

Interviewer: Okay so if you could just start off by saying your full name and the day and year that you were born.

Willis: I'm Thomas C Willis born March 9, 1928.

Interviewer: Okay and where were you born?

Willis: Born in a little community called Ferguson which there is nothing hardly in Logan County now. At that time there was three grocery stores general stores a post office, school, two churches about 15 or 18 houses around. Now there is two houses left.

Interviewer: Wow okay and what branch of the service did you serve in?

Willis: Army ordinance. Ordinance is the supply part.

Interviewer: Okay and what was the primary unit that you served with?

Willis: Primary what?

Interviewer: Unit

Willis: Well it was the 229 ordinance and we ended up part of the 8th army.

Interviewer: Okay

Willis: We supplied a full battalion in my company we had we had truck drivers, dispatchers, telephone operators, cooks and bakers, almost everything that you have except MPs. For some reason or another they were not in our outfit.

Interviewer: What was your job what were you in charge of?

Willis: I was a motor pool dispatcher.

Interviewer: Okay what were your parent's names and what were their occupations?

Willis: Claude Willis was my father he was a rural mail carrier and my mother housewife.

Interviewer: Okay

Willis: Vera Willis

Interviewer: Okay and do you have brothers and sisters and how much older or younger?

Willis: I had one sister and she was a year and six month two years and six months older than I Flora.

Interviewer: And how long did you remain in school you graduated right before you served?

Willis: I graduated from high school then I work for two years before I went in the army graduated when I was 16. After I got out of the army I went to college.

Interviewer: What did you do the two years that you were working right after high school?

Willis: Most of the time I worked at the drug store. I was sort of disappointed when I got out of school jobs good paying jobs in factories and everything Louisville and Nashville, Indianapolis everywhere were begging for people to work. But I found out that you had to be 18 years old and about the only jobs I could get grocery store, drug store, service station something like that. So I ended up working in a drug store until I went in the army.

Interviewer: Do you have any recollections about the great depression? What do you remember about the great depression?

Willis: Yeah I can remember a lot of it. I was born in 28 and the depression started about 31 all through the 30s.

Interviewer: Right

Willis: And I started school in 1933 I was five years old. And it was just a rural community not many people had cars. My daddy had a car most of the time. But it sounds like a joke and everything but I didn't realize I was poor until we moved to town.

Interviewer: Right

Willis: And nobody had anything much you didn't get any maybe one toy a year. We didn't go anywhere we played in the creek, climbed trees, made toys of our own.

Interviewer: Right

Willis: And we if you're as well off as everybody else you don't

Interviewer: Right you don't realize it. Why did your family decide to move to town?

Willis: My daddy got to where he wasn't about to work. In fact we had bought a small farm 44 acres \$2700 mind you. And he was made a down payment on it was gonna pay \$25 a month. He got where he couldn't work no income couldn't pay it. Twenty five dollars doesn't sound like very much but if you don't have it you don't have it.

Interviewer: Right

Willis: We lost the farm and my mother was from Simpson County. At that time her mother and daddy three brothers were all still living and daddy had no immediate relatives where we were living. So she wanted to move to Franklin and we did.

Interviewer: Okay what did he do when he got to Franklin?

Willis: Well I was 12 years old I didn't do anything much maybe help mow the yards and pick a few strawberries do a few things delivered bills we delivered bills form grocery stores and theaters. Instead of running ads in the paper they had bills delivered. Until I got 13 I got a bicycle by then and I got a paper route.

Interviewer: Right

Willis: And I did pretty good carrying papers. My sister by that time she had got a job in a restaurant and then got a job in a beauty shop.

Interviewer: Okay

Willis: And we helped a little bit at home too.

Interviewer: Okay when you were working at the drug store right after high school do you remember how much you were making?

Willis: I started at 15 cents an hour and I quite at one time and went to Kroger's making \$25 an hour I mean 25 cents an hour.

Interviewer: That's pretty significant.

Willis: And when I got out of high school I was wanting something regular and I drove a line truck for about a month the man was off sick. I run a bread route for about two months they had to have someone 21 years or older and I was not that old as soon as they got somebody to replace me, I knew that to start with.

Interviewer: Right

Willis: And so I went and got a job regular job at the drug store.

Interviewer: Right before the attack on Pearl Harbor how seriously did your family and yourself take the Nazi threat? Was it something that you thought war was eminent or was it something that just seems too far away?

