

# Joseph John Nekoranec

U.S. Army, Major

1914 - 1997

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Joseph John Nekoranec was born into a large family on June 8, 1914, in Morgantown, West Virginia. He and his twin sister Mary were the middle children of Ignaty and Anna Dluhopolchez Nekoranec, who had immigrated to the United States from Czechoslovakia. Two older siblings, Paul and Josephine, and a pair of younger ones, Albert and Jane, put Joseph and his twin squarely in the middle of the family unit.

Like so many young people across America born in the late 1910s, the Great Depression overshadowed Joseph's youth. In 1930 his father Ignaty, who had been employed as a glass cutter at Morgantown Glass Company since 1920, lost his job. Joseph pushed through these difficult years to graduate from Morgantown High School, then from West Virginia University, where he graduated with a degree in Mining Engineering. While at WVU he even found time to play on the baseball team, and served in the university's Reserve Officer Training Corps program (ROTC).



**Nekoranec in his ROTC uniform.  
WVU yearbook, 1936**

Joseph enlisted in the U.S. Army on December 4, 1941, just days before the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and catapulted the United States into World War II. He was 27 years old. His engineering education almost certainly affected his assignment, as he was put to work surveying military airfields in the Aleutian Islands off the coast of Alaska.

While the Aleutians may seem like an insignificant island chain far from any important wartime objectives, the Japanese recognized the islands as potential staging areas to launch attacks on Alaska or the continental United States. In June 1942, they launched an invasion that seized Kiska and Attu, two of the largest islands, from their American defenders. Bad weather prevented them from seizing the island of Adak. Not until almost a year later, in May 1943, were U.S. and Canadian forces able to launch a major counterattack, taking back Attu in a bloody fight. In addition to Japanese bullets and shells, many Allied soldiers fell to frostbite and other illnesses in the harsh arctic climate.

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**West Virginia University's 1936 baseball team. Joseph Nekoranec is in the back row, second from left. The yearbook misspells his name "Nekoreneck." [Archive.org](#)**

Joseph Nekoranec was assigned to the Alaskan theater of war not long after the Japanese invasion. It is not clear exactly where he was stationed during the uncertain period before Allied forces retook the Aleutians, but even the Alaskan mainland wasn't safe: Japanese planes bombed an American base near Anchorage in June 1942.

While in Alaska, Nekoranec regularly exchanged letters with his father-in-law, famous West Virginia labor organizer William Blizzard (Blizzard was involved in the 1921 Battle of Blair Mountain, and became president of District 17 of the United Mine Workers of America in 1945). Nekoranec's wife Marguerite and their two children were staying with Joseph's in-laws until after the war, so Blizzard frequently provided Nekoranec with updates on the family.

In turn, Nekoranec sent Blizzard money to buy surprises for his wife—"Margie," as he affectionately called her—and his mother-in-law: "I'd like for you to get Margie and Mrs. Blizzard some flowers and candy (or would they prefer liquor?) just kidding, for mother's day [sic]." In November 1943 he asked Blizzard to get a dog for the kids. "It's Thanksgiving day. I have a lot of things to be thankful for



**Two American soldiers in an Army jeep on their base in Alaska. The driver appears to be Joseph Nekoranec. [Alaska State Library](#)**

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such as having a lovely and darling wife, for our two healthy plus cute children, and for such nice and considerate in laws [sic],” he wrote to Blizzard in 1943. Nearly 6,000 miles away from his family, he was a loving husband and father. Some of Joseph’s letters to his father-in-law are held at West Virginia Archives and History. In addition, several dozen photos taken by Nekoranec during his Alaskan service are preserved at the Alaska State Library.

Nekoranec thought Alaska was the best place he had been stationed thus far, though he and the other members of his unit had trouble adjusting to the long days. In August 1944, he finally got a break from his long arctic retreat when he was sent to Georgia and Florida on a mission for the Army. He was tasked with recruiting civilian workers for war-related jobs in Alaska. August in the American South may have been a shock to his system after twenty-six months in the Alaskan tundra.

Joseph Nekoranec was discharged with the rank of major on December 27, 1945, a few months after the Japanese surrender. He and Marguerite had four children together and made a home in the Charleston area, possibly to remain close to her parents. “Margie” had inherited her father’s outspoken nature, and her letters to the editor of the *Charleston Gazette* on various local political issues appeared regularly. Joseph continued work as a mining engineer, the job he had left behind when he went to war. He died on March 10, 1997, and is buried in the West Virginia National Cemetery in Pruntytown.



**Nekoranec poses against the horizon with a slung rifle. *Alaska State Library***



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## Sources

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United States Department of Veteran Affairs. *Beneficiary Identification Records Locator Subsystem (BIRLS) Death File*. Washington D.C. Accessed May 5, 2022, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/7716737:2441?ssrc=pt&tid=3118261&pid=292164543850>.

William Blizzard Collection, Ms97-24. West Virginia State Archives. Charleston: West Virginia.

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## Resting Place

West Virginia National Cemetery  
42 Veterans Memorial Lane, Grafton, WV 26354  
(304) 265-2044

Section MA  
Site 54

Date of interment: September 9, 1997

## About the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Program of the Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. All biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in or near Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's earliest National Cemeteries, the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. When the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton in the community of Pruntytown. The same National Cemetery Administration staff cares for both facilities.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, and Grafton High School.

**Please refer comments or questions to the West Virginia Humanities Council**  
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