

How we came into contact with Willy Willems, a true friend of the 1142nd Combat Engineers Headquarters Company.

I went to a 1142nd Combat Engineers Headquarters Company reunion that was held on November 11, 2006 in Burlington, NC for the first time with my grandfather, William Alga Pace, who served in the unit during WWII. It was at that reunion that I first learned where my grandfather had been wounded. It was wounded by a German V-1 rocket at the village of Sichen Sussen Bolre, Belgium. When I got home from the reunion, I began to look on the Internet for Sichen. The name of the town has changed since the war. Now it is known as Zichen Zussen Bolder, but at the time I wasn't aware of this change. I was very unsure if I was looking in the right place or not. After a couple days of investigating, I finally found a website that looked associated with the town, you have to remember the websites I was viewing were all in Dutch, and I sent off an email telling whoever might receive it about the 1142nd and their time spent there during the war. Could they please help point me in the right direction? Well, that email that was sent "into the dark" couldn't have found a better place or person I might say, than it did that evening.

I got two responses. One was from Willy Willems himself and one from his son Johan. Johan emailed me first stating that the email came to his father and had been forwarded to him. Johan said there were five school buildings in the village and they were all fairly old. He said he would ask his father about which school building the 1142nd used as their headquarters while their unit was stationed there. Within 20 minutes, I got my first email from Willy. A friendship was born. Willy was 10 years old when the 1142nd was stationed in his village. His father ran the local bar in town and since there was no school during the war, Willy was able to help out his father and to spend time with the soldiers. Willy's first email to me contained a picture of Leonard Newsome. At the time, I didn't know who the picture might be, but upon sending the email out to Bill Stephenson and Bernard Wicker, they informed me that was one of their 1142nd buddies. During their stay in Zichen, Leonard had stayed at Willy's house and the Willems had kept a picture he had given them since 1944.

Since we have come into contact with Willy, he has brought back many memories for the men of the 1142nd. He has also provided a lot of wonderful pictures of Zichen from the 1940's and what it looks like today. Pictured in the Willy Willems Picture Gallery you will see several of the buildings that the unit used during the war, pictures of Willy and his family, and even see the names of the men of the 1142nd who wrote their names on the walls of the caves in Zichen those many years ago. Even the school house where my grandfather was wounded is still standing to this day.

I just want to thank Willy for all that he has done in helping this website, but most importantly, bringing back to life a time in these men's lives that should not be forgotten.