WILLIAM ARNETT WILLS

1914 – 1944, WORLD WAR II

U.S. ARMY, PRIVATE

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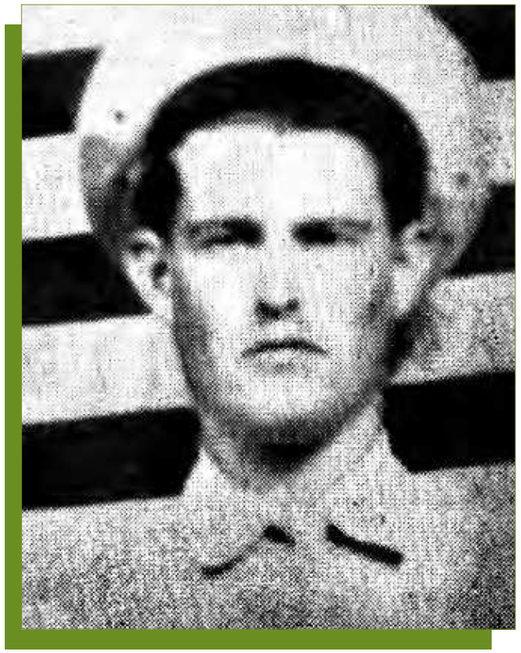
Elsie M. Wills and William Harrison Wills welcomed their son William Arnett Wills into their family on April 15, 1914, in Arnett, Raleigh County, West Virginia. William was the eldest of five siblings, including one sister, Carrie, and three brothers, Edward, Joe, and Dallas. William, who often went by his middle name "Arnett" to distinguish him from his father, spent the early years of his life in Raleigh County.



For much of the 20th century, Raleigh County's biggest industry was coal mining. The Wills' patriarch, however, seems to have supported the family by other means. For a time at least, he worked at a lumber mill and various other blue-collar jobs. Farming appears to have been the family's mainstay. A 1918 newspaper article mentions the family's favorable crop of spring wheat, and in 1930 William Harrison Wills listed his occupation as farmer.

Arnett grew up in a state of constant poverty. He attended Raleigh County schools until fifth grade and, if his experience mirrored that of his younger siblings, his family struggled to provide food for lunch. Upon leaving school, he remained in his small hometown where he met and fell in love with a young woman. On June 19, 1933, at the age of 19, he married Jocie Nina Combs. The bride was 16 at the time, also born and raised in the small Arnett community. Marriage, however, did not settle down Arnett Wills.

Before enlisting into the military, Wills's young adult life was characterized by crime and tragedy. In 1933, he and an eight-man "robber band" had a federal warrant out for their arrest for hijacking trucks and stealing $3,000 worth of inner tubes, tires, and fabric. Arnett's great-grandfather Van Sarrett bailed Arnett out of jail, somehow making arrangements to satisfy the staggering $82,000 bail set for the eight men charged in the crime spree.

Two years after his first run-in with the law, his mother Elsie died of pneumonia and tuberculosis. To make matters worse, Arnett's father abandoned the family forcing his three youngest children into the care of their maternal grandfather, Tony Sarrett. That same year, Arnett himself became a father, so the extent to which he was able to care for his siblings is dubious.

One of Colcord Coal's company towns in Raleigh County. *West Virginia & Regional History Center, WVU Libraries*

Opposite page: Wills in *Young American Patriots.*

The birth of two children did not significantly alter Wills' troubled trajectory and his wife would eventually have to care for their children on her own. Nina gave birth to William Arnett "Billy" Wills Jr. in 1935. In 1937, the couple also had a daughter, Goldie Jane Wills.

Perhaps to support his growing family, he devised an illegal plan with his brother Edward to earn a quick dollar. It backfired—the pair were indicted for breaking and entering and spent time in prison. By 1940, Arnett had committed an unknown federal crime that rated a stay in the Petersburg Federal Reformatory in Bland, Prince George County, Virginia.

His time at the reformatory left an unemployed Nina alone to take care of her two young children back in Raleigh County. She was 23 years old at this point, and renting a home on Marsh Fork. The family next door may have helped her and the children get by: their neighbor was Coy Wills, a cousin of Arnett who had been a member of the 1933 "robber band" with her husband.

