

Mrs. Leverne Wayrynen

Interviewed by: Unidentified 02/19/1997

Transcribed by: Jennie Hakes 04/09/2001

Cassette tape label: *Ms Leverne Wayrynen, mother of Dale – C.M.H. 2/19/97*



Overview

Dale Wayrynen enlisted in the service in 1964, directly after graduation from the MacGregor High School. He volunteered to go to Viet Nam, and was killed there only two months after he arrived, in 1967. He received the Congressional Medal of Honor posthumously. His family accepted the Medal from President Richard Nixon in a ceremony in Washington, DC, on October 16, 1969. Dale was the only Aitkin County soldier who had received the Medal of Honor. This tape is an interview of his mother's remembrances. – Jennie Hakes

Side 1

Introduction

Interviewer: I certainly appreciate your being here. We feel that it is important to document your story and so forth and have it in the records at the Historical Society. There will be a time when there is going to be people who are going to be very interested and so forth, and to hear your story and to hear you tell about (*unintelligible*). We think it's very important to have in the records. (*unintelligible*)

Dale was in Vietnam in 1967...

L: Yes.

I: ...when he was killed.

L: Yes. He went in...he got there in March, and then he was killed in May, so it wasn't very, very long.

I: And I read where your husband's father was a prisoner of war hero in World War II. That was interesting. He got out about twenty years before.

L: May of '44 until May of '45. Almost a year.

I: Almost a year. So your family is full of military heroes.

L: Yeah. And then my other son, David, served in Vietnam after Dale was killed.

I: Oh, he did?

L: He had to go. But then, while he was there, they passed a rule that if you had lost someone in the war before, they can't put the other siblings into combat zones. So they pulled David out of the way of gunfire - when he got home, and was there ten months.

I: Are there other siblings? Brothers or sisters?

L: There's a son, John, who lives not far from here. He's the youngest one. And David has gone to Vietnam, too - he's in Baxter with his wife.

I: Dale was the middle one?

L: Dale was the oldest.

I: Oh, Dale was the oldest.

L: David was next, and then there was Randy, he was killed in a car accident. And then there was John, who lives in *(unintelligible)*.

I: Any daughters?

L: No daughters, no. But granddaughters. So you can imagine how special they are in our house!

I: Dale certainly showed that he had a lot of compassion and concern and caring for others to do what he did. People...you know, it's a remarkable feat.

L: Quick decision, I'm sure.

I: Oh, I'm sure it is, but it isn't just anybody and everybody that would have done what he did. A lot of people were headed the other way, and having concerns and compassions for his comrades there, to take care of them... When Dale was a young boy, did he show signs of compassion?

L: Oh, yes, and of leadership is one thing he had. Before he left for Vietnam, they would have wanted him to go through OCS, is it?

I: Up in Canada.

L: No, they *(unintelligible)* in Vietnam. He didn't want to go to officer's school.

I: He had the military in mind. Yeah, I suppose some of that maybe came from his dad, having to be back on the field *(unintelligible)*. Can you tell you anything special about Dale as a young boy, or any early stages - about pre-school, or some of the...

L: Well, oh yeah, I think he already had some, and he had his love for sports. He had...his dad had to play a lot of catch. We were milking cows and Dale was a little tyke yet, four or five maybe, and he had to go between cows, you know. And squat there by the barn so Dale could pitch to him.

I: Oh, sure.

L: So he did love his sports.

I: He loved his sport from a very early age, then.

L: Yes. It's too bad they didn't have Little League then. You know, in those days...

I: Yeah. He would have loved that. Did his brothers also show an interest in sports?

L: David was in sports, yes. And then the other two were fun, too, but not as much as Dale was.

I: Dale was more athletic.

L: Yeah, yeah. He loved his sports.

I: *(unintelligible)*

L: We were at all the basketball games. *(unintelligible)*

I: Are you from this area, originally?

L: Yes. I'm from by Tamarack.

I: By Tamarack?

L: And then my husband was *(unintelligible)*

I: What was your name?

L: Herkula (?).

I: Herkula. Both you and your husband were natives of this general area.

L: Yes.

