

ROSCOE CRENSHAW

SEAMAN FIRST CLASS
U.S. NAVY

WORLD WAR II
1927 - 1948

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Roscoe Crenshaw
in uniform.
Ancestry.com

Roscoe Crenshaw was born in Mammoth, Kanawha County, West Virginia, to George R. and Thelma G. Crenshaw on June 16, 1927. Roscoe had two older brothers, Rufus and Mathew. He also had two sisters, Juanita, the oldest, and Geraldine, the youngest. Roscoe's parents, along with many other African Americans at this time, had moved from Virginia to West Virginia to seek employment in the coal mines. As part of this "First Great Migration," which saw the movement of millions of Blacks out of the deep South, Virginia's Black population decreased between 1915 to 1930—while West Virginia's African American population reached a high of 115,000 during the same time.

By the time Roscoe was two years old, the Crenshaws had moved into a rented home in nearby Cabin Creek where his father supported the family through work as a coal miner. Nearly all of Roscoe's childhood took place in the shadow of the Great Depression, which caused widespread job loss and hardship to countless families. West Virginia was especially hard hit, with unemployment rates in some counties reaching 80 percent. The state's leading industry—coal mining—nosedived and many miners found themselves out of work.

By 1935, the Crenshaw family dynamics had changed with Roscoe's parents separating and living in different counties. While Roscoe's mother relocated to the state capital of Charleston, the rest of the family moved north to the small town of Carolina in Marion County. In Carolina, Roscoe's father

supported his five children by working as a coal loader at Mine 86, owned by the Consolidation Coal Company. Consolidation Coal, a Maryland company, expanded into West Virginia in the late 19th century and by 1903 had control of most mining interests in the Marion County area. George Crenshaw was also able to employ a housekeeper named Fannie Black, who was an African American woman born in Alabama. Fanny worked in the Crenshaw home until she became its new matriarch when she and George married in May 1943.

Due to segregation throughout West Virginia, Roscoe's first eight years of schooling were spent at Carolina Negro Elementary School which had only one teacher and roughly two dozen students. He also completed one year of high school at the all-Black Dunbar High in Fairmont which served as a combination elementary and high school for more than 700 Black students in Marion County. Fairmont's Dunbar was one of more than 40 schools across the nation named for Paul Lawrence Dunbar, who used his poetry to stress to Black Americans to work to "achieve their dreams despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles." Possibly to help support the family economically, Roscoe ended his schooling early and began work as a concrete finisher for Clyde M. Shrum Contractors in Clarksburg in February 1944.

After seven months working in construction, Roscoe enlisted in the United States Navy Reserve on September 28, 1944. While the United States had entered World War II nearly three years earlier, Roscoe joined the fight as early as he could at the age of 17. He would have needed parental consent to enlist. Although the risks of service were no doubt known to the family, his parents may have been more likely to sign off because Roscoe's older brother Rufus had enlisted into the Navy Reserve two years prior (he was medically discharged in July 1943). Perhaps Rufus would have also reported how unlikely it was that Roscoe would ever be in danger since Black sailors were overwhelmingly assigned to noncombat units.

Despite the Selective Service Act of 1940 stating that "there shall be no discrimination against any person on account of race or color," by that same year only 2.3 percent of Navy personnel were Black, with most rated primarily as stewards or messmen. While Crenshaw served, White commanding officers frequently treated African Americans unfairly. Black sailors were usually denied advancements to petty officer ranks. Unskilled manual labor was the most common lot for the many African Americans seeking to serve their country despite protests by Black servicemen and vigorous campaigning by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and other civil rights organizations.

Like his older brother, Roscoe received training at the Great Lakes Naval Station in Lake County, Illinois. Due to racial segregation within the U.S.



The early and muddy period of the 34th NCB's camp on Okinawa, prior to paving the roads. *NHHC*

Navy, African American seamen were trained at Camp Robert Smalls, which was the Blacks-only camp located in the northwest corner of the base (Robert Smalls was a Black maritime hero of the Civil War). Like the White sailors, Roscoe learned discipline, seamanship, physical fitness, and most importantly—how to swim.

Following his training in Illinois, Roscoe was assigned to the 34th Naval Construction Battalion (NCB), the first "Seabees" battalion to be comprised of mostly Black personnel. The Seabees were created in 1942 to construct airstrips, roads, warehouses, hospitals, and other military facilities in the Atlantic and Pacific theaters of World War II. Abbreviated to NCB, Naval Construction Battalions quickly acquired the phonetic nickname Seabees. Since the Navy did not have time to train men in construction and engineering skills, Roscoe's previous work experience as a concrete finisher was likely the reason for his assignment to the 34th NCB. Holding the rank of seaman second class, Roscoe arrived at the Advanced Base Receiving Barracks at Port Hueneme, California, on January 9, 1945. The only Pacific deepwater port between Los Angeles and San Francisco, Port Hueneme was built as a temporary depot to train, stage, and supply Seabees.

Having completed a long tour building bases in the south Pacific to sustain American offensives against Japan, the 34th had returned stateside for rest, resupply, and rotation of personnel. Racism also dogged this period of

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recuperation, however, and matters came to a head in the unit shortly after Roscoe arrived. While segregationist military policies enabled the 34th NCB's command structure to maintain the usual racial divides of the era—such as separate quarters, mess lines, mess huts, and water stations—the unit's White officers had a heightened reputation for racially motivated cruelty. Above and beyond standard humiliations were denials of promotion, denial of medical care, and perhaps even physical violence.