Willis: Well the Japanese seemed to bother us more than the Germans did because they were started out they took the Philippines and first one island then another took Guam and they were in other words they were coming this way.

Interviewer: Right

Willis: But I kept us as 13, 14, 15 year old I kept up with the war situation more than most people did my age because I was carrying papers and I read the newspaper every day.

Interviewer: Right do you remember discussion what you read with your friends or your family?

Willis: No I don't.

Interviewer: What were you hearing about the war in school? Did your teachers ever say anything about it?

Willis: Oh yeah you had all your rationing was on.

Interviewer: Right

Willis: You had shoe rationing you had gas rationing you had meat rationing and it was something that was mentioned and talked about every day. Then we had a couple of course in school that were related to world affairs that they hadn't had before and haven't had since.

Interviewer: Oh wow okay I didn't know that. Do you remember where you were when you heard that Pearl Harbor had been bombed?

Willis: I was at home.

Interviewer: Did you have a radio?

Willis: We didn't have a radio that would work at the time but some of my friends told us. She might remember it but I don't. I remember I was out in the yard and some friends told us about it.

Interviewer: Do you remember your parents saying anything to you about it or remember them saying anything to each other?

Willis: No

Interviewer: Okay

Woman in the background: It was on a Sunday morning.

Interviewer: Yeah Aunt Lidia was saying that she was coming home from church yep.

Woman in the background: I heard it at church.

Interviewer: That's crazy I mean I remember where I was at when 9/11 when I heard about 9/11 so.

Willis: We had been reading all the time in the paper about England in war and we were supplying guns equipment and so forth to England.

Interviewer: Right do you remember listening to President Roosevelt on the radio at all? Did you have to like go to other people's houses like that?

Willis: Well we had at school we had what you call a general assembly.

Interviewer: Right

Willis: And they had everybody dismissed their classes and everything and we all met in there and listened to his speech.

Interviewer: Wow that's kind of neat. Did your family or personally did you approve or disapprove of the way that Roosevelt was handling the war?

Willis: Generally approved at the time we didn't think about anybody doing it besides him.

Interviewer: Right I know I already asked you this but were you drafted or enlisted?

Willis: I was drafted.

Interviewer: Okay and did you have a preference for the branch of army I mean the branch of military that you were going to serve with?

Willis: No I was drafted and as I told you it was after the war they were trying to build up a regular army. And if you joined the regular army for it was three or four years I forget which you supposed got your branch of service but that was somewhat a political promise you might and you might not. We had a friend that we met we sort of buddied up different ones and he wanted us to all join. He signed up to be in the I believe it was the finance core with a promise of serving in the Caribbean if he went overseas and I forget what the other promise was. Anyway we saw him in California we were going to Hawaii he was in the light artillery going to Alaska.

Interviewer: Oh no that's a far cry from the Caribbean.

Willis: You see what the promises were worth.

Interviewer: Right the poor guy. Did you when you were in basic and when you first realized that you were going to be in the army did you have a preference for the kind of work that you were going to be doing the kind of work that you were going to be performing or were you just happy to go where they put you?

Willis: In the army?

Interviewer: Uh huh

Willis: I don't know whether I volunteered I don't remember it they sent me to parts school.

Interviewer: What?

Willis: Where today you do it all on a computer. Back before then you had big old book yea thick and everything that the army had had a parts number. And you were supposed to be able to learn those parts and to locate them and how to order them and I went about 8 weeks or 10 weeks I don't remember to part school.

Interviewer: Oh okay

Willis: And that's why I was in the ordinance it was a supply division. But when I got sent to Japan they made me a motor pool dispatcher and I never worked in the parts at all.

Interviewer: Okay

Willis: But they needed somebody motor pool dispatcher and I ended up what my job which I liked it very good. We worked very erratic there like I would work all day Monday it was four day cycle. I would work all day Monday from about 8 until about 6. Tuesday I would be off Wednesday I would work half a day Thursday I would come in about five o'clock and work until eight o'clock the next morning. Work about 16 hours and then Friday you would be off again. And it was a four day cycle and if it became your day on Sunday to work on a holiday to work on whatever day you worked that day I mean there was no getting off.

Interviewer: Right wow

Willis: But you had a lot of off time. But then you would work a 16 hour shift every fourth day.

Interviewer: That's rough that's a long day. Where did you do your basic training?