Arnett Wills finally found a positive path forward after serving in the Federal Reformatory's workshops and labor farms. He was out of prison, unemployed, and living with the family again in Arnett in October 1940. He soon gained employment in the coal industry. By this time, he may even have been working alongside his brother and estranged father at Colcord Coal Company. Arnett was labeled a "semiskilled miner" and "mining-machine operator" at various times in the early 1940s. It didn't last long, as world events interrupted the stability Arnett had so recently achieved.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941 dragged the United States into World War II. For over a year afterward, Wills continued working as a miner. As the armed forces ramped up mobilization efforts, however, his draft number was eventually called. He reported for service in the U.S. Army on March 29, 1943, in Newport, Kentucky. He had to leave behind his wife, Nina, and his three children: eight-year-old William Arnett Jr., five-year-old Goldie, and the not-yet-one-year-old Robert, who was born on June 7, 1942.

Wills attended training camps around the eastern United States and learned the basics of military life. After a brief time in Kentucky's Fort Thomas, he went to South Carolina's warmer climes to train at Fort Jackson. Nestled in the center of the Palmetto State, Fort Jackson provided thousands of recruits with basic training and housing in hastily built barrack buildings. At this point in the war, Wills' basic training probably lasted about 13-14 weeks.

He then transferred to Camp Edwards near Cape Cod, Massachusetts, for additional training, most likely arriving in late June or early July 1943. It was there that Wills officially joined Company I, 3rd Battalion, 71st Infantry Regiment, 44th Infantry Division. The 71st had a distinguished lineage dating back to 1850, and had fought in America's conflicts since the Mexican War.

Sprawled on the western side of Cape Cod, Camp Edwards boasted an impressive 1,406 structures for the housing, equipping, and training of tens of thousands of troops at a time. Wills trained with the regiment throughout 1943 and most of 1944. The 15,000-man Army divisions being organized from scratch needed time to assemble, equip, and train rigorously together. While Arnett's 44th Infantry Division came together, the Allies invaded North Africa, Sicily, Italy, and France, steadily driving the Axis powers back.

By the time the 44th Division boarded transport ships in Boston on September 5, 1944, Mussolini's fascist Italy had largely been knocked out of the war. Large swaths of France were liberated from Nazi rule. But some of the war's most difficult fighting still lay ahead.

The untested troops arrived in Cherbourg, France, after ten days of sailing across the Atlantic, and were greeted immediately by the consequences of warfare. Cherbourg had been the site of a week-long battle in June, not long after the Normandy landings on "D-Day." The fighting was fierce and ended in thousands of casualties and the destruction of much of the city, including its docks. Rather than unloading directly from their transport ship, the 71st Infantry Regiment instead went ashore in landing craft.

William Shinji Tsuchida was a young Japanese-American man who enlisted in the Army in 1942, prepared to prove his loyalty to the United States despite his family being imprisoned in a government internment camp. In time, he became a medic in the same Company I, 71st Infantry Regiment as William Arnett Wills.

Wear It Proudly (University of California Press, 1947) is the collection of letters Tsuchida wrote to his family from the front, later published at the urging of friends. It is also one of the few published eyewitness accounts of the perils William Wills experienced in France.

Tsuchida also took dozens of photographs while he was still stationed in the United States, some of which are reproduced here under the Creative Commons license. He did not photograph the 71st Regiment's period of combat in Europe.

William Shinji Tsuchida Collection, Densho Digital Repository

Platoon of the 71st Regiment in Camp Edwards, Massachusetts. *William Shinji Tsuchida Collection, Densho Digital Repository*

By the time Wills reached France, Allied soldiers had already pushed German troops back to the country's eastern border. Many of the Allies' frontline troops were exhausted and spread thin after a summer of constant fighting, however. In late September, the 44th Infantry Division was ordered to relieve the 79th Division. Wills and his battalion functioned as the vanguard of this relief. They took a train to Luneville at the front lines, where the men heard the first of the artillery sounds that would become so familiar in the coming days.