I: Your family was *(unintelligible)*

L: Yes, *(unintelligible)*. One set of grandparents, my dad's parents, live by...on 47 over there, by Hanson Lake. *(unintelligible)* And my mom's family, side of the family, were from Lawler. So they also *(unintelligible)*. Dad went to Rossburg to grade school.

I: Where did Dale and them go to grammar school?

L: In McGregor. Yeah, it was in McGregor.

I: He went through all his 12 years there?

L: 12 years, yes.

I: Is he...you said that he showed you athletic ability and a desire *(unintelligible)* before he started school...

L: Oh, yes.

I: ...and through school

L: Like I say, they didn't have the sports like they have now for the young ones, like Little League and stuff, in Tamarack there, which is too bad.

I: Can you recall any other particular traits that Dale had and interests and so forth. Did he like to play army when he was a young boy?

L: Oh, I'm sure they did! They all played army outside.

I: Sure.

L: Our youngest son, John, he played with these little army figures, the little plastic ones, by the hour when he was young. But he has never been (*unintelligible*). He didn't have to go, though. Well, naturally! He was only 6 years old! When Vietnam was going on. So he was (*unintelligible*).

I: You weren't married yet when your husband in the service?

L: No.

I: You got married after World War II.

L: (*unintelligible*) I was still in high school at the time. He was in prison camp when I was just finishing high school. We were married about a year after we met, in June of '46.

I: Did Dale go into the military right after high school?

L: He... yes, they had... Three of the fellows in his class had already, you know, signed up before school ever ended. They had had their physical in the Cities on Easter weekend, I remember, when they went there (*unintelligible*) and had their physicals. SO then...but they had... it was towards the end of June..

I: That was in '65

L: '65.

I: And he was in training probably down at Fort Benning?

L: Let's see, now. His basic was...oh, boy...was it Fort Benning?

I: Then he went into the...

L: Anyway, then he...yes, he would have wanted to go into the Green Beret Special. And they didn't tell him that until after had enlisted, you have to be 21t. And he was only 19. So then, he figured, the next best thing was to go through Jump School. (Laughs) To be a paratrooper.

I: Did he jump...

L: Yes, he did.

I: ... in combat?

L: No, no. See, they had to do that with all the kids. They were airborne.

I: They had been trained for it.

L: They were on the ground.

I: So he had the training. The airborne training was pretty intensive training.

L: Yes, he had that. He had jumped. The first one, somebody took a picture of him, in the air, of his first jump. And he said, "That was something else!" (Laughs) When he jumped out the first time.

I: I noticed in a story I read about him, that he had made the one jump.

L: Yes! And that was enough!

I: He didn't like to fly.

L: He was pretty nervous.

I: I believe it said he was actually in the air on that jump about 20 minutes.

L: I think so. Yes, it was quite awhile.

I: Seems like a long time!

L: Absolute silence, I guess, up there. Then he landed in a brush pile of some kind. He was knocked out for a little bit. And when he came to, there was the German farmer (*unintelligible*).

I: I imagine Dale enjoyed talking to his Dad about his experiences?

L: Well, I don't know if they talked so much, you know. But he had... they didn't talk so much about their experiences. Just the latter years, he would talk to me.

I: Some of those things, I guess, could get pretty...

L: Yes, a lot of them had a very hard time talking about their experiences.

I: Can you think of any other thing that you would like mention about Dale in his growing-up period, through his grammar school and junior high and so forth? I mean, particular interests that he had that... I am sure that living in this area, most people in the outdoors...

L: Oh, yes! He went hunting, and oh yeah – he got his first buck right away, I remember.

I: I'm sure it was a happy day for him.

L: Um hm. (Laughs) Yeah, he liked to hunt. And sunfishing, too.

I: Sure. When you received a medal from President Nixon, that must have been a very sad, but very proud day, both.

L: There were a lot of mixed emotions, yes. There were. But I was very proud. It was a hard day. A hard morning.

