

J.D. Williams:  
Christian Values Tested by War



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## “A Way of Life,” A Childhood and Adolescence Spent on the Move

Movement marked the first seventeen years in the life of J.D. Williams. His parents left Oklahoma, where J.D. had been born, when he was just a toddler. The family settled in California. Aside from one brief stay in Arizona, the Golden State became their permanent home. Today we often hear how important stability is in the life of a child. While a loving family proved to be a constant for him, J.D.’s childhood and adolescent years were filled with changes. He lived in several homes and attended many schools. From Henryetta, Oklahoma, the Williamses moved to Bard, California. In time, J.D.’s parents re-settled in nearby Winterhaven. From there, they drove halfway up the state when the family left Southern California for Oakdale, a northern community. All of these moves meant that J.D. became the new boy in class more than once in a string of small schoolhouses. When J.D.’s father got a job working on the Shasta Dam project, the Williamses migrated even further north to a boomtown near Redding. He began his high school years in that community. From there, the family lived for a short time in Stockton, where J.D. attended yet another school. The next move took them to Yuma, Arizona where he enrolled in a third high school. The Williamses’ final relocation occurred after their son’s sophomore year when J.D. and his parents returned to California. They settled in Escondido where he began his junior year at his fourth high school. For J.D.’s parents, years of moving from one town to another ended there. They spent the rest of their lives in Escondido. After graduation, however, movement continued to characterize J.D.’s adult life. He served in the military during World War II where he fought in the Pacific Theater. After the war ended, J.D. returned home. Thirteen years later, a job with the federal government meant years of even more moves. His position necessitated transfers from one place to another, some even to foreign countries. It was not until his retirement that J.D. really “stayed put.” He returned to Escondido, joining his parents in his retirement there. Throughout all of his childhood and adolescent years, J.D. remained, by his own description, “a happy, young person.” Settling in one town after another clearly did not prove detrimental for him. Looking back, J.D. sees moving as just “a way of life.”<sup>1</sup>

Born on June 19, 1926 in Henryetta, Oklahoma to Willie D. (“Dee”) and Anna (“Annie”) Lela Williams, J.D. spent his first few years in that community. His birth certificate simply lists him as “J.D. Williams.” On the document, the two initials do not represent a first name or a middle name, such as “John” or “David.” J.D. points out that it is a Southern tradition to give children initials as their name. Why his parents chose those initials, and what they represented to Dee and Annie, has been lost to history. The first names of J.D.’s two grandfathers, however, furnish one possible explanation. Annie’s father was “James,” so perhaps J.D.’s first initial has its origin with his maternal grandfather. His parents could have drawn his second initial from his paternal grandfather who was “Dee.”<sup>2</sup> It might therefore have been his parent’s sense of family history that explains the “J” and the “D.” When asked to characterize Annie and Dee, J.D. describes his mother as “a kind and patient person” and his father as “a hard worker.” Boerstler Brothers in Henryetta, a wholesale grocery company, employed Dee Williams. Located in eastern Oklahoma, fifty-one miles south of Tulsa, coal mining sustained Henryetta from its beginnings in the late nineteenth century. In time, other industries, such as glass manufacturing



as well as broom and brick factories, contributed to the town's economic base. Henryetta's population in 1920 numbered almost six thousand people.<sup>3</sup> J.D. knows that his parents met and married in Texas, their home state. The 1920 Census lists them both as living in the homes of their respective parents, so they clearly married after that date. At the time of the 1920 Census, Willie Dee labored as a farmer on his father's homestead in Pilot Point, Denton, while Annie was a teacher in a public school in the town of Denton.<sup>4</sup> Sometime in their young married life, they migrated to Oklahoma. When and why is not part of the family lore.

When J.D. was two years old, he and his parents left Henryetta because of his mother's health. Anna suffered from severe allergy problems. A drier climate would be better for her. J.D.'s maternal grandparents lived in a desert area of Southern California. Their home thus became the destination for the Williams family. Leaving Oklahoma as they did in 1928, J.D. and



Annie and J.D.

his parents preceded the 1930's migration from the southern states in the Great Plains. The Depression of that decade, with its drop in agricultural prices and farm foreclosures, prompted the movement. A natural disaster known as the Dust Bowl, a decade long drought, added to the misery. The popular culture nickname for those migrants who came to California became "Okies," regardless of their state-of-origin. In the midst of the Depression and the migration West, the photographer Dorothea Lange took pictures of the Okies that testified to the strength of their spirit in spite of adversity. Writer John Steinbeck tried to capture in words that same quality of character in his novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Undoubtedly, Dee and Anna Williams exemplified that spirit, too. As it turned out, within a few years of their arrival in the Golden State the Williamses joined the mass of migrant labor when they left Southern California to head for the north's Central Valley. Like those

Okies who came later, the Williamses headed West not on a train, but in a car, an old car.

Certainly the first leg of their journey in 1928 would have bewildered Anna and taxed Dee. Painfully, the move forced J.D.'s mother to select which of her sentimental belongings, if any, could fit into their car. They towed no trailer. All of their personal possessions and supplies for the trip had to fit into, or onto, the vehicle. Undoubtedly, more items had to be left than taken if room was to be made for necessities, such as a mattress to sleep upon during the journey. Saying goodbye to friends would have also saddened Anna. For J.D.'s father, the preparation for the long automobile trip tested him in different ways. As the traditional "head of the family," Dee carried the responsibility of financially providing for himself, his wife, and son. In the weeks preceding their departure, J.D.'s father would have liquidated most of their personal belongings to give them cash for the journey. Mechanically, he would have checked and re-checked the automobile's radiator, oil, tires, and brakes. Dee probably took extra oil and water. What they did in the weeks before departure would be duplicated just a few years later as others from the Great Plains headed west. Like those who followed them, J.D.'s family loaded all that they could into and onto their car. The three Williamses then headed out for the state that historically symbolized a new start for men and women who were game enough to try for one. Even though he was very young, J.D. recalls parts of the journey. Specifically, he remembers the vehicle the family used to drive halfway across the country and where they spent the nights.

Their mode of transportation was the family automobile, a vehicle identified in that era as simply a “jalopy,” meaning an old car. In all probability, it was a Ford, black in color and simple in design. It would have been filled to capacity with items piled into the back seat and trunk as well as objects tied down onto the roof of the car. J.D. remembers nights spent on a mattress they carried. In the evenings, his parents took it off of the roof. Even at his young age, J.D. recalls resting on it near the automobile, preferably under trees if some were nearby. Their branches gave some shelter by providing a canopy for the sleeping family. Altogether the trip covered approximately twelve to thirteen hundred miles. Given the road conditions and the speed at which their jalopy could travel, the trip through Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona would have taken days.

For the Williamses, their journey from Oklahoma ended right near the Arizona border, just outside of Yuma, in the small California town of Bard. That is where J.D.’s maternal grandparents, James and Eula Rutledge, lived. They grew cotton. J.D. remembers his mother’s parents as being “prosperous” on their alfalfa and cotton farm. In fact, the latter crop dotted the landscape on other homesteads, not only the one belonging to the Rutledges. J.D. recalls his parents as “amazed at all of the cotton crops growing” in the area. Dee Williams worked for his father-in-law picking the cotton. Anna and J.D. joined him in the fields. Around the age of three, the youngest Williams carried a sack into which he, too, put the picked cotton. As J.D. firmly states, “I remember this clearly.” The sack hung on a strap over his shoulder. “I’d go along picking the cotton.” His father gently scolded him if he missed some of the crop that hung from the branches of the bushes.

Life had dramatically changed for the Williamses. Dee went from an independent living in Henryetta to one where he could not have helped but feel beholden to his in-laws. Anna would have shared that gratitude. She must have felt a physical relief as her allergy-related health issues abated in the dry climate of the Imperial Valley. But she also must have experienced an emotional relief. The trip had been a difficult one. Now at Bard, Annie was surrounded by family. In addition to her father James and stepmother Eula, Annie’s siblings lived at the Rutledge farm--Hubert, Harold, Guy, Rachel, and Moselle.<sup>5</sup> The three Williamses found themselves sitting around a crowded kitchen table. The young aunts and uncles of J.D. probably took delight in their young nephew. A different geographical environment added to the new emotional one. Even J.D. would have seen how their new home contrasted with their old one. A desert terrain surrounded Bard because of its location in the Imperial Valley. It received an



average yearly rainfall of only 2.4 inches. Because of this, in the late nineteenth century the Imperial Valley carried the dark, descriptive title “Valley of the Dead.”<sup>6</sup> In contrast, while rainfall varied depending on the different areas of the state, Oklahoma averaged between twenty-five and thirty inches.<sup>7</sup> Modern irrigation brought water from the Colorado River to the Imperial Valley which by 1920 transformed the Valley of the Dead into a rich agricultural area.<sup>8</sup>

Summer temperatures average in the one hundred degree range. They can even reach one hundred and twenty, a fact that no doubt contributed to the morbid nineteenth century name for the valley. A high, western mountain range forms a wall that insulates the area from cool breezes. This

topography, combined with the fact that the Imperial Valley sits below sea level, creates a virtual “desert pit or oven.”<sup>9</sup> The intense heat sent the Williamses to Jacumba, a small community just two hundred yards from the Mexican border. It derives its name from an Indian word that translates as “hut by the water,” the water being mineral springs. In the 1920’s, a railroad line laid in 1919 made Jacumba readily accessible to visitors. A luxury hotel opened in 1925 to accommodate a wealthy clientele, many from Hollywood. Two years later, a graded, paved road from the desert floor to the top of Mountain Springs Grade allowed residents of the Imperial Valley to reach Jacumba. Its altitude, 2,800 feet above sea level, attracted people such as the Williams family who sought relief from the stifling valley heat. Jacumba’s population swelled from the low hundreds to the low thousands when visitors frequented its hot sulfur springs.<sup>10</sup> J.D. believes his parents rented a small cabin in the resort town. Sometimes his grandparents went with them. While the mineral springs might be beneficial, J.D. “loved going to Jacumba because it was so much cooler” than Bard. On their way up the mountain, the Williamses passed the remnants of a unique road that the family had once traveled on.

The eight-mile stretch was known as the Plank Road (later generations identified it as the Old Plank Road). It began in the east in Yuma, Arizona and ended in the west at Gray’s Well, California, a camp built specifically for the construction of the road. With a clear mark of pride in his voice, J.D. recalls stories his parents told him of traveling on what he correctly identifies as “a historic road.” It came about because of a piece of land marked by sand dunes in Imperial County. Known as “the little Sahara Desert,” the strip measured eight miles in width and between eighty to one hundred miles in length. In the years before 1912, travelers drove their cars around the sand dunes. That detour, however, added an extra fifty-one miles and two days of travel between Yuma and the towns in the Imperial Valley. In 1912, however, a direct route opened up. Eight miles in length, the strip was built over a portion of the sand dunes that proved especially arduous to cross. Modest in its early construction, it eventually consisted of railroad ties, dipped in tar, placed adjacent to each other. The Plank Road was too narrow to allow traffic in each direction. Turnouts every half a mile were meant to allow the one-way traffic to yield to cars traveling in the opposite direction. One historian who researched the history of the Plank Road points out the dangers the route posed to travelers--“Drifting sand, high winds, and flash floods...were but a few of the problems encountered...Lack of water and food along the way made the trip much more dangerous. Each driver had to be constantly on the alert for sand dunes on the road, high wind pockets, oncoming cars, places where the road had been undermined by wind erosion, and the hazard of slipping off the planks into the sand, to be stuck until a fellow traveler arrived.” With a maximum speed posted at only ten miles per hour, and all of the aforementioned conditions drivers encountered, tempers flared.<sup>11</sup> It is not surprising that once someone drove on the Plank Road, the memory stayed with him or her for a lifetime.

