

VERL VEIGH HIXENBAUGH

TECHNICIAN 4
U.S. ARMY

WORLD WAR II
1920 - 1944

WRITTEN BY HOLLIE HIGGINBOTTOM AND JESSE MAYFIELD
UNIVERSITY HIGH SCHOOL
INSTRUCTED BY MEGHAN DUNN

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Verl Veigh Hixenbaugh was born October 24, 1920, in Daybrook, Monongalia County, West Virginia, just a few miles from the Pennsylvania state line. His parents, James Arthur “Ray” Hixenbaugh and Laura Catherine Teck, had four children including Verl, his older siblings Arthur and Verena, and younger sister Violet.

Ray made his living as a farmer. For all Verl’s early life the family lived on a farm along Day Run, a long creek that ran through the center of Daybrook. There were other children to play with near the family farm. The Tennants and McCords were their neighbors in

those early years—two large families with children and grandchildren close in age to the Hixenbaugh brood. Sometime after 1930, Ray bought the farm he had been renting for the past decade or more. The McCords and Tennants continued to live on adjacent properties.

Verl’s mother Laura was a homemaker, though on a farm that also meant plenty of physical labor alongside her husband. It also meant providing for her children on an excruciatingly small budget during the Great Depression. That Ray was a successful farmer is proven by the fact that the Hixenbaughs bought, rather than lost, their farm during the lean 1930s. Laura would have still probably done a great deal of canning, sewing, reusing materials, and perhaps bartering with neighbors for things the family needed.

Despite the Depression’s difficulties, Daybrook was still growing. Verl’s Daybrook grade school had only two teachers and about three-dozen students in the 1920s. By the latter half of the 1930s, the community’s high school, middle, and elementary grades were covered by ten teachers for a combined student population of over 200. Verl was just slightly too old to attend the

brand-new Clay-Battelle High School, built in 1939. His younger sister Violet would be in its first graduating class. Instead, on May 24, 1940, Verl would graduate from Daybrook, the one school he had attended all his life. He was commended for his perfect attendance in the twelfth-grade class of teacher Rosalie Camp.

By this time, both of Verl’s older siblings had moved off the farm, though Arthur certainly did not land far from the nest. He was living just up the road with his wife, laboring on construction projects funded by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The WPA was one of dozens of federal programs kicked off as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “New Deal,” designed to support Americans with work opportunities while the Great Depression continued. Though the economy was in the process of recovery by 1940, it could still be difficult to find work, and the newly graduated Verl was to avail himself of a different New Deal opportunity.

Verl found work by 1941 with the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a temporary federal program that constructed parks and other outdoor recreation opportunities, restored natural areas and planted trees, combated forest fires, and built conservation infrastructure nationwide. To get into a CCC camp, men had to be unmarried, employable, and between the ages of 18 and 25 (although the rules were relaxed during World War II as younger men were increasingly called away to military service). Enrollees were also paid \$30 per month for their labor, though many sent a portion of their wages back home to struggling families. In addition to work, pay, lodging, meals, uniforms, and supplies, each camp also offered the members of its 200-man “companies” educational opportunities. Men like Verl were able to take high school and college classes.

CCC service did not take Verl far from Daybrook—only about 22 miles as the crow flies, or twice as far by road, to Cooper’s Rock State Forest on the other side of Monongalia County. The 12,000-acre reserve had been established as a state forest in 1936, and the CCC soon built Camp Rhododendron there for Company 3527. Verl first worked as a truck driver from February 25 to July 31, 1941. After those first months the young man transitioned to the position of assistant leader, until November 1 when he was promoted to senior leader. He admitted in the camp newsletter that although conditions at Camp Rhododendron had “reached a low mark in August,” he was proud to report that it was “steadily on the climb upward” because of recent improvements “such as new Filter Beds, [a] new refrigerator for the kitchen, and incinerator built back of Mess Hall,” and a renovated latrine.

Many changes awaited Verl in 1942. The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, bringing the United States into World War II. CCC camps

proved excellent administrative aids for funneling able-bodied young men into military units, and Verl proved no exception. He registered for the draft on February 16, 1942, then left Camp Rhododendron in May to work at a CCC camp in Kentucky until July 6. The first major change for Hixenbaugh that year, however, had little to do with war and everything to do with love.