In early March 1945, more than one thousand members of the battalion staged a two-day hunger strike to enact change. They fought for the removal of the commanding officer and other reforms. When the official Navy investigation found no cause for disciplinary action, Los Angeles NAACP leaders leapt into the fray, conducted their own investigation, and found that Black enlisted men had frequently been passed up for promised promotions in favor of less experienced White enlisted men. According to the April 1945 *The Crisis*, the NAACP's official publication, “[34th NCB] Commander McBean even took it upon himself to go into the town of Oxnard and ask White businessmen not to serve his Negro personnel.” The NAACP contacted congressmen and Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, eventually forcing the removal of McBean and the transfer of 25 percent of the White commanding personnel to other units.

Roscoe took part in the 34th Naval Construction Battalion's second tour of duty in the Pacific. The unit departed from Port Hueneme on April 19, 1945. On their way to Okinawa, they made stops at Pearl Harbor, Eniwetok, and Ulithi. The latter two islands were critical bases—retaken from the Japanese—serving the island-hopping campaigns slowly snaking toward the Japanese home islands.

On May 21, 1945, the Seabees of the 34th Naval Construction Battalion arrived in Okinawa, which is the largest of the Ryukyu Islands located to the southwest of Japan. Okinawa's capture, which had begun with a massive invasion on April 1, would provide Allied forces an airbase from which bombers could strike and blockade the Japanese mainland. Although the joint Army-Marine Corps landings in April were initially unopposed, Japanese forces had dug in for a fierce and bloody resistance by the time Roscoe arrived. Due to the continuous rumble of artillery and the possibility of Japanese infiltration through American lines, one Seabee veteran of the 34th noted that raw recruits like Roscoe required close observation to prevent “trigger happiness” during their first days in the new environment.

The site of the 34th Naval Construction Battalion camp was located approximately six miles inland. The constant rain created deep mud and polluted the small stream running through the camp, which made water scarce. While on Okinawa, the Seabees built over 15 miles of roads and laid 7,500 lineal feet of culverts. Most relevant to Roscoe, they poured 200,000 square feet of concrete for building foundations, airfields, and other structures. Some of their most important projects included the construction of a naval

ammunition depot, a radio transmitter station, magazines for dynamite storage, and an airstrip. These important efforts by the Seabees contributed to the American forces securing control of Okinawa on June 22, 1945. Roscoe's hard work was rewarded on July 1, 1945, when he was promoted to the rank of seaman first class.

The 34th was slowly drawn down and inactivated in the months following the Allied success on Okinawa. The surrender of Japan following the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki preempted the need to invade Japan itself, so American troops began to demobilize. Roscoe was transferred to the 23rd Special Naval Construction Battalion (SNCB) on September 26, 1945. The 23rd SNCB was also stationed on Okinawa, and Roscoe remained with the unit until it was inactivated in December 1945. Roscoe's whereabouts with the military remain unclear for the next seven months until he was honorably discharged on July 1, 1946.

Following his discharge, Roscoe returned to his family in Carolina, West Virginia. For his service as a Seabee during World War II, Roscoe received the Pacific Theater Ribbon, American Theater Ribbon, and the Victory Medal. He did not stay away from the Navy for long, however, enlisting for a second time at the Navy Recruiting Station in Buffalo, New York, for a term of six years on July 18, 1947. Likely due to his previous military experience, Roscoe was immediately sent for outfitting, classification, inoculation, and general detail rather than additional training.

Roscoe's reenlistment coincided with mounting global tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. Following World War II's conclusion, both nations became embroiled within the ideological and political struggle of the Cold War. By 1947, President Harry Truman and the United States government had adopted a policy of containment to restrict the perceived threat of communism's spread.

By the summer of 1948, Roscoe was stationed at the Naval Air Station North Island in San Diego, California. While on liberty, Roscoe used his short break from military duties to unwind in a cafe located on the 1700 block of Logan Avenue, then home to many African American residents and businesses. Tragedy struck during the early morning hours of August 17, 1948, when Roscoe was stabbed with a pocketknife during a fight outside the cafe, allegedly over a game of cards. Police rushed Roscoe to the San Diego Naval Hospital, where he was treated for multiple lacerations of the abdomen and internal organs. After nearly eight hours of suffering, Roscoe succumbed to his wounds and was pronounced dead at 10:30 a.m.

The man arraigned for Roscoe's death was James Turner Jr., an African American sailor serving on the USS *Endicott* (DMS-35). Two other sailors were held as witnesses and possible participants in the stabbing, but they were later released from police custody. A coroner's jury initially ruled the incident as a case of self-defense. However, Turner was held in jail on \$5,000 bail

until a month later when a municipal judge ruled that he must stand trial for manslaughter. Although the outcome of this trial is unclear, Turner remained in the Navy. It is likely he was exonerated, and no disciplinary action was taken against him.

Roscoe Crenshaw was only 21 years old when he passed away. His remains were prepared by the Bradley and Woolman Mortuary services in San Diego, and shipped back to West Virginia for burial at Grafton National Cemetery on August 24, 1948. It was a tragic and untimely end for a young coal miner's son who, in just a few short years, had served his country on the far side of the world.



The Seabees' trucks on Okinawa traveled in convoys of six for protection from Japanese snipers and infiltrators. *NHHC*



SOURCES FULL BIBLIOGRAPHY TO BE INCLUDED IN FINAL VERSION

SOURCES

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Full bibliographies will be included in the final draft of each biography, available later in the summer of 2024.

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Grant Program of the U.S. 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 Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's first National Cemeteries—founded shortly after the Civil War—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. Since 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.

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, Grafton High School, and University High School.

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Veterans Legacy Grant Program
 Department of Veterans Affairs
 Washington D.C.