J.D. recalls stories his parents shared with him about traveling on the road. Given his father’s determination to complete a task once he began it, J.D. believes the various obstacles met on the Plank Road might have involved him in some heated confrontations. That by itself would have made the trip memorable in addition to the unique nature of the road’s construction and its special place in the history of migration to California. Since J.D. first heard tales about traveling on the Plank Road when he was quite young, the year when the family drove on it is not clear. Officially, the road existed from 1912-1927, during which time it went through various modifications. In August of 1926, near the original Plank Road, a paved, asphalt thoroughfare

opened, constructed on top of a built-up sand embankment. While it officially replaced the historic road, for years stretches of planks laid on the sand dunes, marking the original route. It is not inconceivable that in the years after the asphalt road opened, adventuresome travelers heading west out of Yuma might still have availed themselves of the opportunity to travel on the Plank Road. J.D. believes his parents spoke of driving on it when they first came to California in 1928. Whether it was then or at a later date, Dee and Annie somehow passed on to their son the pride in traversing such a route across the sand dunes. On trips up to Jacumba and, as J.D. recounts it, “in conversations on the back porch,” the story of the Williamses traveling the Old Plank Road served as what J.D. calls “a good conversation piece” that in all probability is true even if the date of such a journey is uncertain.

Aside from trips to Jacumba, J.D. also recalls his early years in Bard as ones marked by some special time he spent with his father. He remembers his dad’s habit, after the workday ended, of posing a question to his son, “Do you want to play a little catch today, J.D.?” With a very vocal “yes” as the answer, Dee and his son got into the jalopy. Together they went off to pursue this Sunday afternoon pastime with other local men. As J.D. watched, Dee played baseball.

The initial stay of the Williams family in Bard lasted for only a few years. Annie and Dee’s second and last child, Erlene, was born in 1932. Six years older than his sister, J.D. now became a “big brother.” Sometime in that year or in 1933, they relocated to the nearby, larger community of Winterhaven, about seven and a half miles southwest of Bard. Dee leased a ranch on an Indian reservation. In Winterhaven, Dee continued a family tradition when it came to the livelihood he pursued there. Farming served as the occupation for generations on both sides of J.D.’s family. The Williamses helped plant and harvest cotton at the Rutledge farm. Dee continued working with this crop when he moved from Bard to Winterhaven. The family raised cotton, drawing on the knowledge they gained while working with Annie’s father in Bard. They planted the cotton, picked it, and then took it to be ginned where machines separated the lint from the seeds. While living on this ranch near Winterhaven, horses also became part of the farm’s livelihood. Dee raised, traded, and sold them. In J.D.’s estimation, financially the family “did well.” He recalls the time they lived on the ranch with special fondness not because of this fact, but because his father gave him a pony. In the fall of 1933, J.D. rode the horse about two miles to a one-room schoolhouse, the first school he ever attended.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, that initial experience in the world of education did not turn out to be a positive one for seven-year-old J.D. because some Indian students and the teacher abused him. In keeping with the segregation of the era, Indian children went to their own school. J.D. had several encounters with them on his way home, however. In the mornings, he tied his pony up outside of his schoolhouse, leaving the horse with water and hay. When lessons ended for the day, J.D. rode the horse home. Along the way, a bus that carried the Indian children passed him on the road. The students shot pebbles at J.D. with their sling shots. They missed their intended target, though. As J.D. recounts the story in his memoir, “The poor horse traveled at top speed but still received the brunt of the stones shot by the children.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to these episodes, J.D. had an encounter with his teacher that, ironically, guaranteed the first grader would not be troubled again by the Indian children.

Looking back on his life, in his memoir J.D. characterizes himself as a “mischievous” seven-year-old. That trait may have been all too apparent to his first grade teacher. J.D. recalls

her as a woman “ancient of days,” a phrase his generation used to identify someone as older. Her face had “a sour look” to it. One day while in class, J.D. answered a question she posed to him in a way that aroused her ire. The teacher “struck me across the face with such force that I went tumbling from my small desk chair to the floor.”<sup>14</sup> J.D.’s parents valued education, a fact seen when they enrolled their son in school instead of having him work with them on the ranch. J.D. believes his father never went past the fourth grade, while his mother perhaps graduated from the eighth grade, an educational level that apparently allowed her to teach children in the Texas plains. Angered at the treatment their son received from the teacher in Winterhaven, Dee and Annie Williams pulled J.D. out of class. He remained at home for the rest of the academic year. Since J.D.’s mother taught in a public school before she married, Annie may have tutored her son to ensure that he did not fall behind in his studies. In those months, J.D. spent hours helping his father with the horses and crops. Unquestionably, the boy felt that to be a better way to spend his time than with an abusive “ancient one.” It is not surprising that J.D. remembers this period on the ranch near Winterhaven as “a memorable and happy time in my life.” He had his loving parents surrounding him, horses to tend to, and a temporary respite from the daily school routine.

Regardless of the joy another child brought to the family, Erlene’s arrival would have increased the concern Dee Williams felt when it came to economically providing for them all. By 1933-1934, the impact of the Great Depression finally hit them. As with all agricultural products in the economic downturn, cotton prices declined as did the value of the horses Dee raised. It proved too difficult to financially make it on the Winterhaven ranch. Dee and Annie decided to uproot the family once again. Bard became like a magnet, pulling them back to the supportive atmosphere they encountered approximately five-six years earlier when they first arrived in California. Dee sold all of the farm animals at such low prices that J.D. believes his father “practically gave them away.” Giving up the independency Winterhaven represented to them, the Williamses moved back to the Bard area to be close again to Annie’s family. Each household probably helped out the other as much as it could. For Dee and Annie, the move must have been especially difficult emotionally. It represented a retrograde, not an advancement. For their young son, the return to Bard became his third move in about six years. That move took place by the fall of 1934 since J.D. began second grade in a one-room schoolhouse in Bard.

J.D. describes their new residence near his grandparents as “a very old house.” He remembers that screens encircled it, covering not just the doors and windows but the entire perimeter. As was common in rural areas at the time, kerosene lamps provided light in the evenings and outhouses served as bathrooms. That outdoor facility stood about one hundred feet from the house. Not only was it “a long walk during the night,” but rattlesnakes made it a dangerous one as well. Urinal pots served as a safer alternative in the evening and very early morning hours until the sun rose.<sup>15</sup> With so many unemployed, jobs remained hard to come by, although Dee Williams “tried desperately to locate one.”<sup>16</sup> Even at his young age, seven to eight years old, J.D.’s memories of those hard times remain vivid ones. As he described them in his memoir, “It was a time of scrounging for anything edible to keep our family alive.”<sup>17</sup> Although his mother was an excellent cook, Annie did not have a variety of food items to draw upon. As J.D. remembers, “Our main menu was corn bread and skim milk. My grandparents gave us skim milk each day that was usually designated for the hogs.”<sup>18</sup> Sometimes, a neighbor hired Dee, Annie, and J.D. to pick cotton, repeating the task all three worked at when they labored on the Rutledge farm with their first move to Bard back in 1928.

Over the next few years, the Williamses repeated some other activities that had also marked their first stay in Bard. There were more trips to Jacumba. As J.D. puts it, the summer months remained oppressive. He does not recall a cooler or a fan being used by the family. The mountains offered a temporary respite. The Williamses returned to Jacumba even in the midst of the Depression when money was so hard to come by, an indication of how the temperature overrode even economic considerations. During this second stay in Bard, on Sunday afternoons J.D. once again watched his father participate in baseball games with other local men. First, though, came church. In his adult life, J.D. became a devout Christian. His first memories of attending church date from this second move to Bard. They relate to an institution his mother helped establish in Bard, one that J.D. would identify with his entire life. He believes that someone from the Church of the Nazarene in Yuma visited Bard, urging the establishment of a Nazarene church in that area of the Imperial Valley. J.D. does not know what religious institution his parents identified with before this time, although there must have been one that Annie attended in the other communities she lived in. She was a deeply religious woman, and if a church existed in the area, she would have attended it if its doctrine reflected her beliefs. As J.D. explains in his memoir, “My mother had a real love for the Lord so she and some other ladies of the community organized a Church of the Nazarene [in Bard]. The first meetings were held in a brush arbor with logs holding up an accumulation of brush. It was an open air building that accommodated about fifty people. In time, the congregation was able to construct a regular building for our worship services.”<sup>19</sup> Note J.D.’s use of the adjective “our.” Thinking back decades later to that time, J.D. identifies himself as part of the Bard congregation, even though he was only seven or eight years old. Identification with a church remained a constant throughout his life, and it began in his second stay in Bard.

During his early years in the Imperial Valley, young J.D. learned other lessons that stayed with him his entire life. One concerned the drinking of liquor. Dee Williams sometimes drank, but not excessively. Once J.D.’s father took him on an outing with several other men. They had some hard liquor with them. J.D. watched as some of the men got “looped,” or drunk. His father told J.D. to taste the alcohol, which he did. Soon after, J.D. threw up. He never touched liquor again, even after he grew up and went into the Army, where almost all of his fellow soldiers drank. J.D. believes his father had him drink that day in Bard to sour him on liquor. In these years, J.D. also saw the simplicity that could accompany celebrations whose importance is too often obscured by materialism. The Williamses, for example, observed birthdays in a very low-key fashion. While J.D. notes that sometimes the family celebrated with “a little festivities,” those special days were “usually [just] a ‘happy birthday, son,’ ” uttered as a morning greeting. Similarly, the Christmas holiday did not focus on gift-giving, although he might receive some used toys along with fruits and nuts. J.D. remembers December 25<sup>th</sup> as “a time of mostly family gatherings.” At his grandparents’ home, the Williamses joined the large Rutledge clan around a table to observe the holidays. With his aunts and uncles in attendance from his mother’s side of the family, J.D. recalls feasting on a special meal with mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, chicken, and homemade bread. Ham or turkey did not occupy a place on the table. While these two main dishes are seen as traditional ones for Christmas dinners, they were too expensive for either the Rutledges or the Williamses. Both families raised chickens, so they became the center of the meal. J.D. does not recall anyone wearing their “Sunday best.” Adults and children simply wore their regular, daily clothes to the dinner table.

Pride did not get in the way of Dee providing for his family. He accepted help available from the new administration in Washington. Beginning with the inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt in March 1933, the president and Congress addressed the economic crisis confronting the nation. Several bills became law, such as ones to reform the banks, to create jobs for the unemployed, and to subsidize farmers. The one that directly touched the Williams family in Bard was the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA) passed by Congress in May 1933. For a two-year period, it gave the states federal money to provide aid to the unemployed. State relief administrations oversaw the distribution of food and clothing.<sup>20</sup> The FERA's existence from 1933-1935 coincides with the second time the Williamses lived in Bard. In all probability, the FERA was responsible for one of J.D.'s most powerful memories of how his family survived the Depression--"At times we received food as a form of relief. This usually consisted of potatoes, rice, beans, lard and other commodities that helped our diet immensely. We also received garments that were easily recognized as relief clothing."<sup>21</sup> That last reference hints at some degree of shame. When asked to explain the phrase, J.D. readily admits to the embarrassment. He remembers white stitching that showed on the outside of the garments. It distinguished the relief clothing from shirts and pants his mother would have made for him. While he did not want to wear it, wear it he did. Like millions of other Americans, J.D.'s parents worshipped the man responsible for providing relief to people who had momentarily fallen on what was called "hard times." A picture of Roosevelt hung in the Williams home. As their son explained decades later, "They [his parents] acclaimed him as the best president they ever had."

One aspect of the family's move back to Bard turned out to be a blessing to J.D. He now attended a different school than the one ruled over by the "ancient of days" teacher who had hit him. The new one-room schoolhouse was about a half mile from the house they rented. J.D. enjoyed the walk to class and back. What he calls the "different atmosphere" in the new school no doubt helped to create a positive memory of the second elementary school J.D. attended. This memory prevailed in spite of some classmates he calls "the Bard Bullies," a group of older students. They ganged up on children after school let out. As J.D. puts it, the Bard Bullies picked on "everyone they thought they could whip." That included him. But the Great Depression and the Bard Bullies did not sully his memories of these early years in California. "I was still a happy, young person," J.D. concludes.