Willis: Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland about 30 miles from Baltimore.

Interviewer: Was that the furthest you had ever been away from home?

Willis: It was at the time yes. I went in before I went to Aberdeen I went to Camp Attaberry Indiana for induction it was an induction center.

Interviewer: Right

Willis: And you got all your shots and got all of your indoctrination you got all of your clothes then they shipped you to somewhere else.

Interviewer: Right do you remember what your opinion was of your fellow recruits what you thought of them as you got there? Did you make any friends immediately?

Willis: The other guys?

Interviewer: Uh huh

Willis: Nearly all of them was very nice guys. WE had in our company there was a group of 30 something gang members out of Brooklyn New York that were up for before the court. The judge give them the opportunity of joining the army or else serve in the penitentiary. They all joined the army and about half of them ended up in our company. And three, four or five of them together were real tough guys one on one they weren't all that tough they were just tough in bunches.

Interviewer: Yeah

Willis: But they'd steal anything we had training with different kind of weapons and they stole a machine gun parts at a time. They stole all the parts to a machine gun and got it out of the camp.

Interviewer: Okay

Willis: And one of them also stole my billfold too.

Interviewer: Oh no that's horrible. But for the most part you got along with people?

Willis: But nearly all of them was good guys.

Interviewer: Yeah did you keep in touch with any of them after the war after your service?

Willis: What

Interviewer: Did you keep in touch?

Willis: No I tried to keep in touch one or two but I lost out and I had no contact with them after I was out for a year or so.

Interviewer: What were your living conditions like at basic training?

Willis: We had what they call tar paper shacks. They were just building that were put up and had tar paper on the outside and some kind of it was really just temporary building is what they put it around it to and let's see it would be about probably 30 or 40 in a building. When we got out of that and I went to tech school I was talking about that parts school we were in a two story permanent type building. Now they were a lot nicer than that and they had showers in the building these other buildings we had a maybe a row of seven or eight buildings then you had one shower and latrine building together. When we first went into Japan we stayed in tents for a while in Zama and it was in the winter time.

Interviewer: Oh goodness.

Willis: We stayed there three weeks and then they moved us out somewhere else. It was actually Zama was equivalent to go to West Point. It was an officer training camp but it had been bombed out and the group I was with didn't even get to stay in a building we stayed in tents. Showers they had a shower building there but it was in the winter time you had to wait up until it warmed up a little bit for the pipes to unfreeze so you could take a shower.

Interviewer: Right

Willis: So needless to say you didn't take a shower too often.

Interviewer: Right I don't blame you. What was the food like?

Willis: The food?

Interviewer: Uh huh

Willis: I'm gonna tell you they had good food but it wasn't cooked right most of the time. As your cook and bakers the deserts nearly all places was delicious. One place I was in while I was in Japan we had a mess sergeant who no doubt in my mind would run a good restaurant in civilian life. Food there was you couldn't eat better anyplace you could go. I mean everything was cooked right it taste good it was just a different set up all together. And it was just a matter of a man wanting to do it right.

Interviewer: Right

Willis: I mean all before you just took what come along if you went in there in the morning with him and you wanted eggs you got a chance how to order them. If you wanted eggs over light if you didn't get them that a way I mean the cook was in trouble. I mean and we got stakes I mean we were getting food out of Australia and when we got beef or steaks whenever it tasted as good as you could get at any restaurant. And a lot of the other guys in other companies wanted to eat in our mess hall but he knew everybody that was supposed to eat in it. He might not know your name but he'd know whether you belonged in there or not.

Interviewer: That's funny

Willis: But like I said it was a matter of how it was cooked but we got good food.

Interviewer: When you were in Japan did you ever like go out on your free time and go to restaurants in Japan?

Willis: Some there was a lot of places called off limits. You weren't allowed to go. But yeah we'd go into Yokohama we were closer to Yokohama than we were Tokyo we were between the two. And we'd go in Yokohama quite a bit an a couple of weekends I got a vehicle what they call three quarter ton truck about like a big pickup truck and we went to Mount ___ and a few different sightseeing things.

Interviewer: Right that's neat. So

Willis: Where I was it was a small place ___ and I'd hear news every now and then it was on _____ which is the deepest harbor in Japan. And they had it was in the news a few years ago one of the big atomic ships was docked in there and there was a lot of news about it and everything. But it's every now and then I see something about ___ it's because it's the biggest harbor they have in Japan.