A colleague at Camp Rhododendron had teased Verl on Halloween 1941 that “the Bells” of marriage would “chime soon.” His prophecy came true. On August 13, 1942, Verl married Alma Jeanette Tennant in Winchester, Virginia, and formally ended his temporary employment with the CCC. Alma was three years younger than Verl—and was one of the Tennant family members who had grown up just down the road from the Hixenbaughs. They had probably played and gone to school together throughout their youth.

Although Verl did not return to the CCC, his time with Alma was brief. He was drafted into the U.S. Army and made a technician fourth grade (T/4) after training. Searching for a way to designate men who had specialized skills, but little to no combat experience, the Army had created the technician ranks just prior to World War II. While it took time to shake out petty details of rank, seniority, and pay, the new technician ranks eventually made a lasting mark on Army rank structure that can be seen to this day. Army technicians of World War II served as medics, repairmen, cooks, mechanics, radio operators, and in other roles beyond that of a regular combat soldier.

As it turned out, Verl was anything but a regular combat soldier. After his training, the hardy ex-CCCer found himself on a ship to the United Kingdom to join the First Ranger Battalion—“Darby’s Rangers”—the forerunner to the United States Army Rangers.

The First Ranger Battalion was relatively new at the time of Verl’s enlistment. It was activated on June 19, 1942, and began to take shape in Northern Ireland. The Rangers were a new concept for the American military. Impressed by British Commando units, another precursor to modern special forces, Army Chief of Staff General George Marshall asked that a similar American force be organized. Brigadier General Lucian Truscott is credited with the Ranger moniker: “I selected ‘Rangers’ because few words have a more glamorous connotation in American military history. . . . [it was a] compliment to those in American history who exemplified such high standards of individual courage, initiative, determination and ruggedness, fighting ability, and achievement.”

A rough and ready commander, Colonel William Orlando Darby, was selected to lead the experiment. The original idea was to train the Rangers alongside British Commandos, then disperse these hardy men around the Army to pass on the knowledge gained. In practice, the First Ranger Battalion remained

together as a unit until their tragic destruction—and Verl Hixenbaugh’s death—in 1944.

The Ranger recruits were all volunteers, and in Scotland and Northern Ireland they were put through four months of the most difficult training the U.S. Army had up to that point. Speed marches, obstacle courses, urban warfare, night combat, boat-handling, even live-fire training (unheard of in the Army at the time) were employed to bring them up to fighting trim. Since he was not part of the original training cohort and was still in the United States in August 1942, Verl almost certainly missed the Rangers’ first major combat operation during the invasion of North Africa—Operation Torch.

Since Verl received combat honors for the North Africa campaign, he may instead have joined the 1st Ranger Battalion with a group of 100 or so replacements in Arzew, Algeria, at the end of January 1943. If so, he had barely two weeks to get to know Ranger Company C before they loaded onto transport planes for raids on Sened Station and Djebel el Ank in Tunisia. These lightning attacks were so successful that Darby was instructed to create two more Ranger battalions, borrowing veterans from the 1st Battalion. In retrospect, historians have noted that this diluted the combat power and effectiveness of the Rangers as a whole, for which they paid dearly in the year ahead.

This was not yet in evidence by July 10, 1943, when the 1st and 4th Ranger Battalions— reinforced by combat engineers and a mortar battalion to form a regimental combat team called Force X—landed on the shores at Gela in Sicily. The Rangers formed the tip of the spear for Operation Husky, and they moved so rapidly that they took 4,000 Italian prisoners on the way to the important city of Palermo. By mid-August, Sicily had been conquered with the Rangers in the vanguard all the way across the huge island.

The fall of Sicily brought about the collapse of Mussolini’s Fascist regime, but German forces quickly took control of northern and central Italy after the new Italian government signed an armistice with the Allies. Hitler was not going to allow the liberation of Italy without a fight.