About the time when J.D. completed the third grade, which would have been in June of 1936, "hard times" forced Dee and Annie Williams to once again make a major move. If the family story is correct, they had arrived in the Imperial Valley in 1928, when J.D. was only two years old. Beginning in September 1933, he attended first grade at a one-room schoolhouse in Winterhaven. The fall of both 1934 and 1935 found J.D. starting second and third grades respectively in a one-room schoolhouse in Bard. Probably soon after he completed third grade, in the summer of 1936 when he turned ten years old, another move took place. Like the one eight years earlier, it proved to be a major one. His parents decided to sell what they could and pack up some belongings in and on the same jalopy that had carried them to California from Oklahoma. This time their destination was California's Central Valley where Dee hoped to find a job. The Williamses were not alone in their move there. As the Great Depression and a severe drought hit Americans in Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri, they headed west. These "Okies" hoped to find work in farming areas of the Golden State. Approximately 350,000 arrived in

California during the 1930's.<sup>22</sup> Many, if not most, sought migrant agricultural work in the Central Valley. Dee, Annie, J.D. and Erlene joined them.

If the Williamses left Bard in 1936, they arrived in Northern California one year after large numbers of Okies began arriving there. Dee competed with them for work in the very years, 1937-1938, when the migration from the southern plains peaked.<sup>23</sup> For J.D. and his family, the Central Valley became their home for the next several years. In reality, that river basin consists of two valleys, the Sacramento and San Joaquin. One commentator likens it to "a great oblong bowl," about five hundred miles long and one hundred miles wide. The five thousand foot coastal range borders the western side of the Central Valley and the fourteen thousand foot Sierra Mountains towers over the valley on the east.<sup>24</sup> Around the time of J.D.'s birth, water pumped from the Central Valley's aquifer created "the largest semi-continuous expanse of irrigated farmland in the world."<sup>25</sup> The valley became a fertile agricultural area, representing two-thirds of California's thirty million acres of farm land.<sup>26</sup> Migrants moved from one piece of land to another, picking crops such as peaches, apricots, grapes, celery, or walnuts.<sup>27</sup>

J.D. remembers being part of that migratory pattern. His father helped to harvest crops at various farms whose exact location is long forgotten by his young son. But what J.D. does remember are the living accommodations the family faced. Their last house in Bard had been an old one, but it outshined what the Williamses confronted soon after they arrived in the Central Valley. At one point, he, his three-year-old sister, and his parents lived in a place with a sod floor, which his mother "diligently swept." An abandoned railroad car that sat "in the middle of a field" served as another shelter. The family slept on mattresses they brought with them. Somehow, Annie dealt with the lack of kitchen facilities. As a child, J.D. compared his living conditions with the comfortable homes of those who owned the farms where his father picked crops. He admits to being envious of what he saw. And it was not just the housing that struck J.D. He wished, too, that he did not have to move (again) when the harvest was in. The Williamses also lived temporarily in a house that its owners had abandoned. There was an explanation of why the home was empty. It belonged to a Japanese American family who either left the West Coast to avoid government relocation or, by their decision to stay, had been relocated.<sup>28</sup>

The transient nature of their early stay in the Central Valley changed when an almond farmer in Oakdale hired Dee Williams as a full-time worker. Located about thirty miles southeast of Stockton, the town sat almost halfway between San Francisco and Yosemite National Park. The nearby Stanislaus River nurtured the large number of oak trees the surrounded Oakdale, giving the community its name. With a population of around three thousand, the town must have seemed so much bigger to young J.D. than Bard or Winterhaven.<sup>29</sup> His father's salary of two dollars a day allowed the family to rent a small house near the middle of town. J.D. walked to Oakdale's grocery store on errands for his mother. Sometimes a woman across the street asked him to pick up a few things for her. She paid J.D. a small amount of money for this. While he spent some of it on candy, J.D. put most of the change he earned into what he calls his family's "grocery fund." When asked why he remembered his father's daily wage over seventy years later, J.D. replied "because money was so tight." The town's elementary school became the third one J.D. attended when he began the fourth grade there. Unlike the schools in the Imperial Valley, Oakdale's was not a one-room schoolhouse. Students sat in many classrooms. He had his

first school-age “crush” in Oakdale. It led to a brawl with another student, a realization on J.D.’s part on how fickle girls can be, and a trial by a children’s court.

As J.D. tells the story, he became “stuck on a little girl,” but he found a rival for her favor in one of his classmates. This contender for the girl’s affection warned J.D. to “stay away” from her. J.D. threw the warning back at him, “No, you stay away.” One day during lunch time, the two boys fought each other in a fist fight. As in a boxing match, J.D. recounts how each one went to “different corners” of the yard as their respective friends advised them “how to floor the [other] guy.” These classmates urged J.D. and his rival on. The little girl was asked at one point to choose between the two boys. Proving how whimsical young love can be, she wanted neither as a boyfriend. But this by itself was not sufficient punishment for J.D. and his classmate. The teacher ordered a trial for both of them by “the children’s court,” as J.D. describes the tribunal. In this custom, older children judged the actions of their younger classmates. The teacher decided what form the punishment would take. She decreed a week of pulling weeds during the lunch hour for both boys. They could eat their meal, but there would be no playtime afterwards, just weed pulling.

J.D. & Erlene in  
Oakdale



In time, however, the Williams family left Oakdale. Like other migrant workers, they followed the harvest cycle of various crops as they moved throughout the Central Valley. “We traveled along the farm belt,” as J.D. recalls. But he never missed a school term because of this. Dee and Annie Williams seem to have taken care that come September, they put roots down somewhere, all be they temporary ones, to insure J.D.’s enrollment at schoolhouses that dotted the valley. At one point after their stay in the southern end of the Central Valley, Dee loaded up the family and their belongings in the old jalopy for a trip much further north, to Redding. That move changed their lives more than any of the others in their California years.

They drove over two hundred miles--Dee, Annie, J.D. and young Erlene--in the same car that had brought three of them to California. Like the Williamses it had carried back in 1928, the vehicle in the late 1930’s would have shown the age brought on by the decade or so that had passed. It was the hope for a totally different type of job that sent the family so far north. Somehow, Dee heard about the building of the Shasta Dam just north of Redding.

The public works programs of Roosevelt’s presidency were meant to move America out of the Depression by creating government jobs. As such, the 1930’s became what one writer calls “the glory days” of dam building.<sup>30</sup> The Shasta Dam developed as the prime unit in California’s Central Valley Irrigation Project approved by the state legislature in 1933. Two years later, the federal government took the project over.<sup>31</sup> Construction began in 1937 to build what would then be the third largest dam in the world, dwarfed only by the Grand Coulee and Hoover Dams.<sup>32</sup> Dee Williams probably heard about this huge construction job when they lived in the southern part of the Central Valley. Perhaps hoping that it would mean a steady job for him, and one that paid well, he took his family north. They first lived in one of the nameless boomtowns that sprung up around Redding. Since J.D. remembers beginning the eighth grade at a school near that town, they probably arrived there in the summer or fall of 1940. His father signed up with a union and trained as a pipe fitter. Dee became one of the millions nationwide who joined a union

when Congress passed legislation that backed the right of workers to do so. In California, membership increased from 33,000 in 1933 to 200,000 in 1940.<sup>33</sup> Dee Williams was one of them. He made more money in this job than he had made at any of the agricultural ones he had since coming to California some ten years earlier. The work at the Shasta Dam probably lasted a year or two since J.D. completed the eighth grade in the Redding area, and he also began Shasta High School in Redding itself. (He recalls taking a bus from the boomtown where his family lived to the high school.) Those few years were happy ones for J.D., no doubt in part because of the job his father secured working on the Shasta Dam. At least at that point in time, financial concerns were not as great as they had been before Dee learned a skilled trade and joined the union. As it turned out, these two developments permanently changed Dee Williams' work life. No longer would he be a migrant laborer. Higher paying jobs in construction awaited him. Even in his adolescent years, J.D. would have picked up on a new sense of pride his father showed in being able to provide more for his family. J.D.'s school years in the Redding area also contributed to the happy memories he holds for this period in his life. In Winterhaven, Bard, and Oakdale, J.D. attended schools where he was "the new kid" in class. But as he points out, the nature of the boomtown meant that all of the children were new to the school. This time, J.D. did not stand out.

After his job at the Shasta Dam project ended, the family moved about two hundred miles south to Stockton. With a population of over forty thousand people, it was the largest town the Williamses had ever lived in. Stockton could boast three railroad stations, three bus stations, streetcars, eighty-eight hotels, and seven movie houses.<sup>34</sup> But this "big city" life turned out to be beyond the reaches of J.D.'s family since they lived on the outskirts of Stockton and their stay in the city proved short. Their few months there, however, became memorable for J.D. It was in front of the house they rented that he learned how to drive. He taught himself. A road stood in front of the house, and J.D. learned how to drive by going back and forth on the street in an old car. He attended Edison High School, beginning his sophomore year there in the fall of 1942. Dee decided that the old family jalopy had served them well. He replaced the car that had carried them from Oklahoma to California, and then halfway up the state when they left the Imperial Valley for the Central Valley. Dee bought another automobile, a used one but newer than the jalopy. (J.D. does not recall his father ever buying a new car.) After a few months, the Williamses left Stockton. Another move, and another state, awaited them.

This time their destination was Yuma, Arizona, located on the state's border with California. One can only speculate as to what brought the Williamses there. It could be that J.D.'s father saw a job announcement on the bulletin board at a union hall in the Central Valley. Because of the number of years that have passed, J.D. is not sure what type of work his father did in Yuma, but it was probably in construction given his union membership. Because of Dee Williams' work on the Shasta Dam, he may have relocated the family to Yuma for a job on the All-American Canal. It brought water from the Colorado River and some nearby dams to the Imperial and Coachella Valleys in Southern California. Begun in 1934, the United States Bureau of Reclamation oversaw its construction, the same federal government agency that oversaw the building of the Shasta Dam that Dee worked on near Redding. Completed in 1940, J.D.'s father may well have worked at the All-American Canal during the family's time in Yuma.<sup>35</sup> J.D. attended Yuma Union High School. While his stay there was not long, it was memorable because the school introduced J.D. to the military. He joined the ROTC program. Students met after

school. The boys wore no uniform, and they practiced with wooden rifles. What J.D. recalls so well is that they learned how to march. Early in 1943, the Williamses left Yuma for Escondido, a town north of San Diego, California.<sup>36</sup> What specifically prompted this decision remains a mystery. When asked if so many moves bothered him, J.D. replied that “making new friends was a problem.” Just after they “settled in” a town, another move came, and J.D. thought, “Here we go again.” He did not complain about the constant moves, though, or the new schools. Instead, J.D. saw moving as “a way of life,” and certainly it was that for millions of Americans as they picked up stakes to try and find jobs during the Great Depression.

During their prior stays in Southern California, the Williamses lived in much smaller communities than Escondido. Something about that town, though, appealed to Dee and Annie since they put down permanent roots in Escondido. Once they arrived there in March of 1943, they never moved again. Dee spent the rest of his working years in the area, and even in retirement, he and Annie lived in Escondido. Recall that after the Williams arrived in California back in 1928, they lived in Bard, Winterhaven, Oakdale, the area near Redding, Stockton, and then Yuma, Arizona. It is not clear if their fifteen years of wandering from town to town tired them to such a degree that they wanted to stay in one spot, or if the couple found something in Escondido that attracted them. Their son believes it is the latter. Over three thousand other people called the city home when the Williams came to live there. In contrast to nearby San Diego which had almost one hundred and fifty thousand residents, Escondido was small. Its size, J.D. recalls, appealed to his parents, as did the existence of a Church of the Nazarene in the community. Farms, orchards, and dairies sustained Escondido’s economy. In the 1930’s, the main crop was grapes, with over four thousand acres devoted to their cultivation. By train, packing houses shipped out other crops such as oranges and lemons.<sup>37</sup> But Dee Williams did not find employment in these agricultural areas. For a short time, he worked at March Field in Riverside.<sup>38</sup> His construction skills soon secured him a job as a civilian employee at the newly established Marine Corps base at Camp Pendleton in Oceanside, about twenty miles west of Escondido. Dee worked there as a pipe fitter until his retirement. Camp Pendleton had just been dedicated in September 1942; perhaps Dee heard construction workers were needed as the new military base took shape. Even once he secured a job at the base, Dee and Annie remained in Escondido. With Oceanside’s location right on the coast, Escondido’s drier climate would have been better for Annie, and the church she was so devoted to was in Escondido. When they first arrived in their new community, the Williamses lived in a small house on Ninth Street. They later moved to a larger one on Maple Street. Both homes were close enough to the town’s one high school to allow J.D. to walk to classes.

