

BRYANT UNIVERSITY

The Best He Could, As Fast As He Could
The World War II Experiences of Wesley Crawley
Bryant College '36

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Wesley Clement Crawley was born April 15, 1917, to Clement and Eliza Crawley in Pleasant View, Wisconsin.ⁱ Crawley's parents came to the United States from Bedfordshire, England shortly after the turn of the century.ⁱⁱ The Crawleys originally settled in Massachusetts, with Wes's father working for the Brown and Sharpe Manufacturing Co. in Providence.ⁱⁱⁱ The Crawleys would move to Wisconsin after Clement, who had recently been ordained a Methodist minister, was assigned to a church in the Badger state. It was there that both Wes Crawley and his younger brother, Walter, were born.^{iv}

The cold weather and unfamiliarity of Wisconsin would cause the Crawleys to return to Massachusetts within a decade. Wisconsin, it seems, was "too cold for Wes's mother"^v, and by 1930, the family had returned to the Northeast. They initially moved to North Providence, Rhode Island, but relocated shortly thereafter to Fall River, Massachusetts. It was while living there, in 1934, that Wes graduated from Durfee High School.^{vi}

Wes indicated that his father strongly believed in the value and benefits of hard work and education. With this in mind, Clement Crawley was determined to see his three sons receive a college education. His eldest son, Len, worked as a painter during the day and attended Bryant College in Providence, Rhode Island, at night.^{vii} One of his co-workers also served as a recruiter for the school, and after a lengthy discussion, convinced Len's father to enroll his younger two sons there as well.^{viii}

In the words of William Richards Castle, who served as the school's commencement speaker in 1936, Bryant College was a place with "a good many...interesting people" and an "attractive...college [which had] just moved from its old location in the heart of the city [to the East Side of Providence]."^{ix} During the 1930s, Bryant offered two-year degree programs in accountancy, finance, and secretarial studies. Evidently, Wes's entrepreneurial spirit was a good

fit with the business focus of the college. For example, he drove a few of his classmates the nineteen miles from where they lived in Fall River to Bryant for the princely sum of twenty-five cents per trip.^x

Upon graduating from Bryant in 1936 with a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration degree, Wes found work as a clerk at the Pacific Oil Company in Fall River. Dissatisfied with the opportunities there, he took a friend's advice and took a similar position at Fall River National Bank.^{xi} His upward climb through the company was temporarily halted in 1941, however, by the war in Europe which now loomed menacingly over the United States.

Wes's life, like so many other Americans, would be directly impacted by the passage of the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940. The Roosevelt administration pressed for the passage of this peacetime conscription due to the necessity of having a well trained and well staffed armed forces in the face of Nazi aggression in Europe. Wes himself was drafted prior to the U.S. entry into World War II; his number called on September 9, 1941.^{xii} His younger brother, Walter, was drafted in March of that year and Len would follow in May of 1942.^{xiii} After being drafted, Wes reported to Fort Devens,^{xiv} located in the towns of Ayer and Shirley, Massachusetts. By that time, Fort Devens had become "a reception center for hundreds of men from all over New England. More than 1200 wooden barracks were thrown together during the early days of World War II and an airport, known later as Moore Army Airfield, was opened in 1941. Devens trained nurses, chaplains, cooks and bakers as well as the troops of the the 1st, 32nd, and 45th Infantry Divisions and the Fourth Women's Army Corps."^{xv}

Wes's stay at Fort Devens would prove to be short-lived. Still, during his time there he witnessed firsthand the discontentment of many draftees with the pending eighteen month extension to the Selective Service Act that was before Congress at that time. He recalls soldiers

frequently grouching about “OHIO.”^{xvi} This view of events was confirmed by a *Life* magazine writer reporting from Fort McClellan, Alabama, during the same time period. As described by Doris Kearns Goodwin, “Everywhere one looked, the reporter observed, on walls of latrines, on trucks, on field-artillery pieces, the word “OHIO” could be seen. It stood for “Over the Hill in October”, a code name for the massive desertion that was planned for October [1941], once the year’s service was up.”^{xvii}