Interviewer: Oh okay I didn't know that. What kind of unit did you serve with immediately after your advanced training? Was that when you were with the 8th army?

Willis: What they did with me after basic training I went to tech school.

Interviewer: After advanced training so after you got done with tech school like what port did you ship out of?

Willis: Our brother Bill Dunn said I wasn't a soldier I was a tourist. I never stayed one place very long I went to Hawaii and once Hawaii was bombed I went to the Philippines went to Japan went to Zama first then we went to ___ and I was sent there. Me along with 15 or 20 others before we were supposed to get discharged went to Camp Stowman California and all they had there was orders to discharge somebody. But you were supposed to have 18 months to get discharged which I didn't have. Had one guy there had been there two or three months they couldn't reassign him they couldn't give him any regular jobs.

Interviewer: So what did he do?

Willis: He went to Bauru and played Ping-Pong and listened to the radio and read or something all the time.

Interviewer: Oh my goodness.

Willis: And by the time I got there they had got special orders or something to go ahead and discharge people. But I just stayed there I don't know 10 days two weeks something like that. But he had been there for months.

Interviewer: Goodness do you remember when you on your way to did you go to from what port did you ship out of when you were on your way to Guam?

Willis: I don't know the port. I was on two different ships General Halzie and General Holly. They sound much alike but they were army troop transports.

Interviewer: Do you remember how many soldiers were onboard?

Willis: I think it was about 3,000.

Interviewer: Okay

Willis: And we picked up we picked up some at Ewagema and another island that had been there during World War II and they were just now getting that's where they were going. They picked them up and put them on the ship and when we got off in Japan they stayed on the ship.

Interviewer: Oh okay so you never saw combat right?

Willis: No

Interviewer: Let's see what kind of things did you do in your free time? Did you ever have civilian contact?

Willis: Some but not much. We had an interpreter there that worked connected to the motor pool. The army had hired a few Japanese to try and give them some job or something and he was as interpreter. He was the man I guess probably if I was just guessing late 30s or 40 years old. He declared on more than one occasion and everything because I pumped him a whole lot that he'd never been in the United States. I think he was lying because he knew more about Kentucky, Tennessee than the average Kentuckian does. He knew where Paducah was he knew the Blue Grass area he knew we had race horses he knew we had race cars, tobacco.

Interviewer: How strange

Willis: But he swore he'd never been in the United States but all the thing he knew you don't just pick up reading.

Interviewer: Right

Willis: He was a nice fellow but.

Interviewer: Yep what did you guys do for fun? Did you have like did you read did you play cards?

Willis: Read they have what they call dayroom in it they have Ping-Pong tables some of them might have a pool table but mostly Ping-Pong tables and you could play cards. We played cards a lot.

Interviewer: Did you write letters back and forth to people back home?

Willis: Uh huh I'd go sometime for weeks without ever getting any mail and then I might get ten letters one day. And I don't know letters that I sent home whether they got them that a way or not. They might have got several at a time too.

Interviewer: Like big chunk right. Did you have leave time at all when you were in service?

Willis: Before I went overseas I did I come home probably two weeks. I went to had to report to New Orleans and we rode troop trains from New Orleans to Pittsburg California which is close to Las Angeles.

Interviewer: Oh okay

Willis: The troop train wouldn't go but about 35 miles an hour we spent about two days and nights going through Texas.

Interviewer: Oh goodness

Willis: We started in whenever you come out of New Orleans into Texas going across the longest way went out to EL Paso.

Interviewer: Goodness that's a lot of time in Texas. Do you remember any of the soldiers that had maybe been there longer than you or before you any opinions that your unit had on the quality of the enemy during World War II? I mean did people think they were talented or that they possessed good leadership? Do you remember anybody saying anything about their side?

Willis: I don't know.

Interviewer: Do you remember how long after the war or if it was during the war when you found out about Nazi atrocities like the Holocaust? Do you remember when that information started?

Willis: It was in the paper and things and like I said I read the paper all the time.

Interviewer: Right

Willis: And we might have got a radio before then we had a radio but an old battery set and batteries cost a whole lot and I don't remember listening to the radio very much at that time. But it was in newspapers all the time.

Interviewer: Right

Willis: And the you didn't hear as much about it the atrocities were probably worse for the Japanese than it was for the Germans because they didn't take many prisoners.

Interviewer: Right

Willis: They killed most of them.

