

The Wilken Family V-Letters: Interpretive Perspectives on Life in Red Hook during World War II through Victory Letters

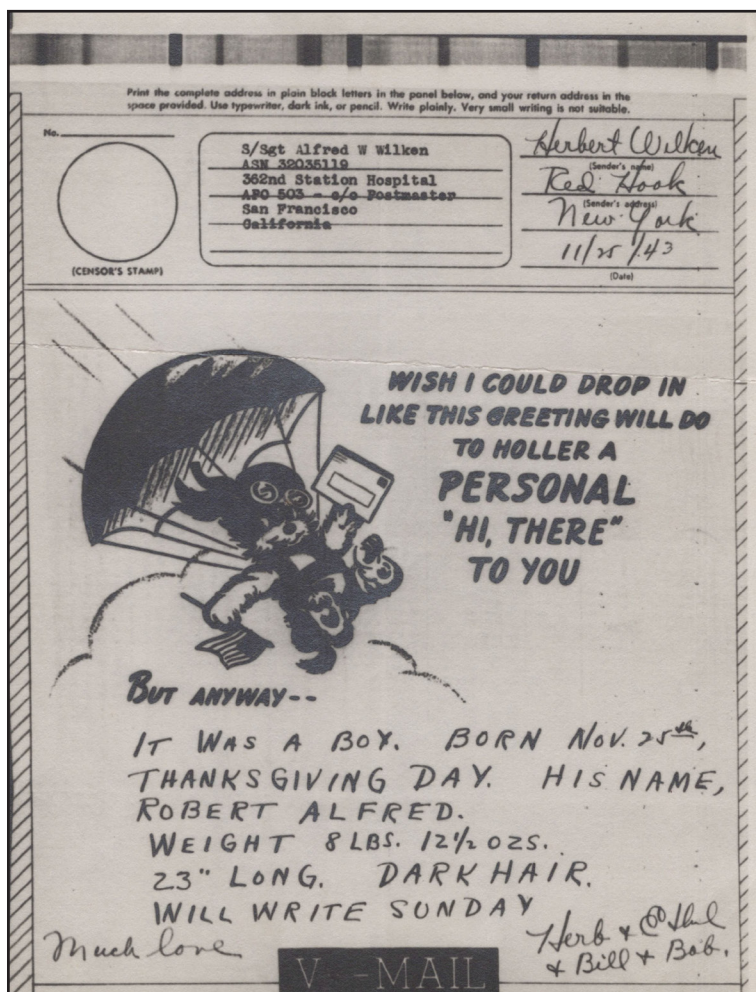
By Marguerite Schneider, Ph. D. Member, HRH Collections Committee, November 26, 2024
(With background details provided by HRH Member Bill Wilken for context)

Democracy. Patriotism. Service to country. The importance of family ties. Supporting those in harm's way while being torn apart with angst at the state of the world. Maintaining a sense of normalcy during the most trying of times. The joy and hope that children bestow on the worn and weary.

These are the themes that emerged from my reading of The Wilken Family's Collection of V-Letters (Victory Letters), written by family members and a few others to Master Sergeant Alfred Wilken while he was stationed in New Guinea during World War II. A 1929 graduate of Columbia University, Alfred joined the Army at age 34 via FDR's 1940 peacetime draft. The letters and cables he sent and received while in New Guinea were routed through San Francisco's Postmaster.

This treasure trove of letters, a time capsule into another era with themes that continue to resonate today, is in HRH's collection while also being part of a national effort conducted by the Smithsonian National Postal Museum. You can read more about the WW II V-Mail effort at <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibition/victory-mail>.

Al Wilken was one of three sons born to Herman and Augusta Wilken, both German immigrants. The other two, Herbert (Herb) and Walter (Walt), remained in Red Hook throughout the war. The federal government declared their feed and farm supplies business, Wilken Brothers GLF, critical to the war effort. Herb's wife, Ethel (Zotz), had taught history in Rhinebeck's High School prior to their marriage in 1938. Several letters were sent under Herb's name but were written by Ethel. Walter's wife, Thelma (Weaver), was a Rhinebeck farm girl and wrote her own letters. Their varying personalities and intellects emerge from the content and tone of their letters.



Detail of cartoon on a Victory Letter in HRH's collections

Two letters in the collection were drafted by Margaret Weaver, Thelma's mother, and by Richard Coons, who had worked at Wilken Brothers prior to Pearl Harbor. His letter was sent from Norfolk, Virginia, where he was undergoing military training that eventually took him to a ship that was part of the D-Day armada.

The most poignant, intellectual letters to Alfred were written by his brother Walter, who writes that he should be cheering Alfred up with family and local news but cannot help to control his "vitriol." A few lines from his letters describe his inner turmoil, largely about the state of the US democracy:

"It is discouraging to hear our people -I mean, those who are fundamentally sound—the backbone people—say such things as, 'Why should we buy war bonds when there is so much waste in Washington? Only a small portion of the money gets to where it belongs anyway.' This feeling seems to be sweeping from the lowest to the highest, it makes you feel as through Lincoln, Washington, Jefferson, and all the rest of our national founders, worried and fretted and wasted their time."

Walter was also troubled by the issue of draft deferments:

"The topic of draft deferments, both here, and in general, is one that has caused more discussion and anger and bitterness than any other subject. We have plenty of young single men around here who are 'fake farmers'... The draft board has one sweet headache on its hands and I know they have an unthankful job."

Yet, Walter also had a lighter side, trying to cheer Alfred with news that a 1944 Chevrolet was reserved for him, ready upon his return to Red Hook. And Walter also announced the birth of his daughter Alice Margaret, noting that he and Thelma are "pleased as punch."