By December of that year, Wes had been transferred to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. Fort Monmouth at the time served as the major signal corps training center on the east coast. The officer informing of him his transfer told him he was headed to the “country club of the Army”^{xviii} Reflecting later on the terrible price paid by U.S. infantrymen during the war, Wes couldn’t help but agree with the officer’s assessment.^{xix} Wes also recalls that on the morning of December 7th that he was writing a letter to his fiancée, Lillian Borden, when news came over the Fort Monmouth loudspeakers that Pearl Harbor had been attacked by the Japanese.^{xx}

In July of 1942, Wes applied for and was accepted to Officer Candidate School.^{xxi} In his words, “I got into training school because of Bryant. Anybody who graduated from college could apply for Officer Candidate School, so I did. And I got in.”^{xxii} In a May 23, 1942 letter to the Bryant Service Club, a student run and faculty supported organization which provided letters, candy, cigarettes, and hand-knitted items to Bryant alumni in the armed forces, Crawley compared officer training with the education he had received at Bryant: “Although I haven’t had instructors [like the ones at Bryant], I like the course very much. It reminds me of Bryant too as I am kept very busy with homework.”^{xxiii}

His account of being “kept very busy” is confirmed by the Fort Monmouth Historical Office. “The Signal Corps School activated its Officer Candidate School (OCS) on 2 June

1941...Those who successfully completed their courses would be commissioned as Second Lieutenants in the Army...Their curriculum included physical training, dismounted drill, military law, sanitation and first aid, military courtesy and customs, interior guard duty, defense against chemical attack, pistol marksmanship, supply, administration, mess management, map reading, signal communications, motor transportation, inspection, and training methods.”^{xxiv}

It should be noted that each of the Crawley brothers were touched by the efforts of the Bryant Service Club during the war. Len, who would remain stateside for the duration of the war, wrote to the club from Scott Field, Illinois, in August 1942. “I received your package some time ago and as always in the Army it was nice to hear from New England. This radio course is much different from Bryant. I have been here three months and will be here another six weeks. They called this the Radio University of the Air Corps but it is the first school I ever attended where I had to get up at 4:45 A.M.”^{xxv} Later, writing from his assignment in Eagle Pass, Texas, he expressed his appreciation for a package of candy he received from the club. The candy, Len informed the club, “helps one digest the dust better.”^{xxvi}

The youngest Crawley, Walter, whose World War II experience took him to Iceland, adopted a more heartfelt and serious approach in his letter writing to the club. Writing in January 1943, in response to a package he received, he said, “Your package arrived in very good condition and [I] wish to thank you for remembering me during the holiday season. After looking at the long list of names you now have, I must say that you are a doing a big job in grand style. Bryant certainly is doing a big job in the present conflict.”^{xxvii} Wes himself shared similar thoughts to the club in June 1942 thanking them for a package of candies: “It makes being in the army a lot easier when we know that folks at home are thinking of us and doing all they can to help us out.”^{xxviii}

Wes completed OCS on August 13, 1942^{xxxix} and was married to his sweetheart, Lillian, in a church in Fall River two days later.^{xxx} The two had been introduced at a church dance in 1936. Their honeymoon was a short one, though, as Wes was sent Orlando, Florida, later that month and then overseas in the beginning of October.^{xxxi}

Not the last of Wes's harrowing wartime experiences would be his journey across the Atlantic. Traveling with 15,000 other American servicemen^{xxxii} aboard the luxury liner *Queen Mary* en route to Scotland on October 2, 1942, Wes was a firsthand witness to one of the better kept secrets of World War II. Approximately 20 miles from the Irish Coast, the *Queen Mary* collided with its escort, the *HMS Curacao*, sinking the smaller craft and resulting in the loss of 300 sailors.^{xxxiii} Crawley remembers everyone being briefly disoriented, followed by a booming voice bellowing over the loudspeakers: "This is very important. Do not mention this to anyone. Do not write home about it."^{xxxiv} The *Queen Mary* sailed on for Scotland, leaving the sinking vessel behind, because they were under orders not to stop for fear of the ship becoming too easy a target for patrolling U-Boats. Wes's remembrances regarding the immediate calls for secrecy and silence are confirmed by the fact that "the tragedy would not be made public until the war's end three years later, for fear of demoralizing the troops or the UK's civilian populace."^{xxxv}

