# Holding Death at Bay: The Story of a World War II Photograph, Blood Plasma, and the Soldier it Couldn't Save

*by Donna Esposito*

**Seventy-five years ago,** on August 9, 1943, U.S. Army Signal Corps photographer Lieutenant John Stephen Wever took a series of photographs at the aid station of the 7th Infantry Regiment of the 3rd Division in the town of Sant'Agata, Sicily, just behind the front lines. Lt. Wever, of the 196th Signal Photo Company, captured a poignant scene of an army medic administering blood plasma to a wounded American soldier lying on a stretcher in the street, while Sicilian women and girls looked on from the doorway of their home. This photograph appeared in newspapers across the United States on September 2, 1943. Due to a recent change in the censorship policy by the Office of War Information, approved of personally by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, this was the first photograph the American public had seen of a critically wounded American soldier. Previously, only photographs of recovering Americans, smiling from their hospital beds, or enemy dead and wounded were released. Fearing complacency, the policy was changed, and this photo caused a sensation when it was published, as well as the desired effect: a surge in blood donation. Donors hoped their plasma would save the life of an American soldier, as the photo's caption suggested. The *Toledo Blade* ran the photo with the caption, "Yank Holding Death at Bay with Plasma: Pvt. Harvey White, army hospital

*Private Roy W. Humphrey of 211 Beacon St., Toledo, Ohio, a member of the Seventh Infantry Regiment, Third Division, is being given blood plasma by Pfc. Harvey White of Minneapolis, Minn., after he was wounded by shrapnel on 9 August 1943 in Sicily. Pvt. Humphrey was later taken to the 93rd Evacuation Hospital. 8/9/43. (National Archives, original caption provided by Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library & Museum)*

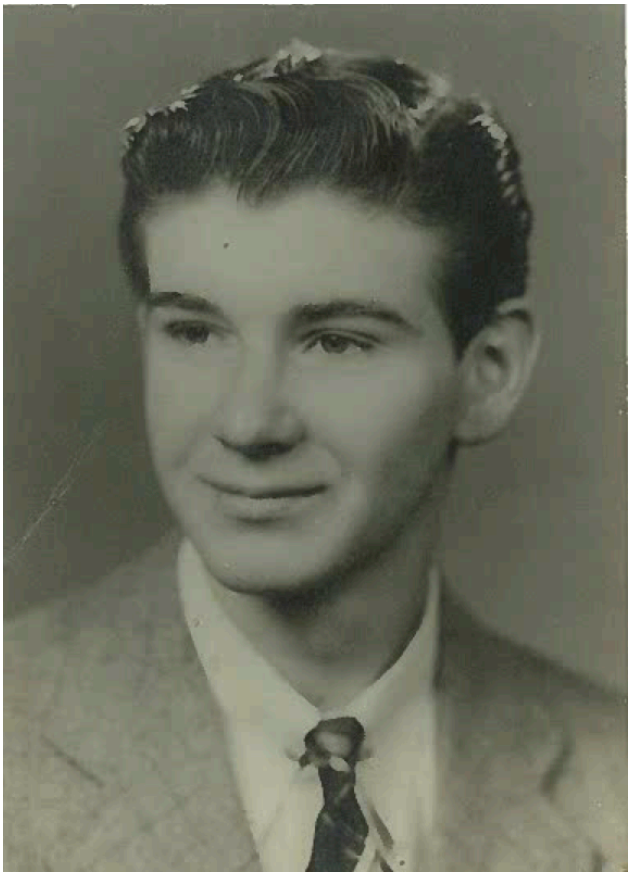
corpsman from Minneapolis, holds death at bay as he administers blood plasma to a wounded Yank in a street at San Agata, Sicily," while the *New York Times* proclaimed, "You May be Playing a Part in this War Drama: Oblivious to all but the task of saving a comrade's life, Private Harvey White administers life-giving blood plasma to a soldier wounded during the campaign in Sicily, from a blood bank furnished by Americans at home."

Only the medic, Private First Class Harvey White of Minneapolis, Minnesota was identified in the caption provided by the Signal Corps. Americans on the home front also wanted to know the identity of the wounded man. Soon people across the country thought they recognized the soldier as their son, brother, or friend. Eventually the Signal Corps contacted Lt. Wever to find out the name of the wounded man: Private Roy W. Humphrey of Toledo, Ohio. What Lt. Wever didn't know – and never found out – was that Pvt. Humphrey had died the next day, August 10, 1943, at the 93rd Evacuation Hospital in San Stefano, close to where the photo was taken. Coincidentally, this was the same day as what became known as General Patton's second slapping incident. Patton was there to visit patients and award Purple Heart medals to the wounded. Among Pvt. Humphrey's personal effects when he died was a Purple Heart, most likely awarded to him by General Patton himself earlier that day; his family still treasures the medal.