I: I am sure it was. (*unintelligible*)

L: And we got one nice letter from someone that he knew in the service. He had seen the Medal of Honor thing in the paper. He lived in Colorado. And he wrote to us right away. Dale, he was supposed to go hunting, in Colorado. And he said that he got real sick when they were out on some maneuver, here on stateside, not Vietnam, stateside. And this other kid got really a high fever, and Dale kind of carried him on his back. The boy wrote that he didn't have to do that. (*unintelligible*)

I: There, again, it showed the compassion and concern that he had for others. That he cared for other people, more so than for himself, you know. (*unintelligible*) Have you heard from any of the people who were there at the time that Dale was killed?

L: No. Not a one. But a sister of this one who was in the group, in fact, her brother had been with the Lieutenant whoever it was, who recommended that Dale get the medal. There has to be two officers, I guess. And so this was her brother, and she was from Indiana, and she wrote. She said, when they heard about the medal (*unintelligible*).

I: Yeah, sure.

L: So she wrote that her brother didn't want to bring up old memories or something, you know. But she wrote, and oh, we were so thankful (*very emotional*) she did. Just to hear from somebody. And he had been wounded very seriously after that, this brother. But he came home. He made it. But now, when this dedication of the highway came up, why, we... John Smith and some of these who were interested in all this... they wanted her address, because I had saved the letter. They were going to get in touch. Now they haven't let me know if they've gotten in touch with her or not. And I've been (*unintelligible*) I should have written to her myself, you know. But my friend in Indiana, this lady was close to (*unintelligible*), so he went to the Post Office to inquire. He was here for the Fourth of July. When he went back, he went to retire. She was on a trip someplace, so we didn't see her at the time. But she had said that this brother was murdered a couple, two, three years ago. Is that something? (*unintelligible*) Then you have to come to that kind of thing. (*unintelligible*) We wished we would, you know.

I: Yeah. A lot of times, you know, if you have good friends in the service, you might not even know where they come from, you know – where their home is.

L: Right! Because he didn't know any of these guys only for a couple three weeks. That they were all together.

I: Is that how long he was in Viet Nam?

L: Well, he was there a couple months. You see, he wasn't with this particular... he was 82nd Airborne when he went over. And then they put him into the (*unintelligible*), so he didn't even know these other guys much.

I: He only knew them a couple of weeks was all. So he probably would like to have known where he was from, afterwards. But he didn't know.

L: Yeah. We got a letter from Dale, I know, roughly (*unintelligible*). Right at the end, he was in some action involving (*unintelligible*). And then one letter that he must have had ready to be mailed to us or something, at the time he got killed. It came - we had taken David, he was home, he was in the Army then, but he was here on stateside yet – so he came home of course when Dale was killed. And then we had... he was home, oh, about a week, I think, or maybe 10 days. And we had taken him to the airport in Minneapolis, so he'd fly back to Georgia. And when we came back, there was a letter from Dale. That was his last letter to us. So evidently it must have been ready to be mailed, or he didn't get it mailed yet, or something, somebody else must have...

I: Was Dale buried back here?

L: Oh, yes! In (*unintelligible*) their cemetery. Out in the country. Peaceful woods. (*unintelligible*) with his brothers and grandparents.¹

¹ Rice River Cemetery, McGregor MN

I: Your husband passed on just about...

L: Four years ago, it was, in October. I always think maybe a year or two has gone by, but it's more like four. When you think of something...

I: Now they have dedicated the gymnasium in MacGregor Schools to Dale.

L: Yes.

I: I am sure that was because of his interest and ability...

L: He played many a basketball game in that gymnasium.

I: He played all the sports? Football and so forth?

L: Basketball, football, and baseball. (*unintelligible*) He was a pitcher for baseball. And his brother David was his catcher. And then, in football, he was quarterback, and his brother David was his center. In fact, they both of them got on the all-conference team one year when they were (*unintelligible*). So that was...

I: How many years difference was there between Dale and his brother?

L: 15-and-a-half months between him and David. Then there was about six years... Randy, another seven years, and there's Johnny.

I: Oh, yes.

L: No girls. (Laughs)

I: Well, Johnny, then... does Johnny remember Dale?

L: Oh, yeah! He remembers him. He was six when Dale died, but he has a very good memory. Yeah, he remembers Dale. And (*unintelligible*) by that time, you see, he was eight, when we went to Washington (*unintelligible*).