After arriving in Scotland, Wes recalls being placed on a train bound for Liverpool almost immediately. From Liverpool, Wes would follow behind the initial wave of Operation Torch, the Allies coordinated invasion of Algiers, Oran, and Casablanca on November 8, 1942. From 1940, North Africa had taken on increased significance in the conflict between the Axis and Allied powers. The Allies viewed its strategic value as presenting an opening back into Europe, while the Axis saw it as an opportunity to access the Suez Canal and to choke off the British from their Middle Eastern oil reserves. The conflict began with the Italian invasion of

Libya from Egypt in September 1940 and would be followed by a series of back and forth advances and retreats by the competing powers. Following the success of British Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery at the second battle of El Alamein in October 1942, Torch was launched in hopes of freeing those territories from the nominal rule of the Vichy French government. Upon landing in Oran, Wes was attached to the 733rd Signal Aircraft Warning Battalion.^{xxxvi}

In Wes's words, the primary responsibilities of his battalion included "setting up a radar unit and tracking planes."^{xxxvii} At the time, he was placed in command of a platoon of roughly 20 men.^{xxxviii} He recalled with some pride that his unit's efforts led to the shooting down of a German plane.^{xxxix} The unit was soon thereafter stationed at Feriana, Tunisia. One of his more memorable experiences in North Africa was what he described as "the retreat from Feriana,"^{xl} where his battalion had to hastily pack up "and evacuate, [as the Germans] had gotten through [Allied lines]."^{xli} This "getting through" refers to the last gasp of the Axis war effort in North Africa in late February and March 1943. Eventually routed and cornered in the cities of Tunis and Bizerte, the Axis were defeated following the final Allied offensive launched May 3rd. Tunis fell May 7th, Bizerte on May 9th. All told, some 275,000 Axis soldiers were taken prisoner.^{xlii} Yet, it would be those Germans that the victorious Allies did not capture that would lead to one of the more remarkable experiences of Wes's life.

On July 19, 1943, the Bryant Service Club received a letter from Mr. and Mrs. Clement Crawley. In it, the Crawleys expressed their gratitude for the organization's concern regarding their son. "Dear Friends", the letter began, "You were so kind to us in our hour of trial that we wish to express our deep appreciation for your sympathy and prayers."^{xliii} The Club had written to the Crawleys because "on the 1st of June [1943], [Wes] was taken prisoner by [seven] Germans in a place which was considered clear of the enemy."^{xliv}

With the campaign in North Africa seemingly over, Wes and a few companions from his unit were eager to explore the waters off of Cape Bon where they were stationed.^{xlv} Their travels took them to a pair of outlying islands, which Wes described as “one island being much larger than the other” and the larger of the two possessing “incredible cliffs.”^{xlvi} Given their proximity to Cape Bon and their corresponding geographical features, it is reasonable to assume that Wes and his companions traveled to the islands of Zembra and Zembretta in the Gulf of Tunis. In his desire to explore one of the islands, Wes encountered seven German soldiers. He recalls the Germans “firing on” his men, and “hitting one of them in the wrist”^{xlvii}, before retreating with him in tow. For the next three weeks, he was a German prisoner of war, where he would experience a most interesting cultural exchange.