Given that only 1.2% of wounded men subsequently died, the Signal Corps must have felt confident in releasing the photo to the public. They must have been shocked to discover that Pvt. Humphrey was one of the unlucky few who died. Fortunately for them, various men across the country either identified themselves as the soldier in the photo or someone at home reported that they knew the man. The U.S. Army never released the identity of the soldier, and Humphrey's family never knew he was the famous soldier in the photo during the war. It was only decades later when the photograph was published online by the U.S. National Archives with a full caption that his family came to know the truth.

Nevertheless, this powerful photograph was reprinted over and over during the war, appearing in Red Cross blood donation ads, photography magazines, books, and on war maps. The contribution this scene made to the war effort and blood donation program was undeniable. In fact, the photograph was even considered for a Pulitzer Prize in photography and was deemed by one judge as "already a classic."

Roy Willis Humphreys (his army enlistment did not use the "s") was born on February 27, 1922 in Morristown, Tennessee to Zetta Ray (Greene) Humphreys and Roger Theodore Humphreys. Willis, as his family and friends called him, had an older brother, James Dewitt Humphreys, born in 1919. In 1924, a sister, Winifred Lucille Humphreys, was born. Roger was employed as a laborer in a public works factory. By 1930, the family had relocated north to Toledo, Ohio in search of employment. Roger abandoned the family, leaving Zetta to care for her three children while working in a laundry. By 1935 the family moved to a house at 211 Beacon Street in Toledo, and Zetta was working in a factory. During the war she contributed to the effort by working at the Electric Auto-Lite Company.

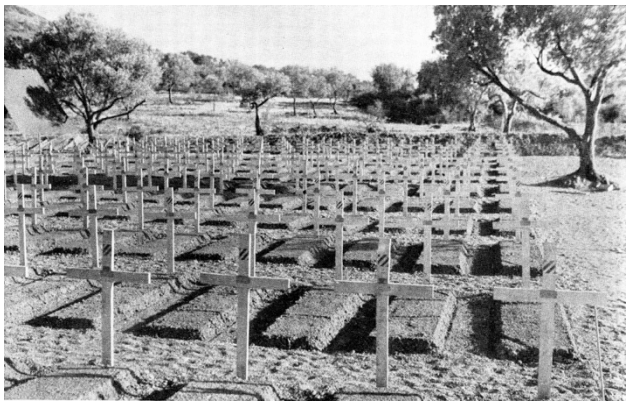


*Roy Willis Humphrey. 1941 Macomber Vocational High School senior portrait. (Courtesy of Neil Weiser)*

Willis attended Robinson Junior High School in Toledo and then Macomber Vocational High School. He graduated from Macomber in June of 1941 after studying welding. He was employed by the Iron & Wire Co. in Toledo and Detroit as a welder and had a pretty girlfriend whom he liked to take out in his red roadster convertible. Willis' older brother James enlisted in the army in June of 1941, joining the 148th Infantry Regiment of the 37th Infantry Division. James would go on to serve in the Pacific in the Northern Solomons and Philippine campaigns through 1945. A year later, on June 9, 1942, Willis followed suit and enlisted in the U.S. Army at Fort Benjamin Harrison in Indiana. He did his basic training at Camp Wolters in Mineral Wells, Texas at the same time as Audie Murphy, who would also go on to serve with the 3rd Division in Sicily and become one of the most decorated American soldiers of World War II. Initially hoping to become a paratrooper, Willis was later transferred to the infantry. As a private in Company G of the Second Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division he went overseas in January 1943, arriving in North Africa in February.

On July 10, 1943, Willis participated in the invasion of Sicily, at the time the largest amphibious invasion in history. He landed with the 2nd Battalion west of Licata. Heading north, Company G captured Favara on July 15. On July 22, the 2nd Battalion entered Palermo, remaining there on guard

duty until July 26. Pushing forward along the northern coast in the race to Messina, Willis was wounded by shrapnel about four miles east of Sant'Agata near the Rosmarino River and San Marco D'Alunzio on August 9, the day the photo was taken. He was treated at the aid station in Sant'Agata by Pfc. White and removed to the 93rd Evacuation Hospital in San Stefano. He died there the next day, August 10, 1943, and was buried at U.S. Military Cemetery No. 3, one mile east of Caronia. In 1947 he, along with all the dead from Cemetery No. 3, was disinterred and reburied at the Mount Soprano Military Cemetery on mainland Italy. In 1948, his body was returned to Toledo at his family's request and buried in Toledo Memorial Park Cemetery.