For J.D., the move meant his fourth high school in three years. He attended Escondido Union High School (EUHS) for about thirteen months, graduating at the end of his junior year in June 1944. In that short time, J.D. came to feel part of the school. At first, though, inclusion proved difficult. He recalls the problems he faced as, once again, “the new kid.” Escondido dates back to 1885 when settlers established the town. Many students in its high school had deep roots in the community. They came from families where more than one generation had attended EUHS. Students had friends they had known all of their lives. In addition to the long-standing community from which students came, the small size of the school contributed to its cliquishness. J.D.’s junior class numbered just one hundred and ten students. He characterizes his feelings when he first arrived at the school with the phrase, “acceptance did not come

naturally or readily.” In J.D.’s own words, his “shy disposition” also would have made it hard for him to become part of the student body.<sup>39</sup> The physical appearance of EUHS would have impressed J.D. In 1939, just four years before the Williamses moved to Escondido, the school dedicated a new auditorium, classrooms, and facilities for its athletic program.<sup>40</sup> As it turned out, J.D.’s participation in sports helped him achieve a sense of what he calls “belonging” at EUHS.

The track team served as the vehicle for this. He joined the team and won some races. That earned him “a coveted letterman’s sweater,” a phrase that by itself speaks to the pride J.D. felt while in high school and even today.<sup>41</sup> He joined the Lettermen’s Club that entailed an initiation ceremony whose details were not easily forgotten by J.D. or by any other EUHS athlete. He ate raw liver, endured spankings by other lettermen who used a wooden paddle, and sat still as someone partially shaved the front of his head. As J.D. observed, “I made more friends as my activities increased.”<sup>42</sup> Inside of the classroom, English, history, and Public Speaking became his favorite subjects.



J.D.’s junior class photograph. He is in the 2<sup>nd</sup> row, 2<sup>nd</sup> from the right.

United States involvement in World War II pervaded life on campus and in the community. The 1944 EUHS yearbook, *The Gong*, notes that the school observed December 7, 1943 as “Pearl Harbor Day.” A special assembly in February 1944 collected \$2,083.82 for bond purchases. Many male EUHS graduates either enlisted in or were drafted into the armed forces. Their pictures, in military uniform, appear in the last pages of *The Gong*.

In the city itself, all types of activities spoke to the existence of a Home Front in the war. For example, troop trains carrying members of the military came through Escondido, a military guard stood watch over Lake Hodges Dam to protect it against any act of sabotage, and a Hostess House run by Navy mothers welcomed members of the military.<sup>43</sup> Residents bought groceries and gasoline using their government-issued ration books. J.D. bridged both worlds--EUHS and the town itself--when he signed on to be part of a work program to offset the labor shortage that agricultural communities felt across the country.

United States crops fed not only a domestic population but also American troops overseas and refugees in countries the Allied nations occupied. As the government put it, food became “a weapon of war.” Its cultivation, harvesting, and delivery became crucial to the national war effort. Yet the total number of agricultural laborers decreased during the war years. Almost five and a half million men and women left the farms to work in the cities, tempted by higher-paying jobs in war-related industries.<sup>44</sup> In addition to this loss, one and a half million men left farm life for military service.<sup>45</sup> In Escondido, local growers worked with EUHS to help, to a degree, fill the labor shortage. Farmers supplied trucks that showed up at the high school when classes were over. The vehicles took students to local orchards where they picked lemons and oranges. The

farmers paid the students for their labor. J.D. remembers working many, many hours in his junior year in the groves and at a packing house where he loaded forty-pound boxes of oranges onto freight trains that pulled into Escondido.

In spite of hours spent in school, on the track team, and working on local farms, J.D. did manage some time for a social life. He had teenage friends who reflected the diversity of Escondido's population, boys who were Caucasian and some who were Mexican American. One day, J.D. walked by a grammar school that was located near his home. He saw some young Mexican Americans playing football. At first, he just watched them. But soon they invited J.D. to join them in the game. At that point in time, he was the only Anglo in the group. Some of J.D.'s friends questioned him about who he was playing with. In time, one of his Caucasian friends joined him. J.D. and the Mexican Americans sometimes hung out at a local store on Kalmia Street. The store was named "Wilbur's," owned by a man of that same name. The young men drank Coca-Cola and played a pinball machine. The boys spent time there for a special reason. Wilbur was blind. He could not tell the difference, as J.D. puts it, between a one-dollar bill or a five-dollar bill. "We watched over Wilbur," J.D. explains.

Throughout his young life, J.D.'s parents and church taught him Christian values. Brotherhood was just one of them. How a young J.D. acted on that belief can be seen in his participation on the neighborhood Mexican American football team and in how he protected Wilbur. As noted earlier, after they settled in Escondido the Williams family joined the local Church of the Nazarene. It was through their church, specifically at a Bible study class, that J.D. met the woman who would be the love of his life, Oweta Huff. Even at age seventeen, J.D. understood the deep connection he felt with her. He later wrote of that first meeting--"I saw the most beautiful 16 yr. old girl that I had ever laid eyes on. Her name was Oweta Huff and she was absolutely gorgeous. She had a sweet spirit and inner beauty with a personality that portrayed strong spiritual and moral character. I was smitten."<sup>46</sup> But J.D. kept silent about his feelings for Oweta. He did not even ask her for a date. J.D. knew, with America at war against Germany and Japan, the draft would claim him as soon as he graduated. He felt it would be unfair to Oweta if he shared his feelings with her at that point in time. They continued to see each other at high school as well as at church services and social events. But they interacted at these gatherings as friends, not, in the words of J.D., "as a couple." He admits, though, that every time he saw her, his "heart would always beat a little faster." One would guess it beat very fast when at Mission Beach they rode a roller coaster ten consecutive times as a couple, sitting next to each other in the two-seater car.

Although only a junior, J.D. graduated in June 1944. Mr. Perry, the school principal, suggested this to him months before commencement. The age J.D. would reach in June--eighteen--might have influenced Perry. That age made him eligible for the draft. If he returned to EUHS for his senior year in the fall of 1944, J.D. would be just a few weeks away from his nineteenth birthday when he graduated with his senior class. In all probability, the Army would have conscripted him by then. He would be a soldier without a high school diploma. While returning to school after the war ended was possible, there was no guarantee J.D. would do so. It could be that Perry realized this and wanted to ensure that J.D. earned his degree before he joined the military. As an educator, he believed J.D.'s future would be best guaranteed with at

least a high school degree. Perry thus urged J.D. to sign up for extra classes that would give him the units required for graduation.

Less than two years earlier, the ROTC program at Yuma Union High School taught J.D. how to carry a wooden rifle and how to march. In just a few months, the United States Army would teach him how to not only carry, but also how to fire a real weapon. The military would also drill into J.D. the basic purpose of firearms by teaching him how to kill with, among other weapons, a bayonet, knife, sidearm, and rifle. By age eighteen, J.D. fully embraced Christian principles, including the one espoused in the Sixth Commandment. Killing the enemy, however, is basic to warfare. How J.D. reconciled his Army training as a young soldier with his religious faith is a story of inner strength amid tremendous outside pressures.

### A Modern Day David: J.D. is Trained as a Soldier

As with other Christians, J.D. knows very well the Biblical story of David and Goliath. It is found in the Old Testament. David was an Israelite shepherd and Goliath a soldier in the Philistine army which had gathered to attack the forces of Israel. What distinguished Goliath from other soldiers was his size. He stood more than nine feet tall. For forty days, a heavily armed Goliath stood before the Israelites, mocking them. The enemy giant frightened the Israelite King, Saul, and his entire army so much that no one engaged Goliath or the Philistines. David saw how fear of the enemy paralyzed the Israelite army. One day, this teenage shepherd boy challenged the Philistine giant. Dressed in a tunic, David carried his shepherd's staff, a slingshot, and a bag filled with stones. Goliath wore body armor and held a sword, spear, and javelin. But David showed no fear. Using his slingshot to fire at the enemy, he aimed one of his stones at Goliath's unprotected head. The giant fell to the ground. David grabbed Goliath's own sword and killed him with it.<sup>47</sup>

In respect to his World War II service, one could see J.D. as a modern day David in that they shared some key characteristics. Both were young men forced into battle against their nation's enemy. Both were also "peaceful," an adjective J.D. uses to describe the shepherd boy. It is a word that comes readily to mind in describing J.D. then and now. But both saw their people endangered by a powerful enemy, and both had to kill the soldiers that threatened their nation. As J.D. explains, "I did not want to go to war, but I was willing to fight and protect my family and our homeland."<sup>48</sup> In his months of training as a soldier, J.D. thought often of how David rose above his pacific nature as a religious man to confront the enemy. Religious principles, such as the belief against killing another human being, did not hold David back from defending his people. This thought gave J.D. a rationale, too, for the plans the United States Army had for him. David never saw a contradiction between his religious principles and the killing he had to do. Neither did J.D. as he prepared himself for battle--"I never had any conflict between my Christianity and my purpose as a soldier."<sup>49</sup>

If J.D. had had his way, he would have served in World War II as a sailor rather than as a soldier. Philosophically, that would have been easier for him. The military trains soldiers for

hand-to-hand combat, to kill the enemy in close quarters. Sailors, in contrast, usually participate in battles from a distance as their ships land the ground troops. If sailors fire weapons in support of invasions, they use the ship's big guns on enemy installations. Yes, World War II would have been a very different experience for J.D. if he had enlisted in the Navy rather than wait to be drafted into the Army. When he was seventeen years old, he asked his parents if he could join the Navy. Because he was underage by one year, their signature was required for his enlistment. His father and mother refused his request. They feared their only son might become a casualty of war. They also hoped, J.D. recalls, that if he waited one more year, perhaps the war would be over before he saw combat. When asked what appealed to him about Navy service when he was seventeen, J.D. simply replied, "I liked the idea of being on a ship." Could he have realized at his young, inexperienced age, how different war was for a young man who became a part of seagoing forces versus ground forces?

A few weeks after his graduation from EUHS early in June 1944, J.D. turned eighteen. That birthday made him eligible for the draft. In the next months, J.D. anticipated the draft notice he knew would arrive one day in the mail. He worked that summer in an Escondido packing house where he lifted forty-pound boxes filled with oranges and lemons onto freight cars. More than once, his boss joked that the job was preparing J.D. for basic training because he would be in good physical shape from picking up such heavy items. One day an envelope arrived at the Williams home on Maple Street. As his generation put it, the letter was from "Uncle Sam." It ordered J.D. to report to Fort MacArthur in San Pedro, about one hundred miles north of Escondido in Los Angeles County. The Army post, with its guns pointed outward toward the Pacific Ocean, guarded Los Angeles Harbor. For J.D., the installation functioned as an induction center where he underwent a medical examination to determine if he was physically qualified to serve in the armed forces. The exam was, in a way, the first step into military service. When asked today about how he handled this emotionally, J.D. replies without equivocation, "I knew I was going to go. I was ready. I had prepared myself. I had accepted this." Like David the shepherd, J.D. did not want to fight, but the circumstances demanded it.

