not.

Nearly all of the 38th Division sailed to England first—only the 113th Engineers and a handful of other detachments led the way directly to France. The 113th needed to precede the division's arrival in order to ensure the proper infrastructure was in place. In addition, engineers were in extremely high demand on the Western Front, building roads, ports, and bridges for the arrival and conveyance of more troops and supplies.

The list went on. Engineer formations like the 113th constructed living quarters and hospitals in battle zones and behind the lines across France. Without thousands of engineers, Allied housing, sanitation, and even logistics would have suffered, increasing rates of illness and reducing combat effectiveness among frontline troops. The fact that the French were already heavily burdened by years of war and much of their national infrastructure had been destroyed or overtaxed, made the engineers' work even more significant.

On October 8, the 113th Engineers moved from Brest to Cote-d'Or, Haute-Marne, and Vosges in northeastern France. Guy and his unit had arrived in France at a crucial point in the war, just as the massive Meuse-Argonne Offensive was gaining steam. It was one of the largest campaigns in U.S. military history, and it would serve as the final catalyst for German surrender. The influx of American troops, coupled with relentless offensive pressure across the Western Front, finally cracked the German army. All through October, the 113th supported the push by clearing trees and obstacles, building roads, and laying telegraph lines.

Among the many units of the 38th Division, the 113th Engineers were lucky. As it was headed to the front, the rest of the Keystone Division arrived in France only to be immediately "skeletonized," (broken up and its men sent to various units as replacements). Rather than being assigned to another unit decimated by fighting, Guy Wilhelm was able to stay with the Keystone men with

whom he had trained and journeyed across the wide Atlantic Ocean. It was probably a comforting thought when the front was close enough to hear the rumble of artillery.

On November 11, 1918, the Allies and Germany signed the Armistice and effectively ended the war, though a formal peace treaty would take months to ratify. After the fighting ceased, many of the 38th Division's troops were sent home almost immediately. Not so for the 113th Engineers. Guy and his comrades were needed to help with repairs to French civil infrastructure before they left for American shores. From February 1919 until they left, the regiment was attached to the 7th Division and spent time in Bordeaux and Konz.

The regiment boarded the USS *Great Northern* (AG-9) in Brest on June 12, 1919. They arrived in Hoboken, New Jersey, two weeks later, whereupon Guy was almost immediately discharged along with the rest of the 113th Engineers. The train took him back to Grafton.

Guy Wilhelm's postwar life had its share of challenges. For a time, Guy and his wife Elsie moved to New York. When he returned to his beloved hometown in the West Virginia hills, she stayed behind and died in New York in 1933. As Elsie left his life forever, Guy found himself out of work—like millions of Americans—as the Great Depression worsened through the 1930s.

Fortunately, Guy's wartime engineering experience proved a boon when President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" inaugurated the Works Progress Administration (WPA), designed to invigorate the economy by providing public works jobs for the unemployed. Wilhelm put his AEF engineering skills to good use clearing the land for the Tygart Dam in Grafton. This project, mere miles from his Grafton home, was one in a series of 16 flood-control projects constructed in West Virginia between 1935-1938.

About 3,000 men worked on the Tygart Dam to pour 324,000 cubic yards of concrete and create the lake and surrounding recreational facilities. On the job, Guy severed his foot and was rowed downriver to the hospital, where the separated limb was reattached. He returned to work a few weeks later. Guy Wilhelm was clearly made of hardy stock.

In 1940, Guy married his second wife, Alice Gertrude McMasters. They had six children: Lula, Geraldine, John (who died in infancy), Juanita, Guy Jr., and Sandra Kay. They raised their family at 633 W. Main Street in Grafton in a home that overlooked the Tygart Valley River. Guy found work with the B&O Railroad again as the global economy recovered, and was not called upon to serve in World War II. Their son still resides at the home on Main Street in Grafton decades later.

On June 17, 1960, around midnight, Guy and his son, Guy Wilhelm Jr., went on a night fishing trip on the river in front of their home. Guy Sr. tried to grab a string of fish and went over the side of the boat. His son could not see him in the dark and Guy Sr., who could not swim, drowned. When the fire-rescue team arrived, they found his body a short distance upstream from his still-burning B&O lantern. He was buried in Grafton National Cemetery on June 21, 1960, with full military rites.

PLACE OF INTERMENT:
Grafton National Cemetery
SECTION G
SITE 74

Aerial view of the Grafton that Wilhelm knew and loved, circa 1920s.
West Virginia & Regional History Center, WVU Libraries

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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As home to one of the nation's first national cemeteries—founded shortly after the Civil War—the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. Since the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, Grafton High School, and University High School, among many others.

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SOURCES AND COPYRIGHT

For readability, bibliographies have been omitted from this publication. Student research for these biographies relies heavily on primary sources—census records, city directories, draft cards, muster rolls, and more—made available digitally through Ancestry and Fold3. Yearbook repositories and the digitized collections of many universities and archives have been invaluable resources. Most newspaper research was conducted digitally via Newspapers.com, NewspaperArchives, and the Library of Congress's *Chronicling America* database.

Servicemembers' Official Military Personnel Files (OMPFs) and Individual Deceased Personnel Files (IDPFs) are another essential part of project research, provided free of charge in most cases by the National Archives through standard records requests.

As the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project has grown and matured, the team has found that new sources sometimes surface for veterans researched in prior project years. To better maintain a "living bibliography" of all its veterans, a single master document is kept up on the project's webpage under the "Programs" tab at **www.wvhumanities.org**.

Views and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Archives of the United States, or any other federal agency. For more information about the Veterans Legacy Memorial and the Veterans Legacy Grant Program, visit **www.vlm.cem.va.gov**.

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