At Luneville they occupied a set of trenches constructed during the First World War. Within the decades-old fortifications, Arnett and the 71st came to know many of the same harrowing experiences as soldiers from a generation before: frequent artillery barrages, sleep deprivation, bouts of hunger, and even trench foot. The cold, wet months of autumn in northern France often restricted blood flow to the feet, resulting in numbness, swelling, and even gangrene. Throughout the winter of 1944-45, American soldiers reported more than 23,000 cases of trench foot—validating the old maxims about illness being a worse threat in war than the enemy.

The first two months Wills and Company I spent in France did not directly involve them in combat. That all changed on November 13, when they were tasked with capturing a German position designated as Hill 310 near the small town of Leintrey. Located only about 40 miles from the French-German border, Leintrey was surrounded by rolling farmland, where even a small hill could dominate the nearby landscape and provide one side with advantages in combat.

Far Left: American troops come ashore from LCIs in August 1944, just as Wills would a month later.

Left: 71st Infantry soldiers search and question German prisoners, 1944.

National Archives

The fighting was fierce and the weather cold and wet. Company I took the hill, but suffered 90 casualties in three hours. One of the company's medics, William Tsuchida, wrote to his family two days later (original spelling and punctuation has been preserved):

> **The weather is bad. The mud oozes and the sleet cuts like a knife and the snow puts a false blanket over everything. My heart sinks a foot when I get to wounded man covered with an inch of snow. You can just imagine the suffering they go through before medical aid can get to them. Boy the real heroes are these line company guys. I'll never forget some of them their guts.**

Company I had successfully reached their objective, but were the only company in the 44th Division to do so that day. Making the recent snow and rain more difficult to bear, it took three more days for hot coffee to reach the troops, by which time large numbers of soldiers with trench foot were sent back to receive medical attention at the aid station. To make matters worse, it was hard for Company I soldiers to find a comfortable place to sleep. The night after the attack on Leintrey, medic Tsuchida related the apocalyptic experience of trying to find a dry billet:

> **...it was too dark to dig in so Warren and I went over to a German half track, removed the dead driver, threw out the junk, carefully remembering the booby traps, found a grenade under the seat and removed that, and then climbed in and huddled together to shiver the night out. It was a mansion compared to a water-filled hole.**

Four days after Wills' first combat experience, his company slogged through sticky clay soil to seize the towns of Amenoncourts and Igney. They pushed on with the rest of the 71st Infantry Regiment to take a high ridge near Foulcrey, about 10 kilometers east of their fight at Leintrey. Inch by inch, the regiment was pushing toward the border. After hard fighting to take Foulcry, the 71st discovered a warehouse filled with German officers' bedrolls in a nearby town. The regimental historian recalled that "they were very much appreciated, since bedding rolls had not yet been issued to the men." The men of Company I (and one platoon of Company M) advanced to the village of Rauwiller, excited for better sleeping conditions.

The bedrolls were cold comfort for Wills, Company I, and the entire 3rd Battalion in Rauwiller, however. On November 24th, the elite 30th Panzer-Lehr Division suddenly counterattacked with state-of-the-art Royal Tiger tanks, hoping to break through and disrupt Allied supply lines at Sarrebourg. The Tigers rumbled into Rauwiller's streets, sending 3rd Battalion scrambling into the buildings for cover. In a sharp fight in and around the town, several companies of the 71st managed to delay the panzers long enough for reinforcements to arrive and permanently halt the German advance.

After spending most of November on the move, 3rd Battalion took a reserve position in Waldhambach, a mere 13 miles from Germany. The stay provided them with some time to rest and recuperate. Soon enough, however, the 71st went back on the offensive against the Maginot Line. France had constructed the Maginot Line's bunkers and forts to deter another German invasion after World War I, but the Nazis refitted the defenses for their own use after the fall of France in 1940. Any Allied attempt to push into the heart of Germany would require advancing through the pillboxes and redoubts of the Maginot Line. As William Tsuchida would write to his family in the midst of the upcoming battle, "A bunch of good American kids have to go through hell for a mess of concrete and steel. It sure is no bargain."

December 11, 1944, was cold and wet as Wills and his regiment advanced on Freudenberg Farms. At 3:15 p.m., Company I rushed through the muddy ground in a heavily mined field between two pillboxes to seize a cluster of farm buildings. Numerous men fell along the way, despite covering fire provided by Company M.