Interviewer: Do you remember once you got home did you know anybody who knew Japanese citizens that had been put in internment camps?

Willis: I knew a couple of guys had been in German camps but not any Japanese.

Interviewer: Okay

Willis: Dr. Freeze he was POW in Germany and Emmitt Stewart there was a half or dozen around here Jack James that were POWs all of them in Germany.

Interviewer: When you came back to Franklin after the war do you remember discussing your experiences because you were in the Pacific Theatre because you were in Japan? Do you remember discussing your experiences with say people who were in the European Theatre or did life kind of just go back to normal?

Willis: I don't think we discussed it much.

Interviewer: Do you remember having (they stopped the camera for a moment).

Willis: (Tape begins with Willis looking at a piece of paper) Just two churches and schools and things there. We had a pump station there on the creek had a water tower and pump station and in all the trains that ran from Bowling Green to Memphis line filled up their water boards there. And in turn we would have anywhere from 5 to 10 trains stopped a day there. During the depression they were just loaded with hobos going across country I mean it wasn't all bums some of them were just down and out didn't have anything needed to go somewhere and they was ridding trains. And they would get off and make the closest houses around and try and get a little food. And Momma would give them some food if she had something to give them and if she didn't want to fool with them we had two dogs and everything and one of them was a collie everybody loved a collie and everything but she bit three people we had to get rid of her she bit three people. But had a big ole German Shepard that everybody was afraid of him and he never did bite anybody but he scared them to death. And Momma would tell me to get ole Buster and go around front you know and we'd go around there and they'd start in the yard and they'd see them dogs and everything they'd take off back somewhere else.

Interviewer: That's funny did anybody ever do any work for you? I know sometimes people will say like when like hobos come by

Willis: Nearly all of these they just wanted something in a hurry and get back on that train.

Interviewer: Yeah

Willis: They knew it was gonna take maybe 30 -45 minutes to fill the train up with water and get it moving.

Interviewer: So they had to hurry.

Willis: And they just wanted to get some food and get back on the train and keep going.

Interviewer: That's crazy

Willis: Commodities daddy had a job, didn't make much money as a mail carrier then, it's a good job now but they didn't make much then.

Interviewer: Right

Willis: And my mother had a real serious operation in her early 30s then about 35 daddy had a ruptured appendix stayed in the hospital about three months and stayed off work about eight months. Didn't have no antibiotics and it was amazing he didn't die. So we stayed behind all the time and I don't think we ever did get it all paid off.

Interviewer: Yeah

Willis: But anyway the ones who got commodities they got some things they didn't eat Momma would trade them something's. They'd get the government would give them this brown flour, old wheat flour is what it was but it was ole brown flour. And it didn't make them white biscuits like they was used to having.

Interviewer: Right

Willis: And so Momma would swap with a couple of neighbors she would swap some white flour for some of this other so it would help they had it as good as we had.

Interviewer: Do you know anybody that like because I know some people have talked about the black market for different things during rationing times.

Willis: Yeah they did you could buy most any of those things gasoline stamps you could buy extra ones somewhere somebody got them all the time. Some people coffee was rationed and you could get it was a black market for a price you could get any of those things including sugar. There was oh yeah grapefruits we had never had grapefruits in the country there most people didn't even know what they were. And the government of course they were distributing all this stuff supposed to be good for you and my mother and I we learned to like grapefruits they gave us all the grapefruits we wanted. I still love grapefruit my sister and my daddy they never would eat one.

Interviewer: My grandma used to eat grapefruit for breakfast every morning.

Willis: I joke about it but I don't ever put any sugar on a grapefruit I like all fruit just like they are. But I tell people we didn't always have sugar and grapefruits at the same time.

Interviewer: Right exactly you had to learn to love it.

Willis: You had to learn to eat them without it. I guess we probably did have sugar all the time. Oh yeah when I went in the army I learned a good lesson to begin with. They were drafting by the week and the week before I was supposed to go three of four friends of mine was going so I volunteered to go a week ahead to go with them and that suited the draft board fine.

Interviewer: Right

Willis: But we went to Louisville the day and I noticed they wasn't giving me much examination.

Woman in the background: D.C. quit talking I don't want everything to get cold.

Willis: Just a minute I told them I'd be through in just a minute. Anyway they sent me on Attaberry Camp Attaberry with the group that come in the day before and that's the last I ever saw of those three guys.

Tape ended