I: Three boys and (*unintelligible*) all went to Washington.

L: Yes, David had just... actually, David had just come back from Viet Nam. About three months before, I believe. And Randy was (*unintelligible*). And Johnny was eight. Yeah, they took us all.

I: How long were you there, then? The ceremony lasted one day?

L: Yes. (*unintelligible*) We went on one day, let's see now, the fifteenth of October, we went there.

I: And that was '69?

L: Yes. In '69. And then the next day, the medal was given out. And we came back home on Thursday. So we weren't there long.

I: How far in advance did you know that he was receiving this medal?

L: Well, we had been called, I don't remember how long before... that he would be...

I: A few weeks or so?

L: Oh, yeah. And then it took a little while again before they knew all the arrangements and everything, and then we got the call finally (*unintelligible*).

I: And then the memorial at the wayside rest – that dedication was made about when?

L: Oh...

I: We've got some pictures of that.

L: Yeah. (*unintelligible*) remember that.

I: But it's been some time...

L: Oh, yeah. Oh, yes.

I: And of course, 210 through Aitkin, being a memorial highway, I was kind of disappointed that they didn't have on there, that he got the Congressional Medal of Honor. People who aren't from this area...

L: ...they would have no idea.

I: It's kind of a shame that the people in Aitkin County are aware of it, of course, but ones traveling through aren't, wouldn't know why... They could stop and find out, I'm sure, but all the same, (*unintelligible*)

L: We thought of that, too.

I: But it was certainly a nice...

L: Oh. There are so many nice things have been done, all these years. And then there's the recreation center at Fort Candle (Kendall?), Kentucky, which is now the base... home base for the 101st Airborne. And they built a beautiful, new big recreation center, that's named after him. And so we flew there for the dedication of that.

I: Well, that goes to show you, there aren't that many of the Medal of Honor given out. It's a unique honor, that's for sure. Your album there is certainly nice, that you can have, you know, (*unintelligible*)... some of those mixed emotions, full of sadness as well as being very proud.

L: You see, when we went to Washington, DC, we had never read the citation. We had been phoned, but we (*unintelligible*)... well, that was it. But the evening we got there, we got the first copy of the citation itself. That was really emotional. (*unintelligible*) Then we had to stand up there with the (*unintelligible*) or whoever he was. (*unintelligible*)

I: Well, I am sure there were many lives saved because of what he did.

L: They never actually gave a (*unintelligible*), you know.

I: (*unintelligible*) ... they may have killed all of them there, if hadn't had done that. There was no way of knowing. Being that he prevented it. Certainly he saved many lives, I'm sure. (*unintelligible*) Any other things, school or high school years, that come to mind, that would be nice to have recorded, his accomplishments, or what he enjoyed in school?

L: It was mainly the sports, you know. That's what he kind of lived for.

I: Was he a good student, also?

L: Kind of an average. You know how boys are.

I: Typical boy! He was interested in sports and the outdoors.

L: Yes.

I: Well, that's typical.

L: Yes.

I: And he went in very shortly, as you said, after he graduated. Within a couple of months.

L: It wasn't even a month after. Towards the end of June. He joined the end of May. SO there was about a month for him. And there were two classmates went with him, so they all went through basic training together.

I: So he had spent a couple of years on the state...

L: Yes, he had. Yes, he had. He had his jump school at Fort Benning. And then he was stationed at Fort Bragg, yes, for over a year.

I: He wanted to go to Viet Nam.

L: So he volunteered. He wanted to go.

I: The area that he was in. I don't know if (*unintelligible*)... Do you have the name of the province?

L: Yes, they had... the Quang Ngai province. I think that's what I've heard. It was towards the north part of... towards that DMZ (de-militarized zone). I don't think it was far from there, either.

I: Dale was a pretty serious boy, I would imagine. As opposed to being a happy-go-lucky, carefree?

L: Well, he had both. He was more happy-go-lucky, too.

I: He certainly had a strong desire to serve his country. He wanted..