According to J.D., a bus took him and other young men from Escondido to Fort MacArthur. He remembers his fellow draftees as "a lively group" during the trip north, "cutting up a little bit," perhaps to relieve some tension. Once they arrived at the post, Army doctors gave each a physical exam. Height and weight were noted in the inductee's file. Each underwent a chest x-ray. A physician checked teeth, eyes, ear, and throat.<sup>50</sup> J.D. passed the physical exam. At one point, a mass swearing-in ceremony took place. Like all of his fellow inductees, J.D. took some written aptitude exams known as the Army General Classification Test (AGCT). The men had forty minutes to answer the multiple-choice questions that focused on basic principles in English and arithmetic.<sup>51</sup> J.D. remembers that he signed up for a life insurance policy the government offered. It could be bought in increments of \$1,000, with the maximum amount being \$10,000. He purchased the full amount, with his parents as beneficiaries; the Army deducted \$6.50 a month for that coverage.<sup>52</sup> After a few days at Fort MacArthur, J.D. returned home on another bus to await his next set of orders which would tell him where to report for Basic Training (BT). When they arrived, they directed him to Camp Roberts, near San Luis Obispo. His father drove him to the training station, probably the one in Oceanside. From there, J.D. traveled north to Los Angeles where he changed trains, boarding one bound for San Luis Obispo. As J.D. quotes the lyrics from a 1943 song to explain his resignation to this new life, "You're in the Army Now."

When Camp Roberts opened in March 1941 as a Replacement Training Center, it was one of the largest ones in the world. The parade ground equaled the length of fourteen football fields. The military installation was named in honor of Corporal Harold W. Roberts, a tank driver in World War I. He was only nineteen years old when he gave his life for others in his unit while fighting in France. For his actions, Roberts received the Medal of Honor. Very few military posts are named for enlisted men. Camp Roberts is one of them. By the end of World War II, approximately 436,000 soldiers had gone through its seventeen-week training program.<sup>53</sup> J.D. was one of them. In his memoir, he explains why his arrival in San Luis Obispo became such a memorable one for him, "I will never forget the day I reported to Camp Roberts in California. I was scalped by the barber and issued non-fitting army clothes."<sup>54</sup>

At Fort MacArthur and at Camp Roberts, J.D. quickly learned how his life as a civilian was changing. A quiet and shy person by nature, he lost any hope of privacy in the communal living that accompanied life in the barracks. Strict discipline pervaded Army life. Failure to observe military protocol or obey orders resulted in immediate disciplinary action. The military rigidly allocated time; no longer was it to be spent in a leisurely fashion as it could be in civilian life.



J.D. also learned how to tell time in the military way. For example, 5:00 A.M. became 0500 hours. An evening hour such as 6:00 P.M. became 1800 hours. Also basic to Army life was the military's attempt to eliminate the individualism that characterizes Americans. Instead, the armed forces conditioned each recruit to see himself as part of a unit. As such, the soldier was to put the interest of the unit ahead of his personal interest. As one military publication explained this transformation, "The serviceman learns to subordinate the self-centeredness and self-indulgence that he probably allowed himself in civilian life. He learns self-control...he learns to put the welfare of the unit above personal welfare."<sup>55</sup> When asked today about the difficulty of undergoing such a new life, J.D. replies, "I adjusted to it real fast." He believes this adaptability grew out of his earlier life when all of the Williamses' family moves forced him to accommodate change.

J.D.'s physical immersion into the military occurred in several weeks of BT. The following explanation of what the inductee learns in that time is taken from a 1944 Army booklet--instruction in citizenship, the Articles of War (regulations that govern the conduct of the armed forces), military discipline, personal hygiene, first aid, defense against aircraft and armored vehicles, camouflage, counter-intelligence, drills, guard duty, the use of various weapons, and how to dig as well as use foxholes and trenches.<sup>56</sup> Prodding J.D. and other recruits through BT was the much-maligned Drill Instructor (DI). And he had the type portrayed in Hollywood movies. As J.D. describes him, "The sergeant assigned to make soldiers out of us was downright mean and vicious. He was also sadistic to the point of being morbid and cruel."<sup>57</sup> However much J.D. might have disliked the type of person his DI was, the sergeant tried to teach the recruits survival skills, albeit in a brutal way. According to J.D., the NCO (noncommissioned officer) announced to the new recruits, "I'm going to teach you how to kill and be a soldier." The DI added, however, why each man had to learn this brutal skill in warfare--"So you will kill before you are killed." With the story of David and Goliath in his mind, J.D. focused on his weapons training so well that he became "very good with the bayonet." He was fast on his feet, twirling

around to put the “enemy” off balance in simulated combat exercises. A dummy hung before the recruits. They were to plunge the bayonet into the dummy’s chest. Because of his skill in this exercise, the sergeant called on J.D. to show the other recruits how they should “kill a Jap” with the bayonet. J.D. recalls that as training progressed, the DI urged the recruits to use more and more velocity and strength as each man plunged the bayonet into the dummy.

Somehow, J.D. retained his religious sense in such an atmosphere. He never considered registering as a Conscientious Objector (C.O.). He did not consider that to be “appropriate” because “our country was at war.” But the contradiction between his Christian principles and the training he now received on how to kill other human beings did prompt a visit to the chaplain. How much that officer guided J.D. is not clear. But as a soldier, J.D. knew he had to “fight so I could live in peace with myself. I felt it essential I not be held back by my religious beliefs.” As he drew on the story of another young man of peace, David of the Old Testament, J.D. accommodated his spiritual values to the reality of a war in which his country had been attacked by a determined enemy.

Yet even though he understood that he was now part of a military unit, J.D. maintained his individualism when it came to his personal values. When asked how he was able to do this, J.D. refers to a trait he shared with his father--determination. Before the government drafted him, J.D. did not drink, he did not smoke, and he “did not cuss.” Most soldiers did all three. J.D. refused to join in on such activities. That by itself is just one testament to J.D.’s strong character. He insists that the other recruits did not pressure him or make fun of him for his refusals to join in such practices. Another member of J.D.’s company shared his values, Clarence Umphenour. While Clarence was not what J.D. calls “deeply religious,” this Catholic recruit from Santa Ana, California also did not drink, smoke, or swear. Together, the two cheered each other on as they endured the demands of BT. The military exercises J.D. recalls some sixty years later are overnight hikes where he carried a heavy backpack, setting up his tent in a temporary camp, the foxholes he dug, and the weapons training. Aside from the bayonet, J.D. remembers how he learned to pull the pin in a grenade at just the right moment. He also became so familiar with his M1 Garand rifle that, to J.D., “it seemed like I always had it.” Taking it apart and putting it back together became an often-repeated exercise in BT. J.D. earned an expert rifleman rating with the M1. When asked about his overall reaction to BT, with an air of resignation apparent years later, J.D. simply replied, “I knew I had to be taught all of these things.” He explained why in a very straightforward way. As J.D. pointed out, he and the other soldiers would one day be at the mercy of the enemy. He heard that “the Japanese spent a lot of time in training.” Their troops were “seasoned.”

J.D. did have a life outside of the exercises associated with BT. He enjoyed meals at the mess hall where he invariably ate with Clarence and other men in his company. J.D. rated the food as “good.” If certain dishes were repeated by the cooks, J.D. did not complain. “My Depression background prepared me for the repetition of the same food.” On Sundays he attended church services on the base. If J.D. had a pass, he left the camp for the nearby town of Paso Robles where he stayed overnight at the YMCA, enjoying what the city had to offer. On some of his weekend passes, J.D. rode back home to Escondido with another recruit who also lived in North San Diego County, but that soldier owned an automobile. With a car full of local boys, they sped homeward. To J.D., it “seemed like we went 70 mph.” The driver dropped them

all off at one particular place where their families picked them up. Annie made her son some of his favorite meals, one of which was fried chicken. While other soldiers home on leave might have partied, J.D. spent most of his time with his parents, just one indicator of how close they were. On those weekends, he watched his father, with “ears glued to the radio,” follow news of the war’s progress in the Pacific and European Theaters. According to J.D., Dee “knew his son would be there before too long.” When asked if he had a preference while in BT as to which theater the Army would ship him to, J.D. replied that he “was resigned to wherever they sent me.” While home, he took walks to downtown Escondido, located just two blocks away from the family home on Maple Street. Recalling such visits decades later, J.D. remembers that “it felt so good to be away from camp.” The respite from Army life ended, however, on Sundays. On such mornings, J.D. attended Escondido’s Church of the Nazarene. He saw Oweta Huff there, the young woman he hoped to one day court. In the afternoon, J.D.’s father dropped him off at the designated pick-up point where the car, once again full of young soldiers, “drove fast” to get back to Camp Roberts on time.

Such weekend visits home might have made J.D. miss his family even more when graduation day came at Camp Roberts. With his fellow soldiers, he marched before a grandstand filled with important officials. The families of some soldiers were also in attendance. J.D. wished that his father, mother, and sister could have been there. He admits to being “envious” of those soldiers whose parents were in attendance. He especially would have been proud to march before Oweta.<sup>58</sup> But the distance was too great to travel. As a “buck private” now in the United States Army, J.D. received a monthly salary of \$50. With promotions, that amount would rise. Service overseas added on another 20% to the base pay for enlisted men. The Army calculated, however, that fringe benefits added much more to the salary a private drew. To the yearly figure of \$600 base pay, the military pointed out that the enlisted soldier also received food valued at \$576.50, shelter at \$120, health care at \$100, cigarettes at \$10.95, laundry at \$32.50, and postage as well as barber services valued at \$26.65.<sup>59</sup> After graduation, the men received a one-week leave during which J.D., of course, went home to Escondido. After just a few days, he became ill with a fever and cough. Tonsillitis was suspected. Bedridden, his illness did result in one bright moment. Oweta visited him. While she was with him, J.D. wanted to tell her that he “had a crush on her.” But practically, he could hardly talk because of his sore throat. “I also knew that this was not the time to sweep her off of her feet. My plans for capturing this young girl’s heart would have to wait for a more appropriate time.”<sup>60</sup> While the war might have thrown some young men and women together before the soldier shipped out, it had just the opposite effect on J.D. and Oweta. If not for the war, J.D. would have approached her once he graduated from high school. Their courtship would have moved along even more with her graduation in June 1946. But the war interfered with all of that.



J.D., on left, in Hawaii .

Even though he was still not well, J.D. had to report back to duty. His father drove him to the railroad station in Los Angeles where he boarded a train for Fort Ord near Monterey Bay, just south of San Francisco. After some days there, the Army sent J.D. to Seattle where he awaited departure for the Pacific. As it turned out, Hawaii was his next stop, but not Honolulu on the island of Oahu where Pearl Harbor is located. Instead, the Army sent J.D. and other replacement troops to a camp on the “Big Island” of Hawaii. He remembers two weeks of training there. After that, J.D.’s unit left for Saipan, one of three islands in the Marianas, the other two being Guam and Tinian. By then, J.D. knew the military high command was sending his unit to fight in the battle for the island of Okinawa. American forces had landed there on April 1<sup>st</sup>. The Army put J.D. through even more training on Saipan. He likens it to “a refresher course.” While his next stop did indeed turn out to be Okinawa, he did not fight long in the island campaign. A week or so after he landed, J.D. returned to the Marianas, this time to a hospital bed on Guam.