It may be said that Wes’s education and background provided an opening for dialogue with his German captors. Equally important, it also helped to provide him with insight into the situation which he found himself thrown into, both on the island and in the larger world. Initially, Wes’s religious upbringing opened the door for conversation. The Germans “were very interested in the New Testament” he kept in his pocket, perhaps because he was so diligent in reading it every morning.^{xlviii} This morning ritual was certainly preferable to his sleeping accommodations, which involved him “sleeping in the middle, with two Germans to either side of me.”^{xlix} It was, in Wes’s words, “how the Germans took care of [him].”¹

Whatever the reasons for their interest, he was ultimately able to begin a steady string of conversations with the German captain commanding the group. Their conversations ranged from discussing Hollywood movie stars to far more serious matters. “What do you think about Hitler?” Crawley asked his captor. “Oh, he is good for Germany,” replied the captain. “But how

about the Jews?” Crawley interjected. “We pay them for everything we take,”^{li} was the German’s answer.

Wes was amazed that even at that point the Germans had no idea of the sinister character of the Hitler regime. Still, he came away with a changed attitude toward the German people. He was very moved at “how well they treated me”^{lii} and at various acts of German kindness during his captivity. He spoke of how one of the soldiers chased a seagull near the cliffs and after catching it provided Wes with the most ample portion of meat.^{liii} He was forever grateful, too, that when a previous injury led to the development of gangrene, his captors chose to leave him behind on the island. In their letter to the Bryant Service Club, Wes’s parents indicated that prior to this onset of illness, “It was the intention of his captors...to take him to Italy and later to Germany.”^{liv} Ultimately, the Germans requested that “[Wes] wait 48 hours before signaling for help” and that he swear on his New Testament that he wouldn’t.^{lv}

Wes honored his words to the departing Germans and on June 26th was spotted by a British motor launch while waving a makeshift white flag made out of a sheet.^{lvi} Upon being rescued, however, he was humorously reminded that cultural understanding is a thing that should not be limited merely to enemy combatants. After explaining the story to the crew of the motor launch, he was welcomed aboard and in his relief told one of the sailors, “Boy, am I glad to see you English.”^{lvii} The suddenly red-faced crewman shouted, “I’m not English, I’m Scottish!”^{lviii} Wes remembered distinctly, with a laugh, fearing he might be left on the island at that moment.^{lix}

Following his rescue, Wes was placed in a US Navy Hospital where “he was doing well and expected to be out...within a couple of weeks.”^{lx} By the time of his release from the hospital, his battalion had already been transferred to Sicily for the Italian campaign. It was from “Sunny

Sicily” on August 13, 1943, that Wes wrote the Bryant Service Club to tell them of his POW experience and inform them that he had been reunited with the 733rd.^{lxi}

Having defeated the Axis powers in North Africa, the Allies moved on to Sicily in hopes of bringing down the government of fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. The initial Allied attacks of July 10th, 1943 were met with resistance, but within two weeks the forces had advanced as far as Palermo. On July 24th Mussolini was arrested and negotiations for an armistice began. By August 17th, the entire island had fallen into Allied hands. The month of September would see an armistice with Italy signed and a rapid Allied advance to Cassino. At that point, however, the Germans were able to dig in and cause a prolonged stalemate from their defensive position, which came to be known as the Winter Line.

The Allied landings at Anzio in January 1944 would eventually lead to access to Rome, but it would not be until June of that year that they were able to finally drive the Germans from Cassino. Once through the Winter Line defenses, the Allies continued a gradual march northward that would lead to total victory in the campaign in April 1945. For Wes, the majority of his time in the Italian campaign would be spent in Sicily, Naples, and Anzio. While in Naples, his 733rd Signal Aircraft Warning Battalion was incorporated into the larger 582nd.^{lxii} In September of 1944 the 582nd disembarked in Saint Tropez, France, to join the effort against the German Siegfried Line. According to the official history of the battalion, “After the invasion [of Southern France], the whereabouts of the various radar units and ground observer relays was not know[n] to [Battalion Headquarters] because of the distance involved and the rapid movements. Therefore it is impossible for the Historian of this Battalion to submit a day by day war diary.”^{lxiii} Wes’s recollection of this period is sketchy, though by all accounts he remained in France for only a short time before moving into Germany, where he would spend the remainder of the war.