L: He started talking about Viet Nam when he was a senior. And we didn't even (*unintelligible*) at first. I didn't pay that much attention. Where was Viet Nam? But we found out. And that's what he started talking about going there. And I said, well, why should... how come, you know? And he said, I'd rather die there than in some stupid car accident here. You see, he was meant to go there. Every step I look back on, he was meant to go there. And he went. He put it on (*unintelligible*) at school (*unintelligible*).

I: Everything (*unintelligible*) was going over there and doing what he did.

L: It was his destiny.

I: Well, I would think it would be somewhat of a comfort to look at it in that respect.

L: Oh, yes. Definitely. It was his time to go.

I: A plan for him.

L: Oh, yes. He firmly believed that.

I: (*unintelligible*). And this happened on May 18, in 1967 (?). And it was about two years later that the word that he had received, was awarded the Medal of Honor.

L: Yeah. It took almost two years, I think, really. We knew that he had been, what would you say, that he had been recommended for one. And then that was all we heard for a long time.

I: Well, I'm sure it takes a long time to go through all the procedures there.

L: Well, to go through Congress even (*unintelligible*). I think they have to act upon it.

I: (*unintelligible*) That's for sure. Is there anything else about Dale's military service (*unintelligible*). Did he get a chance to play any athletics?

L: Oh, he played touch football, I think, was all he could play. On a winning team. I think that was important for him. (*unintelligible*) for some of his training. No, it wasn't the basic, it was after that. Yeah, he played touch football. They say he was on a winning team there. And then he sent some things home from there by mail. A trophy or whatever they received was in this package; we never got it. Never. Oh, yes, and some boots and I don't know what actually was in there. He was sending them home, and we never got it. We heard afterwards that there was a lot of... stealing stuff out of their packages. I mean, just recently.

I: Well, he certainly brought honor not only to the family, but the whole area. The Brainerd area and Aitkin County. Being the only one in Aitkin County. I am sure there are many, many counties, in the whole country that don't have any Congressional Medal of Honor. It's not a common honor to give.

L: There were a few others, though, from Minnesota.

I: Yeah.

L: In Viet Nam. Yeah.

I: And from other wars, I am sure.

L: Oh, yeah. Not many given out.

I: You said that you have several of those pictures?

L: Oh, yes!

I: Would it be possible to (*unintelligible*)... maybe we could have it displayed...

L: Yeah, you can have that.

I: ... in a case with some other things.

L: Um hm. You can certainly have them. (*unintelligible*). And he remembered. He sure had a knack for names and everything. We were supposed to have about twenty minutes - each family was going to have about twenty minutes - alone. Well, something came up, so he was a little bit late, so we didn't get twenty minutes. We only had a few minutes. (*unintelligible*) and he knew all our names, and remembered them all. They remember those things.

(end of side 1)
(Nothing on side 2)

Added 2/3/2017

Wayrynen served as a Specialist Fourth Class, United States Army, Company B, 2d Battalion, 502d Infantry, 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division. He was awarded his medal for service at Quang Ngai, Province, Republic of Vietnam, on May 18, 1967. His citation reads-For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty. Sp4c. Wayrynen distinguished himself with Company B, during combat operations near Duc Pho. His platoon was assisting in the night evacuation of the wounded from an earlier enemy contact when the lead man of the unit met face to face with a Viet Cong soldier. The American's shouted warning also alerted the enemy who immediately swept the area with automatic weapons fire from a strongly built bunker close to the trail and threw hand grenades from another nearby fortified position. Almost immediately, the lead man was wounded and knocked from his feet. Sp4c. Wayrynen, the second man in the formation, leaped beyond his fallen comrade to kill another enemy soldier who appeared on the trail, and he dragged his injured companion back to where the point squad had taken cover. Suddenly, a live enemy grenade landed in the center of the tightly grouped men. Sp4c. Wayrynen, quickly assessing the danger to the entire squad as well as to his platoon leader who was nearby, shouted a warning, pushed one soldier out of the way, and threw himself on the grenade at the moment it exploded. He was mortally wounded. His deep and abiding concern for his fellow soldiers was significantly reflected in his supreme and courageous act that preserved the lives of his comrades. Sp4c. Wayrynen's heroic actions are in keeping with the highest traditions of the service, and they reflect great credit upon himself and the U.S. Army.

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