### “God’s Warrior” in The Last Great Battle

The battle for Okinawa turned out to be the last great battle of World War II in the Pacific Theater. No one knew that when American strategists made plans to wrest control of the island from the Japanese. The high command believed securing this island would give the Allies a base from which to launch the invasion of the Home Islands. Because of the strategic importance of Okinawa, everyone from the generals to the privates understood the determination the enemy would show to repel the invasion. In the end, the battle for Okinawa turned out to be the most costly American island campaign of the Pacific war.<sup>61</sup> For the United States Navy alone, the Fifth Fleet incurred more casualties in the Okinawa campaign than it had suffered in the prior two years of the Pacific war.<sup>62</sup> From the landing of United States forces on April 1, 1945, the sheer military force brought together for the campaign dwarfed other American battles in the Pacific. By June 22<sup>th</sup>, when the Tenth Army declared the island “secure” eighty-two days after the initial landings, approximately 200,000 American servicemen fought in Okinawa.<sup>63</sup> Of them, over 12,500 were killed or missing in action. Another 36, 613 were wounded, with J. D. being one of them.<sup>64</sup> His injuries were both physical and psychological. It is believed that the fighting on Okinawa resulted in more “neuropsychiatric casualties” than in any other battle in the Pacific Theater.<sup>65</sup> Certainly some who fought there were haunted by memories of this island campaign even more than others in which they had fought. It is probably not a coincidence that two of the most powerful memoirs written by United States veterans of World War II came from men who fought on Okinawa.<sup>66</sup>

Ironically, though, Okinawa became a footnote in the history of World War II for those on the Home Front as other major stories took center stage. Two weeks after the initial landings on April 1<sup>st</sup>, President Franklin D. Roosevelt died. He had led the country for twelve years. In the 1930s, he guided the nation through the trauma of the Great Depression. In the first part of the

1940s, he showed even more leadership after the United States entered World War II. For young Americans such as J.D., Roosevelt was the only president they knew. Less than a month later, six weeks after the campaign on Okinawa began, Germany surrendered. News of V-E Day (Victory in Europe) dominated the front page of newspapers throughout the United States. Editors of *Life* magazine focused on the European Theater rather than the Pacific one in their coverage of the war from April-June 1945. The first story *Life* ran on Okinawa appeared in the May 28, 1945 issue. Looking back on it today, it strikes the reader as a strange article given the significance the fighting on Okinawa represented for the war in the spring and summer of 1945. Its title might strike veterans such as J.D. as odd, “Okinawa, Except for Japs, it is a very pleasant place.” The story focuses not on the fighting there, but on the attributes of the island, such as the absence of snakes and the “industrious” islanders who lived on Okinawa. It was not until *Life*’s June 18, 1945 issue that a major story on the battle for Okinawa appeared. Then less than two months after Americans took over the island, the dropping of the atomic bombs forced a Japanese surrender. No invasion of the Home Islands was necessary, which had been the primary purpose behind taking Okinawa. For the history of World War II, while stateside Americans remember the spring and summer of 1945 for the death of a president, V-E Day, and the dropping of the atomic bombs, veterans of Okinawa recall those months very differently.

J.D. joined the battle for Okinawa early in May, about a month after it began. As a replacement soldier, he and others like him arrived on a ship from Saipan. By the very nature of “replacements,” they were sent to take the place of soldiers who had been wounded or killed. Knowing he would eventually be separated from his friend Clarence, J.D. said goodbye to him and wished him luck. J.D. said a prayer as he prepared to board the landing craft (LC) with other replacements. He saw himself as “God’s warrior,” and after months of training, his moment to fight for the Lord had arrived.<sup>67</sup> With a backpack behind him, hanging from straps on his shoulders, and with a rifle slung over his shoulder, J.D. lowered himself down the side of the ship. He hung onto a cargo net as he descended. In spite of all of his training, he does not remember the tricky climb down a cargo net as one of the exercises he had been through. Even though this was his first time going down a net, he



J.D. on Saipan

timed his drop onto the LC properly, landing on his feet in the small boat. After arriving on the beach, J.D. received orders to dig a foxhole and bunker in to await further orders. The Japanese did not fire upon the LC or the soldiers on the beaches. As they had done from Day One of the battle, the enemy waited for the Americans to come after them in the interior parts of the island. Okinawa is large, some sixty miles in length and two to eighteen miles in width.<sup>68</sup> Enemy strategy called for an army of some one hundred thousand Japanese to defend the interior of the island, principally the southern one-third. Its steep hills, ravines, caves, and ridges furnished natural defenses. In addition to man-made pillboxes, bunkers, and trenches, the Japanese dug hundreds of miles of tunnels in the months before American forces landed.<sup>69</sup> Unknown to J.D. when he arrived, this southern part of the island was the area to which he would be sent. His first days on Okinawa were spent on the beach, where he ran into Clarence. With no orders to act upon, J.D. simply waited as did other replacement soldiers. He allowed a fellow private to cut his hair with some scissors. As J.D. recalls, “I did not look too pretty” as a result of this.

After days spent on the beach, J.D. and others received their orders to report to the 307<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion of the 77<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division based in the southern end of the island. He remembers seeing bodies of dead Japanese soldiers lying along the edge of the path they marched down. When they arrived at battalion headquarters (HQ), “an old seasoned sergeant,” who J.D. guessed was in his mid-twenties, handed out assignments. In all probability, the sergeant knew nothing about J.D.’s high school letter in track, yet of all the jobs he could have given the new replacement, the sergeant told J.D. he would be a runner. This meant J.D. would hand-deliver messages from one officer or NCO to another when radio communication was not practical. He did inquire as to what had happened to the previous runner. “He was killed” was the reply. As it turned out, J.D. never delivered any messages. On his second day with the 77<sup>th</sup>, orders came down that his unit would attack a Japanese position. What happened to J.D. on his third day with the battalion ended his service as a combat soldier.

The enemy position was one near the city of Shuri. The Japanese had created a ten-mile-long defensive line north of the city, “the Shuri Line.” Before the Americans landed, the Japanese spent over three months building a sixty-mile network of heavily fortified tunnels that added to the terrain’s caves, cliffs, and ravines.<sup>70</sup> The Shuri Line has been judged to be “one of the most formidable in the history of warfare.”<sup>71</sup> These fortifications allowed the enemy to fire heavy artillery and mortar fire down upon the Americans when they arrived at the Shuri Line. Once the United States forces moved against this defensive perimeter, what followed was “a close-quarter slaughter.”<sup>72</sup> And J.D.’s battalion was caught up in it.

On May 11<sup>th</sup>, the 307<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion attacked the western, central, and eastern sections of the Shuri defenses. Ten days of constant fighting followed, “including some of the bitterest action of the battle of Okinawa.” Company E, in the central section, suffered heavy casualties as it moved against an objective of the 307<sup>th</sup>, Ishimmi Ridge, west of the village of Ishimmi. HQ sent replacement soldiers. While J.D. cannot recall what company he was assigned to as a replacement, it may have been to Company E. What he does remember is that his unit participated in offensive action against the Shuri Line beginning on May 17<sup>th</sup>. The Army’s official history of the Battle of Okinawa details how Company E, strengthened with an influx of replacement soldiers, moved against Ishimmi Ridge, only to be pinned down by heavy enemy fire. Wounded men waited to be rescued by litter bearers. The dates J.D. identifies with his combat experience on Okinawa, May 17<sup>th</sup> through May 19<sup>th</sup>, coincide with the 307<sup>th</sup>’s attack on the Shuri defenses. His assignment as a replacement and his experiences over a two-day period reflect the history of Company E, especially some of its casualties.<sup>73</sup>

After leaving HQ on May 17<sup>th</sup>, J.D.’s unit hiked for hours before it reached its objective. A sergeant to whom J.D. had been assigned as a runner, a private, and J.D. constituted an advance group of three. They each dug a foxhole in preparation for the night. The attack was to begin in the morning. Early the next day, the soldiers set out toward their objective. The sergeant, J.D. and the other private ended up about one hundred yards in front of the main body of American soldiers. As it turned out, the three were about fifteen yards from the entrance to a Japanese tunnel when the sergeant told J.D. and the other private to dig in. More than a foxhole, what the two dug resembled a trench. Suddenly, the Japanese began firing mortar shells, machine gun fire, and other weapons at the Americans. As J.D. describes the scene, “The shells were so thick and exploding everywhere that the ground seemed to shake beneath us.”<sup>74</sup> One of those shells landed

in the sergeant's foxhole and another in J.D.'s. The power of the blast threw the two soldiers to the ground. Both were wounded by flying shrapnel. J.D. knew he was hurt badly. As he had throughout his young life, he said the Lord's Prayer, not silently to himself, but out loud. Praying gave J.D. strength to do something that he did not want to do, but something that he knew he had to do--"I looked down and saw that my fatigues on my left leg and groin area were saturated with blood."<sup>75</sup> Shrapnel hit the sergeant below the knee. While wounded, he felt he could still make his way to the aid station. The sergeant thus left J.D., promising to send help.

"After the sergeant left I felt alone and scared. I said a prayer to the Lord asking that He would deliver me out of the hands of the enemy."<sup>76</sup> Fearing that the Japanese would overrun his trench, J.D. grabbed his rifle and pointed it toward the tunnel. But the weapon was not a M1 Garand, a .30-caliber semi-automatic rifle. After his assignment as a runner, J.D. had been told to replace his Garand with a lighter rifle, a carbine, a less effective weapon for the situation J.D. now found himself in. He counted his ammunition, which amounted to just four clips. As armed as he could be, J.D. also took out something else as he waited what he feared could be an enemy attack. He pulled out his small copy of the New Testament given to him by the pastor at the Church of the Nazarene in Escondido. J.D. carried it in his uniform, in a pocket over his heart. He read some Biblical verses that reinforced his belief that God would protect him--"A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right side but it shall not come nigh thee" (Psalm 91:7), and "Thou shall not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day" (Psalm 91:5). Strengthened again by the words of the Holy Scripture, as J.D. had been when they gave him courage to look at his wounds, he reassumed his role as a combat soldier. He surveyed what he had to draw upon. Aside from the rifle and ammunition, he had a small entrenching tool. The explosion had thrown his backpack and canteen out of the foxhole, so he had no food or water. What gave J.D. some comfort was the continued firing by American forces at the Japanese fortifications. He understood that this offensive action would hopefully keep the enemy from approaching wounded Americans such as J.D. until medics could get to them.

Before that happened, however, J.D. spent two full days and two nights in the trench. He was not completely alone, though, since other wounded soldiers laid in their foxholes nearby. American forces could not reach them due to the Japanese barrages. If his own situation was not enough to cause concern, J.D. worried about his nearby fellow soldiers. Some who were injured called out for a medic. J.D. did not do so. As he explains, "I just called on the Lord [for help]." One soldier lay in a trench just a few feet away from him. The soldier cried out in pain, calling for his mother. J.D. wanted to go to him but knew that was impossible. J.D. passed the days and nights going in and out of consciousness, often thinking of his childhood, adolescent, and teenage years. Oweta, the young woman he left behind in Escondido, occupied his thoughts more than anyone else. While the two corresponded, she did not know the depth of his feelings for her. Now seriously wounded in the trench, J.D. wondered if he would survive to court Oweta, marry her, and have children with her. He feared the wound in his groin would make it impossible for him to ever father children. His leg wounds were large, and on J.D.'s second day in the ditch, he saw his skin in the injured area becoming discolored, a sign of infection. If he died, J.D. wondered where he would be buried. Would it be on Okinawa, or would his body be shipped home to Escondido? At night, his attempts at rest were punctuated with continued sounds of mortars and machineguns. He slept fitfully. J.D. continued to pray. He remembers one as very simple, but expressing his compelling need at that moment--"My Father in Heaven, help me."<sup>77</sup>

During J.D.'s second night in the trench, the lack of water, the loss of blood, and the overall trauma to his body weakened him to the point where he could not hold his rifle. But surprisingly, he felt no pain. Was that due to shock or the power of prayer? Again, at one point he prayed "Help me, Lord."<sup>78</sup> J.D. was not alone in asking for God's help in these days. At the Williams home in Escondido Annie sensed that her son was in danger. She went on her knees in her bedroom, praying for her son's safety. Believing in the force of community prayer, Annie enlisted the prayers of others in her church, including the pastor.<sup>79</sup> According to J.D., this happened on the same two days he was trapped in the trench.