Company I men who made it to cover were exposed to 75mm artillery fire from other nearby

> "Here is what I wear now to give you an idea. They might be considered the *absolute* [*sic*] absolute necessities: a pistol belt with canteen, aid kits, shovel, and raincoat. All this is hung on the pistol belt.
>
> We long ago shed our field packs (the thing that looks like a knapsack) and pup tent, poles, pegs, mess gear. I keep just a fork in my pocket. I even lost my raincoat (and I really hated to give that up) when we wrapped it around a casualty."
>
> *-William Shinji Tsuchida, Company I, 71st Infantry Regiment*
> *Eastern France, 3 December 1944*

German positions. As an enemy round burst in their midst, shrapnel burrowed into the abdomen of William Arnett Wills. Medic Edward Floyd of Company M got the 31-year-old West Virginian to the rear, and later to the 116th Evacuation Hospital for emergency treatment.

Combat surgeons at the hospital struggled to find and remove the shrapnel from Wills's stomach. The effort proved fruitless, and on December 12, 1944, Wills succumbed to his wounds. On him were a handful of souvenirs, a medical receipt, ten photos, a Purple Heart ribbon, two wallets with $6.05, his engraved wedding ring, and a bloodstained New Testament.

Although Wills died early in the Freudenberg Farms engagement, his comrades in Company I continued fighting. Of the brutal battle, the regimental historian later wrote, "there was not a building standing, nor a single animal left alive." William Wills joined 1,093 Americans temporarily interred in Hochfelden, France. The Army's Graves Registration Service marked his plot with a wooden cross.

While Arnett served overseas, Nina and the children carried on back home. They were informed of his death on December 28. On February 16, 1946, Nina remarried a forty-seven-year-old Arnett native named Ash K. Cook. Cook was 19 years older than her and had six daughters of his own from previous marriages.

In September 1946, Nina received a standard letter from Army Quartermaster General T. B. Larkin informing her that the War Department would "comply, at Government expense, with the feasible wishes of the next of kin regarding final interment, here or abroad, of the remains of your loved one." The government offered the Wills family a chance to bring their fallen family member back to West Virginia. But Nina's new marriage voided her position as next of kin, and she sent a reply back to Larkin to inform him of this fact. This put the future of Arnett's remains in the hands of his father, William Harrison Wills.

Despite the estrangement from his children that occurred after the passing of his wife Elsie, Harrison worked hard to ensure that his first son received a hero's welcome in Arnett. He arranged for the remains to be embalmed and clothed in an Army dress uniform, even though they were in an "advanced stage of decomposition." He answered the government's inquiries, applied for a military headstone, scheduled a funeral at Armstrong Funeral Home in Raleigh County's Whitesville, and coordinated with the local American Legion Post to deliver full military honors at the gravesite.

Arnett's body arrived in the United States in May of 1949 along with nine other men from the southern West Virginia area and, accompanied by Private First Class Arnold Walkins, he made his final journey home to Raleigh County on the 26th of that month. Three days later, Arnett's family and friends gathered for his funeral and burial in Arnett Cemetery. It is likely that his sister, Madeline Carrie Wills Dickens, who was married but still resided in Marsh Fork, brought his younger brothers Dallas and Joe to the service, as they still lived with her.

Arnett was interred in the local cemetery with which he shared a name until 2009, when his remains were relocated to Pruntytown's West Virginia National Cemetery. The reasons for this relocation are not clear, but only next of kin have the right to request interment or disinterment in a national cemetery.

The children from Nina Cook's marriage to Arnett Wills eventually married and started families of their own. Nina passed away on January 24, 2012, at age 94.

Arnett's father William Harrison originally asked that his son's gravestone be inscribed with the phrase "Gone But Not Forgotten." Although the Army denied this request, the deceased soldier's loved ones and neighbors worked to fulfill a father's wish to remember his son in other ways. In 1952, community leaders included Arnett on a memorial for local fallen Second World War veterans at the Raleigh County Memorial Airport. In 2008, the year before Arnett was reinterred in the West Virginia National Cemetery, the West Virginia House of Delegates honored Wills by naming a bridge near the town of Arnett the "William Arnett Wills Memorial Bridge."

PLACE OF INTERMENT:
West Virginia National Cemetery
SECTION 7
SITE 813

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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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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