The letters written by Alfred's sisters-in-law, Ethel and Thelma, are filled with family and local news while also indicating their own concerns and worries about Alfred, the war, and events both local and global. I found an interesting, emotional, and very personal intensity in their writing. For example, Thelma states that she thinks of Alfred often, mentions a chair and music box he gifted her family, and states that she finds his letters (not included in the collection) to be lovely. Several family members mention their admiration of Winston Churchill and "Eleanor" Roosevelt and were filled with pride at Churchill's visit to nearby Hyde Park.

An interesting passage from the sisters-in-law's letters reflects the norms of the times in terms of a married woman's responsibilities. Ethel writes

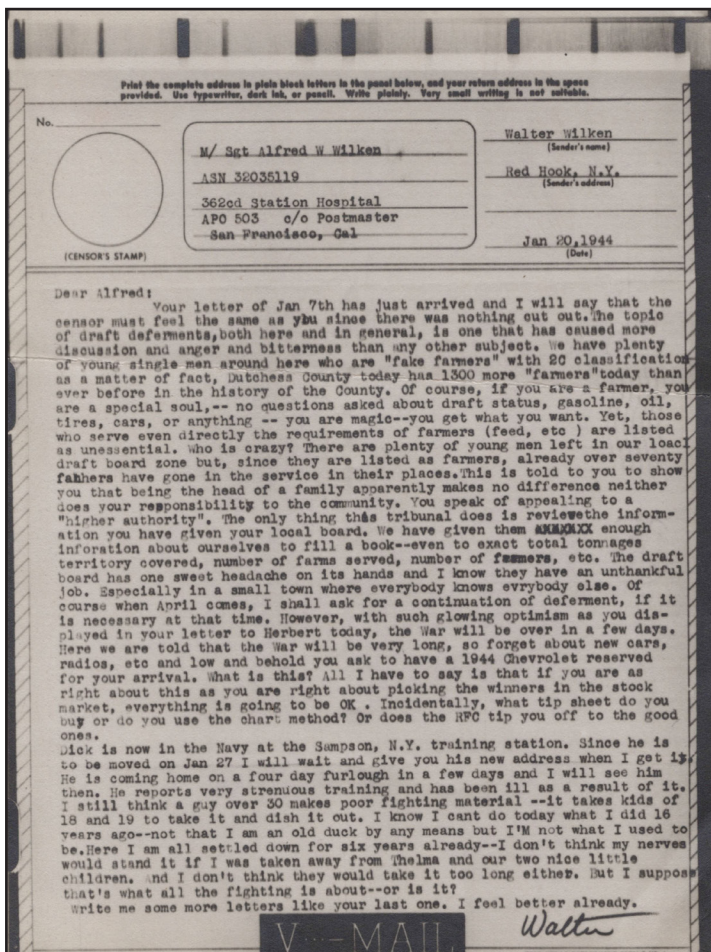


Image of a Victory Letter in HRH's collections

“Just refused the chance to substitute teaching English and library at the Central School. Herb said why not? But each job, homemaking and teaching, are fulltime jobs, and just now and all the time, I prefer the home to the classroom.” It’s interesting to me that Herb encouraged his wife to take the job, but she chose “the home to the classroom.” Ethel’s decision is certainly understandable in that it wasn’t easy being a homemaker during the war, as she illustrates in other letters. For example, she notes the challenges of raising a young child during the war: “I try to teach Bill to be careful with things [given rationing mandates] and at times it is a bit difficult to make a child of 2 ½ years realize what ‘war’ is.”

Herb was less of a scribe than were Ethel, Walter, and Thelma. Herb sent Alfred the announcement of his son Robert Alfred’s birth, on Thanksgiving of 1943. In his next letter to Alfred, Herbert expresses astonishment that, soon after giving birth, Ethel ate quite a bit of the Thanksgiving turkey she had missed. In that same letter, Herb congratulates Alfred on behalf of the family for his promotion to Master Sergeant and asks about his new monthly pay level. I certainly don’t think Alfred cared about the pay increase! Indeed, he had turned down an opportunity for a higher-compensated Army commission. Last, Herb (although it possibly could be Ethel) co-wrote a V-Letter in which three-year-old son, Bill, invites Alfred to Bill’s upcoming birthday party and wishes Alfred a happy birthday. The artwork in the letter is attributed to young Bill.

Alfred Wilken’s father, Herman, was a successful businessman whose first job at as an immigrant “greenhorn” in New York’s Harlem Market required a 72-hour work week. His letters to Alfred are largely about business, including news of Alfred’s stock holdings and other business interests. In a letter dated October 1943, Herman informs Alfred that business is better, “there is new life in the stock market,” and hopes that Alfred has access to the Herald Tribune to be informed of such events. Yet, in a letter written soon after, on Christmas, 1943, Herman informs Alfred that business is bad and the market is “dead as a doornail.” But despite his tendency towards hyperbole and his all-about-business ways, Mr. Wilken’s deep pride and concern for his son Alfred is apparent. Herman expresses pride in what a great effort is being made in fighting the war. Very poignantly, he expresses his wish that the family could be together again but understands that the turmoil in the world prevents this.

Several questions remain unanswered by the Wilken V-Letters, most notably whether Mrs. Herman Wilken was alive, and if so, why no letters from her appeared in the collection. A “Mom and Pop” are mentioned in Ethel and Thelma’s letters, but perhaps they are referencing their own parents. Also missing are the referenced letters from Alfred, which would be a fascinating read.

I invite you to read the Wilken V-Letters to learn more about World War II from the perspectives of several bright, caring, and concerned citizens of Red Hook, who understood the impact of the war on the global arena while experiencing its local impact. And should you know more about the Wilken family or other families during the Second World War era, please share your knowledge (and any related documents, particularly V-Letters) with HRH.