J.D.'s ordeal came to an end very early on the morning of May 19<sup>th</sup>. Surprisingly, after his second night alone on the battlefield, he heard no enemy fire. In a semi-unconscious state, J.D. felt two men lift him from the trench. They were medics. The sergeant had made it back and sent help, just as he had promised. Not understanding what was happening, J.D. asked them if they were angels. "No," came the simply reply. The medics put J.D. on a stretcher and proceeded to carry him back to the aid station. It proved to be a rough trip, however. American flares lit up the sky. Fearing an attack, the medics dropped the stretcher on the ground as they hugged the earth. After arriving at the aid station, J.D. soon passed out. The pain he had not felt in the trench suddenly overwhelmed him. When he awoke, he found himself no longer on Okinawa, but on a hospital ship. It surprised J.D. to see that he no longer wore the dirt and blood that had marked him for two days. He now had on a clean, white hospital gown. Worried for days about the extent of his wounds, J.D. decided it was time for him to check one very personal part of his body. "I slowly pulled my gown away from the affected area and observed several bandages on my left leg. I noticed a bandage covering the left side of my groin area. Meticulously and gently, I lifted the bandage...I almost shouted for joy. I had all of my vital parts in place."<sup>80</sup>

Even though J.D. was no longer physically on Okinawa, the island had not left his psyche. He could not sleep for hours on his first night on the ship. When he did drift off, his rest was not a sound one. J.D. dreamed of being back in the trench. During the day hours, he experienced flashbacks, reliving his two solitary days on the battlefield. But he thought, "it would be best if I did not mention the early anxieties, lack of sleep and flashbacks since boarding the hospital ship."<sup>81</sup> The reason for this related to the treatment J.D. saw some traumatized soldiers receive in the same ward where he lay in his hospital bed. He noticed them in locked cells that stood against the wall of the ship. One young soldier in particular caught J.D.'s attention. He "stared between the bars into space. He showed no emotion or interest in what was happening in the ward. It appeared that he was in a world of his own and did not comprehend what was happening to him."<sup>82</sup> In the language of World War II, the soldier suffered from combat or battle fatigue. In the Civil War it was called "melancholy" and in World War I "shell shock." Today, this young man's response to experiencing the horrors of war is called post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Historians have traced this condition back to ancient times when warriors saw and felt things that no human being should. The ability of individuals to cope with the trauma of war--what they had to do and what they had to see, smell, and feel--varied. Some men dealt with it differently than others. The soldiers in the cells J.D. saw were extreme cases. At that time, J.D. did not understand any of this. All he knew was that he did not want to be put in a similar cell, so he kept his insomnia, flashbacks, and dreams to himself. He did not realize that these three conditions were all symptoms of PTSD. But then, neither would the doctors, since treating the psychological trauma of war had not yet become a part of wartime medicine.

The hospital ship took J.D. to Guam. He was, therefore, back in the Marianas just weeks after he had left for Okinawa. At a hospital on the island, he ended up on a ward with other military men, but they were not combat soldiers, They were there for a variety of medical problems. J.D. sensed how different war was for these soldiers, safe and secure behind the lines. He felt no affinity with them and purposely kept to himself. One of the first things J.D. did was to send his parents a letter telling them he was safe and in a hospital on Guam. Sometime after this piece of correspondence arrived at the Williams home in Escondido, Dee and Annie received a government telegram. It informed them that their son was Missing in Action (MIA). They discounted this ominous communication because of J.D.'s letter.

A doctor explained to J.D. that a piece of shrapnel had hit him in the groin area; it "slightly skimmed the left testicle," missing an artery by less than an eighth of an inch. The metal fragment settled near his urethra, below the prostate gland.<sup>83</sup> A few days after J.D.'s arrival at the hospital, a surgeon operated on him. The doctor removed shrapnel from his left leg and closed some large wounds with staples. He did not, however, take out the shrapnel that was close to the urethra and prostate gland because of its proximity to those two. (J.D. still carries that piece inside of him today.) About three days after this operation, J. D. was able to move around in a wheelchair. Several days later, crutches allowed him to walk outside of the Quonset hut that housed the hospital. As he recuperated, J.D. received a bounty of letters from family and friends, including Oweta. The correspondence accumulated during his time on Okinawa, the hospital ship, and now the days spent on Guam. J.D. saved Oweta's for last. He felt tempted to write her back, declaring his love for her, but decided against that. He wanted to court her properly. After the doctor removed the staples, J.D. thought he would be sent back to Okinawa. He received orders to report to the assignment depot on Saipan for reassignment to the 77<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. It did not seem to matter to the Army that J.D. still had bandages on his wounds and a swollen ankle from circulation problems in his left leg. As J.D. reasoned, "It appeared that my physical condition was of no consequence to the Army as long as I could walk and carry a weapon."<sup>84</sup>

Although J.D. did not know it when he left Guam, his role as a combat soldier was over. On Saipan, his leg and ankle continued to swell. Instead of Okinawa, the Army assigned J.D. to a company within the Quartermaster Corps, a division of the military that ordered, received, and disbursed supplies. He credited God with keeping him safe--"The Lord had taken me out of harm's way."<sup>85</sup> His unit was sent to the American-occupied island of Iwo Jima. In spite of his new surroundings far away from the sounds of combat, J.D. still battled with PTSD. He experienced flashbacks of exploding mortars, bullets from machine guns that passed over his head, and fellow soldiers crying out for help. The smells of combat followed J.D. to Iwo Jima, odors associated with conditions such as decaying bodies and flesh ripped apart by enemy fire. He still feared the repercussions of telling others of his flashbacks and nightmares. As he had done throughout his life, and especially on Okinawa, J.D. drew strength from prayer. He was on Iwo Jima when news came of the dropping of the atomic bomb on two Japanese cities. Japan surrendered days later. World War II was over, at least the hostilities that had brought it about. It is a truth, however, that for those intimately touched by war, it is never really "over." While on Iwo Jima, J.D. knew World War II had changed him. As he wrote in his memoir, "I was no longer the shy teenager of my high school days. I was aggressive and ready to take on bullies of any size."<sup>86</sup> What J.D. called "fierce hostility" could be seen in his eyes.

During his time on Iwo, J.D. excelled in the Quartermaster Corps, rising to the rank of a staff sergeant. His Commanding Officer (CO) offered him a four-year tour in Germany. He pointed out to J.D. the advantages of becoming a career soldier. Before departing for Europe, the CO promised him a three month leave in the United States. The officer gave nineteen-year-old J.D. three days to consider the offer. But in spite of the adventures Army life could offer him in travels to distant countries, J.D. knew what was important to him. Oweta Huff. Could he reasonably court this young woman, declare his love for her, and convince her to marry him in just three months? No, J.D. did not think such a timetable was a realistic one. In those three days, he also prayed to God for guidance. In the end, J.D.'s mind and heart agreed that his place was in Escondido with Oweta, not in Germany with the Quartermaster Corps. He remained on Iwo Jima for about a year, until he fulfilled his military commitment. In September 1946, two years after he received his draft notice, J.D. returned to the Williams house on Maple Street, and to Oweta.



J.D. and Erlene

Once he came home, he remembers himself as “anxious” and “quite nervous.” As J.D. readily admits, he “knew something was wrong.” No one, however, prepared him for what he was going through. After World War II, as in the years following other American wars, the military did not offer extensive counseling services to returning veterans. Once home, they were expected to resume life as usual, to leave the horrors of war on the battlefield where they had experienced them. It is only in today’s culture that medical professionals recognize that war memories need to be addressed. It did not take long for J.D. to acknowledge the transformation he had undergone. When asked if his parents understood the change in their son, J.D. replied, “They might have suspected it, but they said nothing.” He added that Oweta “noticed right away that something was different.” Today, J.D. knows what people did not grasp in the years after his discharge. He might have left the battlefield, but the battlefield had not left him.

As noted earlier, J.D. wanted to go to an injured soldier in the foxhole next to his, but he realized that would be futile. The Japanese in the tunnel would have gunned him down before he could have gotten to the young man. Yet even though J.D. understands there was nothing he could have done, he can never forget lying there for hours, hearing the soldier cry out. J.D. identifies this as his most haunting memory after he “left the battlefield.” That by itself is a very telling statement when put in the perspective of what J.D. experienced on Okinawa--the enemy attack with all of the powerful sounds of war that accompanied it, and then J.D.'s own injury that made him fear he would not survive, or even if he did, he would not be “intact.” Like J.D., the soldier in the nearby trench came in and out of consciousness. Again and again, the man called out for his mother. J.D. knew then what he cannot forget today, “I was listening to him as he slowly died.” After his return to Escondido, one way J.D. tried to deal with his memories was, symbolically, to outrun them. He found himself speeding in his 1935 Ford down the highways. To add to the danger, J.D. wove in and out of cars. He found such action “exhilarating.” Others might judge such driving to be irresponsible, but J.D. saw it in a different way. Yes, he put himself into a dangerous situation, but he remained “in control of the car,” as he points out. In that trench on Okinawa, J.D. was not in control.

Ironically, as J.D. explains it, after spending over sixty years trying to forget the war, he has spent the last few years trying to remember it. About six years ago, his daughter Carol urged him to write a memoir, one that focused on his wartime service. In college at the time as a re-entry student, Carol studied PTSD in more than one of her classes. She understood how important it was for combat veterans--for themselves and for their families--to talk about their war experiences. Only then can the healing process begin. Carol prodded her father until he finally began writing. It took J.D. about three years to complete his memoir. When asked why he did so, he replied that it was "for the family." J.D.'s children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren will know in detail what he went through. So will others who read his book as they seek to understand the impact of World War II on everyday Americans such as J.D. Williams. How did a gentle, religious man survive a war that tested his Christian values? One might answer, in the same way he has lived his life, by appealing to his Lord for direction and comfort.

## Epilogue

After J.D. arrived home in September 1946, he secured a job at Camp Pendleton in food services. A few months later, J.D. began courting Oweta, something he had dreamed about for three years. On their first date, J.D. drove to Los Angeles where they saw the Ice Capades. As he has written, "I knew in my heart that she was the only one I wanted to marry and grow old with as a couple."<sup>87</sup> After high school, Oweta attended Pasadena Nazarene College, living in a dorm on campus. J.D. enrolled at the same school in January 1947, because Oweta was there. The two did not take any classes together, nor did they socialize on campus during the week. But J.D. had a plan by which he would spend time alone with Oweta, getting to know the woman he already loved. On Friday afternoons, in his Ford, J.D. left his college dorm room and drove home to Escondido. He asked Oweta if she would like to accompany him. After they each stayed with their respective family for the weekend, he would drive them back to the college Sunday evening. Oweta agreed.

For about three months, the young couple made the weekly roundtrip trip from Pasadena to Escondido. Today, if someone bemoans the fact that there was no freeway back then, no I-5 to connect the Los Angeles area with San Diego's North County, J.D. smiles and confesses, "I was so glad there was no freeway." The trip down Highway 101 took about three hours, one way. That was the charm about the weekly journey. J.D. had this "quiet time" alone with Oweta. They talked throughout those six hours. Stopping to eat stretched out the time even more. About three months after their first date, the one where they went to the Ice Capades, J.D. received an invitation to speak at a church in Tucson. Some of his classmates, including Oweta, accompanied him. On Saturday night, J.D. took Oweta to a three-thousand-foot mountain in the area called Inspiration Point. He carried an engagement ring in his pocket. A full moon looked down upon them. Almost four years had passed since they first met in the Bible study class. Summing up all of his courage, J.D. told Oweta of his love for her. He asked her to marry him. What was Oweta's reply? "I would like to think about it for a couple of days."<sup>88</sup>

Clearly disappointed, J.D. remained hopeful. He deeply believed God planned for him and Oweta to be together in spite of her request for some time to consider his marriage proposal. As J.D. put it amusingly, “She made me sweat.” Two days later, back at college in Pasadena, Oweta called him at his dorm room. On the telephone, she announced, “I want to take a walk with you.” J.D. took the ring with him, just in case the answer was what he hoped it would be. Once together, Oweta began speaking, “That question you asked in Tucson? My answer is ‘yes.’” They married at the end of the year, on December 23, 1947, at the same church in Escondido where they had met in the Bible study class. J.D. later wrote of that day, “Our wedding had deep spiritual meaning for Oweta and me. Our first love was our God and our second love was each other.”