During this period the 582nd was attached to the 64th Fighter Wing. The 64th, after moving from Saint Tropez, established its headquarters in Ludres, France on November 15, 1944.^{lxiv} By January 15, 1945, they were stationed in Nancy, France, and indeed reached Germany and were stationed at Edenkoben by April 1st.^{lxv} The unit is credited with participation in the Rhineland, Ardennes-Alsace, and Central European campaigns.^{lxvi}

Shortly before returning to the United States in November 1945, Wes encountered a segregated African-American unit in Germany. He was shocked that the mess cook was not providing them with any meat in their meals, especially after discovering that the storeroom was stocked full with canned meat. When he questioned the cook about this, the cook replied, “They don’t want any.”^{lxvii} Indignant, Wes informed him in no uncertain terms that as long as he was there he would make sure that the African-Americans were served meat with their dinners.^{lxviii}

With this common act of decency, Wes was following his own advice that he provided to members of the Bryant Service Club in his letter from December 17th, 1943. “Do the very best you can as fast as you can. We beat the Italians because we are smarter than they are... We are beating the Germans and the Japs because we are better educated than they. Fascism suppressed education-we encourage it. Schools and colleges in the states are doing their share for victory and the preservation of the peace to follow depends on them [more] than anything else.”^{lxix}

Wes’s belief in the importance of accepting and understanding both the African-American soldiers he encountered and his German captors were echoed two years later by Tom Watson, founder of IBM and Bryant’s 1945 Commencement speaker. He told the graduating class: “Education is the basis of international understanding. It helps us to understand other people just as we hope they will learn to understand us.”^{lxx} Watson further added that the

graduates should “take advantage of [their] education and [prepare] themselves to impart knowledge to the people with whom [they] come in contact.”^{lxxi}

After the war, the three Crawley brothers took separate paths. Len remained in the Army after the war, eventually retiring as a major. He passed away in 2001 and is buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Walt spent three decades after the war working for the H.P. Hood Company in Providence, before retiring to Cape Cod. He passed away in 2002. Wes returned home to Fall River and his position at the Fall River National Bank, where the managers provided him with a pay “raise equal to if...[he had] never left.”^{lxxii} He remained with the company for the remainder of his professional career, retiring as a Vice President in 1983.^{lxxiii} He lived in Fall River until 2006, when he moved to West Lebanon, New Hampshire. He currently resides there his wife, Lillian, of 67 years.

ⁱ Wesley Crawley, interview with author, December 10, 2008.

ⁱⁱ Clement Crawley’s place of birth confirmed by his 1942 World War II draft registration card.

<http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?rank=1&new=1&MSAV=0&msT=1&gss=angs->

ⁱⁱⁱ Wes Crawley interview, December 10, 2008.

^{iv} *ibid*

^v *ibid*

^{vi} *ibid*

^{vii} *ibid*

^{viii} *ibid*

^{ix} William R. Castle, *Diaries, 1918-1960, Volume 31*, p. 424. Accessed by author at Houghton Library, Harvard University, March 23, 2009.

^x Wes Crawley interview, December 10, 2008.

^{xi} *ibid*

^{xii} Date confirmed by Electronic Army Serial Number Merged File, ca. 1938-1946 (Enlistment Records), contained in the National Archives electronic database. Accessed online at:
http://aad.archives.gov/aad/record-detail.jsp?dt=893&mtch=1&cat=WR26&tf=F&sc=24994,24995,24996,24998,24997,24993,24981,24983&bc=,sl,fd&txt_24994=31035726&op_24994=0&nfo_24994=V,8,1900&rpp=10&pg=1&rid=2233341.

^{xiii} *ibid*

^{xiv} Wes Crawley interview, December 10, 2008.

^{xv} Fort Devens Museum, <http://www.fortdevensmuseum.org/history.htm>.

^{xvi} *ibid*

^{xvii} Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994, pp. 267-68.

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