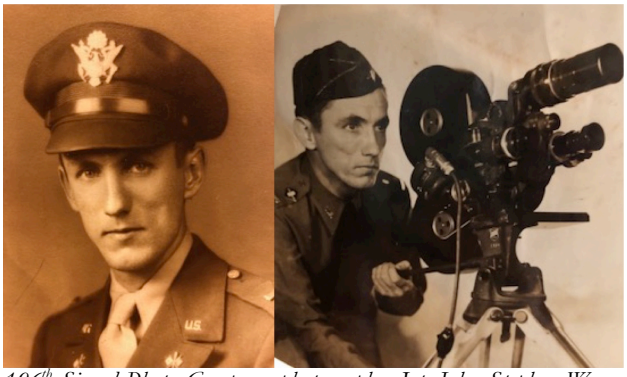


*U. S. Military Cemetery No. 3, one mile east of Caronia, Sicily. Note 3rd Division emblem on crosses. (U.S. Army Signal Corps)*

Harvey Wilfred White was born on July 25, 1911 in Argyle, Minnesota to French-Canadian Alfred LeBlanc and Leontine (Piquette) LeBlanc, known as Leona. An older sister, Cecile, apparently died before 1920, and Harvey's father died in 1927. By 1930 Harvey and his mother had moved from rural Minnesota to St. Paul and Americanized their surname from "LeBlanc" to "White." His mother later remarried. Harvey worked as a baker at the Purity Baking Company. He enlisted on January 19, 1942 and served until October 14, 1945 as part of the 3rd Medical Battalion of the 3rd Division. After the war, Harvey returned to St. Paul, Minnesota, working first at the Union Brass and Metal Manufacturing Company and later as a mixer at the Pepsi-Cola Bottling Plant. He never married or had children and remained close to his mother. He died a few months before her on December 3, 1979. Described as a soft-spoken, quiet man, he was a "kind soul" who never talked about the war. Harvey never gained any fame from the photo and perhaps never even knew of its impact.

The youngest of four children, John Stephen Wever was born March 2, 1916 in Martinsburg, West Virginia to George Lowry Wever and Amelia Louise (Snodgrass) Wever. A photographer before the war, Wever graduated from the New York Institute of Photography and worked as a racetrack photographer at the Charles Town Jockey Club in Charles Town, West Virginia and Tropical Park Racetrack near Miami, Florida. Enlisting as second lieutenant in the U.S. Army in 1942, he was assigned to the Signal Corps Photographic Division and trained at Fort Benning, Georgia before being sent overseas with the 196th Signal Photo Company. After documenting the fighting on Sicily, Wever continued to serve as a combat photographer throughout the rest of the Italian campaign. Returning home after the war, Wever resumed his racetrack photography career and later became an accomplished photographer for the *Miami Herald*. In 1950 he married Kathryn Leith, and they had twin daughters and three sons. He died on November 27, 1995.

Lt. Wever never learned that Pvt. Humphrey had not been saved by the plasma transfusion. It is unlikely that Pfc. Harvey White ever saw or heard of his patient again after that day, either. However, the services performed by both White and Wever in that street in Sant'Agata on September 9, 1943 had far-reaching effects: the surge in blood donation after the photo appeared in newspapers and its continued use in Red Cross ads ensured an ample supply of blood plasma from American donors on the home front. When Wever learned that his photograph was having such an impact, he wrote to his mother, "Glad to learn that some of my pictures are at least doing a little bit of good." This is perhaps an understatement. While Pfc. White and the miraculous blood plasma he administered could not save Pvt. Roy Willis Humphrey, they did, through the influence of this stirring photograph, undoubtedly save the lives of many wounded men. ★



*196th Signal Photo Company photographer Lt. John Stephen Wever. (Courtesy of Kathy Wever Gilmore and Betty Wever Cruse)*

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Donna Esposito is a World War II historian and author of the novel *Flying Time*. She is currently working on a full-length book telling the whole story of the Sicily plasma photograph.

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