When he married, J.D. still worked in food services at Camp Pendleton. He and Oweta lived in a Quonset hut, remodeled into apartments, in Oceanside, the city adjacent to the Marine Corps base. The couple moved back to Escondido as J.D. found employment in construction jobs for a few years. From 1949-1959, J.D. worked for the U.S. post office in Escondido. He and Oweta had two children, Carol and Larry, born during that time. After ten years, however, he went to work for another government agency, the U.S. Customs office where he became an inspector. At first, his superiors assigned J.D. to cities here in the States--Calexico and San Ysidro in California, Falls Church in Va., and El Paso in Texas. The characteristic that had so marked his childhood and adolescent years--moving around from one place to another--continued into his adult life. Then later in the 1970s, the Customs Office offered J.D. two foreign assignments. He became an advisor to the American military in Thailand and in Germany. As in World War II, his travels became global.

After J.D. retired from the Customs Office in 1981, he and Oweta returned to Escondido. The two of them attended Bible classes at the city’s Church of the Nazarene, just like the one in which they had met back in 1943. They prayed together every night. Oweta and J.D. planned to attend a Bible class on Thursday evening, February 3, 2011, when she suddenly died. Oweta had been fighting colon cancer for several months. Married for sixty-three years, J.D. would add that he loved his wife even longer than that. Thoughts of his God and Oweta sustained J.D. in his darkest hours on Okinawa. They continue to do so even today.

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<sup>1</sup> Details of J.D. Williams' childhood and adolescent years are drawn from his memoir and from conversations with the author in March-June, 2011. He self-published his autobiography in 2009, *To God Be the Glory*. It is available on Amazon.com. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from J.D. are taken from conversations with the author.

<sup>2</sup> The 1920 Census lists "Dee W. Williams" as the father of Willie D. Williams. In turn, Willie identifies his middle name as "Dee" on his 1917 World War I Draft Registration card. Both documents are on [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com). Accessed April 22, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Information on early Henryetta is taken from <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/H/HE017.html> (accessed April 18, 2011) and *The WPA Guide to 1930s Oklahoma* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1986), p. 263. A collaborative product of the New Deal's Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration, *The WPA Guide* was originally published in 1941 by the University of Oklahoma as *Oklahoma: A Guide to the Sooner State*.

<sup>4</sup> The 1920 census, [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com). Accessed April 22, 2011. From an analysis of the 1900 and 1910 census on that web site, it appears that Annie's mother, Eliza Rutledge, died sometime between 1903 and 1910. The 1900 Census lists only James and Eliza in the Rutledge household; it also states the couple had been married for three years. James is identified as a widower in the 1910 Census, with two daughters, Annie, age nine, and Alma, age seven.

<sup>5</sup> The 1930 census lists James as fifty years old, Eula as forty-two, Hubert as nineteen, Harold as seventeen, Guy as thirteen, Rachel as ten, and Moselle as seven. [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com). Accessed April 22, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York, 1986), pp.128, 274.

<sup>7</sup> *The WPA Guide to 1930s Oklahoma*, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Carey McWilliams, *California: The Great Exception* (Santa Barbara, 1979), p. 303.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 301, 303 on temperatures and topography of the Imperial Valley.

<sup>10</sup> Information on Jacumba is taken from the Federal Writers' Project Guide to 1930s California, *The WPA Guide to California* (New York, 1984), p. 642 (originally published in 1939 as *California: A Guide to the Golden State*) and <http://www.uscitiesonline.com/cacountyjacumba.htm> (accessed April 26, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> James B. Bates, "The Plank Road," *The Journal of San Diego History*, Spring 1970. Accessed March 27, 2011 at <http://www.sandiegohistory.org/journal/70spring/plank.htm>. Information on the Plank Road is taken from this article and from [http://www.gbcnet.com/ushighways/US80/US80\\_plank\\_road.html](http://www.gbcnet.com/ushighways/US80/US80_plank_road.html) (accessed March 14, 2011) which has exceptional photographs of the road's evolution over time.

<sup>12</sup> J.D.'s transcript from Escondido Union High School in Escondido, California documents the fact that he graduated from high school there at the end of his junior year on June 2, 1944, seventeen days shy of his eighteenth birthday. He insists that from when he had begun school in the first grade, he never missed a year in his progression from one grade to another. If this is true, working backwards from his high school graduation date, J.D. began first grade in the fall of 1933 at the age of seven.

<sup>13</sup> J.D. Williams, *To God Be the Glory*, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> J.D. describes the outhouse in his memoir. *Ibid.*, p.10.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Otis L. Graham, Jr. and Meghan Robinson Wander (eds.), *Franklin Roosevelt: His Life and Times, An Encyclopedic View* (Boston, 1985), pp. 132-133.

<sup>21</sup> Williams, *To God Be the Glory*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>22</sup> James J. Rawls, *New Directions in California History: A Book of Readings* (New York, 1988), p. 283.

<sup>23</sup> <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/o/ok008.html> (accessed April 19, 2011). The site notes that when the migrants reached Barstow, they had to decide whether they would continue toward Los Angeles or whether they would proceed north to the Central Valley. About thirty-eight percent went to L.A., meaning the majority headed north.

<sup>24</sup> Information on the topography of the Central Valley is taken from McWilliams, *California*, p. 319.

<sup>25</sup> Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, p. 348. The author points out that with millions of acres under cultivation because of the pumping from the aquifer, the water table decreased. Looking toward the future, the California state legislature passed the Central Valley Project in 1933, a major conservation program to deliver water from more than one river system to both rural and urban areas. It took eighteen years to complete the project.

<sup>26</sup> *The WPA Guide to California*, p. 66.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 441.

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- <sup>28</sup> Williams, *To God Be the Glory*, p. 11 mentions the sod floor, the railroad car, and the abandoned house. Just months after the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor, the U.S. government began a forced relocation of Japanese Americans who lived on the West Coast. The Army moved them, under armed guard, to relocation camps, located in areas far removed from population centers. The official justification for this was fear that some of the Japanese Americans may have been saboteurs.
- <sup>29</sup> *The WPA Guide to California*, pp. 441-442 gives a brief profile of the town. Bard's population numbered about five hundred (p. 637) and Winterhaven's about one thousand (p. 637), so Oakdale was home to six times the of people in Bard and triple the number in Winterhaven.
- <sup>30</sup> Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, p. 165.
- <sup>31</sup> John W. Caughey, *California: A Remarkable State's Life History* (Englewood Cliff, New Jersey, 1970), p. 469.
- <sup>32</sup> Walter Bean and James J. Rawls, *California: An Interpretive History* (New York, 1988), p. 304; Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, p. 170.
- <sup>33</sup> The federal law guaranteeing workers unionization rights was the National Labor Relations Act (1935). Statistics on the growth of union membership in California are from Caughey, *California*, p. 458.
- <sup>34</sup> *The WPA Guide to California*, p. 311.
- <sup>35</sup> Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Arizona, *The WPA Guide to 1930s Arizona* (Tucson, 1989), pp. 273, 276-277. This volume was originally published in 1940 under the title, *Arizona, a State Guide*.
- <sup>36</sup> J.D.'s transcript from Escondido Union High School lists his "date of entrance" as March 9, 1943.
- <sup>37</sup> Information on Escondido around the time when the Williams moved there is taken from *The WPA Guide to California*, p. 526; San Diego's population can be found on p. 528.
- <sup>38</sup> J.D.'s transcript from Escondido Union High School has a line for the parent's occupation. "March Field" is listed for J.D.'s father.
- <sup>39</sup> Williams, *To God Be the Glory*, p. 18.
- <sup>40</sup> <http://www.ehscougars.com/essentials/history2.shtml> (accessed May 10, 2011).
- <sup>41</sup> Williams, *To God Be the Glory*, p. 15.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>43</sup> Douglas Westfall, *Escondido History & The Grape Day Celebration* (Orange, Ca., 2005), pp. 110-111.
- <sup>44</sup> Richard Lingeman, *Don't You Know There's a War On? The American Home Front, 1941-1945* (New York, 1970, 2003), p.67.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>46</sup> Williams, *To God Be the Glory*, p. 16.
- <sup>47</sup> <http://christianity.about.com/od/biblestorysummaries/p/davidandgoliath.htm?p=1> (accessed June 20, 2011).
- <sup>48</sup> Williams, *To God Be the Glory*, p. 20. Information on J.D.'s training as a soldier is taken from his memoir and from conversations with the author in June 2011.
- <sup>49</sup> Williams, *To God Be the Glory*, p. 20.
- <sup>50</sup> Two publications from 1944 detail the pre-induction, induction, and basic training processes members of the armed forces underwent in World War II. One is "Answers to Important Questions for the Potential Inductee and His Dependents" published by the Oregon State Defense Council. Information in it was compiled by the Army Service Forces. A second one is "Introduction to the Armed Forces: Suggestions for Pre-Induction Informational Meetings" published by the U.S. Office of Civil Defense. Both are available at <http://arcweb.sos.state.or.us/exhibits/ww2/services/induct.htm> (accessed June 17, 2011).
- <sup>51</sup> John C. McManus, *The Deadly Brotherhood: The American Combat Soldier in World War II* (New York, 1998), p. 9
- <sup>52</sup> Oregon State Defense Council, "Answers to Important Question," p. 13; U.S. Office of Civil Defense, "Introduction to the Armed Forces," p. 23.
- <sup>53</sup> <http://www.militarymuseum.org/campbob.html> (accessed June 21, 2011)
- <sup>54</sup> Williams, *To God Be the Glory*, pp. 18-19.
- <sup>55</sup> Oregon State Defense Council, "Answers to Important Questions," pp. 10-11 on how different civilian life is from military life.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 10.
- <sup>57</sup> Williams, *To God Be the Glory*, p. 19.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 20.
- <sup>59</sup> Oregon State Defense Council, "Answers to Important Questions," p. 11 calculates the true salary of an enlisted man.

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- <sup>60</sup> Williams, *To God Be the Glory*, p. 21.
- <sup>61</sup> Donald L. Miller and Henry Steele Commager, *The Story of World War II* (New York, 2001; original edition 1945), p. 590.
- <sup>62</sup> Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, *A War to Be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2000), p. 514. Due primarily to Japanese kamikaze attacks, almost five thousand members of the United States Navy died and over seven thousand were wounded.
- <sup>63</sup> David M. Kennedy (editor), *The Library of Congress, World War II Companion* (New York, 2007), p. 613.
- <sup>64</sup> Miller and Commager, *The Story of World War II*, p. 590.
- <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 581.
- <sup>66</sup> Eugene Sledge, *With the Old Breed, At Peleliu and Okinawa* (1981) and William Manchester's *Goodbye Darkness: A Memoir of the Pacific War* (1979). For a powerful example of how war impacts a family, see Julia Collins' *My Father's War* (New York, 2002). Julia's father fought on Okinawa. Beginning at age four, she had nightmares of "her father's war," rooted in stories he told her when he thought she was sound asleep.
- <sup>67</sup> J.D. Williams uses that phrase to describe himself, *To God Be the Glory*, p. 19.
- <sup>68</sup> Miller and Commager, *The Story of World War II*, p. 561.
- <sup>69</sup> On Japanese defenses on Okinawa, see *Ibid.*, pp. 561-562 and Murray and Millett, *A War to Be Won*, p. 511.
- <sup>70</sup> Miller and Commager, *The Story of World War II*, p. 578; see also p. 565 for a description of the Shuri Line.
- <sup>71</sup> George Feifer, *The Battle of Okinawa: The Blood and the Bomb* (Guilford, CT., 2001), p. xv. This volume was originally published in 1992 under the title *Tennozan: The Battle of Okinawa and the Atomic Bomb*.
- <sup>72</sup> Miller and Commager, *The Story of World War II*, p. 565.
- <sup>73</sup> Roy E. Appleman, James M. Burns, Russell A. Gugeler, and John Stevens, *United States Army in World War II, The War in the Pacific, Okinawa: The Last Battle*, p. 313 for quote on "bitterest action" and pp. 332-338 on "The Attack in the Center" that deals with Company E.
- <sup>74</sup> Williams, *To God Be the Glory*, p. 4.
- <sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- <sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- <sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- <sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- <sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- <sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.
- <sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- <sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- <sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- <sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.