Verl Hixenbaugh only had three weeks between the end of Operation Husky and the beginning of Operation Avalanche, the invasion of Italy via the defended beaches of Salerno. Most of Verl’s time would have been spent re-equipping and preparing for the new operation. At 3:10 a.m. on September 9, the boots of three Ranger battalions were the first Allied feet to hit Italian soil as they stormed ashore in the dark. Verl and his comrades moved off the beach without incident and took Chiunzi Pass as assigned, ready to hold it for a day or two while more Allied troops poured in and the Germans prepared a counterattack. While the Rangers completed their tasks smoothly, the rest of the landing bogged down. Verl’s beleaguered battalion ended up fighting off wave after wave of German assaults for two weeks.

From the end of September through December 1943, the Rangers were no

longer used as a nimble strike force. Instead, they were plugged into holes in the grinding, conventional advance to Naples. Ranger companies like Verl’s Company C had only 63 men instead of a normal rifle company’s 193 men and were thus often stretched thin, feeling the loss of fellow Rangers more keenly.

After a brief reorganization period at the end of the year, the Rangers were again thrown into the thick of things during Operation Shingle. These amphibious landings at Anzio have become synonymous with military failure, as the American general in charge squandered an opportunity to surprise and outflank German defenses and quickly take Rome. As American forces were hemmed in on the beaches at Anzio, it fell to the Rangers and other elite units to attempt a risky breakout at Cisterna di Littoria.

Under cover of darkness on January 30, 1944, the 1st Ranger Battalion led the way through four miles of enemy territory, using irrigation ditches for cover. They were to seize the town of Cisterna and hold it with the help of two more Ranger battalions, driving a wedge into German lines that the rest of the American landing force could use to break through. But months of constant combat had worn down the Rangers’ fighting ability. Verl Hixenbaugh was practically an old-timer in the unit by now. Many other men were new and untested. Complicated night operations required precision and experience. As the clandestine march progressed, the Ranger units lost contact with each other.

It was about to get worse. Unbeknownst to Allied commanders, the Germans were preparing an attack for the next day and had been assembling troops at Cisterna. The Rangers had no idea how badly outnumbered they were. Verl and the 1st Battalion made contact with the enemy on the outskirts of Cisterna at 2:00 a.m. and the situation rapidly disintegrated. Carrying only light weapons like small arms, bazookas, and mortars, the Ranger force had trouble with enemy tanks. Enemy troops closed in from all directions as the sun rose and revealed the Ranger positions. Soon 1st Battalion, now joined by the 3rd, had been pushed into a besieged perimeter only about 300 yards wide, running low on ammunition and taking heavy German artillery fire.

After hours of fighting, Colonel Darby received his last radio communication from his two beleaguered battalions. “Some of the fellows are giving up. Colonel, we are awfully sorry.” The operator then destroyed his radio. The 1st and 3rd Ranger Battalions had ceased to exist as a fighting force. Twelve men were killed, 36 wounded, and 743 captured as they literally ran out of bullets with which to fight. Only eight men made it back to American lines. The hundreds captured would spend the rest of the war as POWs.

Not so for Verl Hixenbaugh, one of the 36 wounded. German artillery had riddled his chest and abdomen with shrapnel. He was transported to a German military hospital (“Lazarett”) in Rome, but likely did not receive the best of care as Allied aircraft bombed German supply lines and made life in the city difficult for the Nazi occupiers. The farm boy from Daybrook, who

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had married the neighbor girl from up the road, succumbed to his wounds on April 9, 1944.

Allied forces liberated Rome two months later. An Army ambulance unit discovered Hixenbaugh interred in the Cimitero Monumentale del Verano, a cemetery east of Rome’s city center, where the Germans had buried him. After the war ended, Verl’s remains were disinterred and returned to the United States with many other war dead. He was reinterred at Grafton National Cemetery on August 13, 1948. That day would have been his sixth wedding anniversary. It is not known whether Alma attended Verl’s memorial service. She had remarried in December 1944.

Thankfully, the Hixenbaugh family did not suffer a double tragedy. Verl’s older brother Arthur, who also served in the Army, returned home safely in 1945. He and his wife raised their sons near his parents, who themselves remained on the quiet farm by Day Run creek in Daybrook, where Verl had never missed a day of school.

1st Ranger Battalion in the hills of Algeria, 1943.
U.S. Army photo



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.

Please refer comments or questions to the West Virginia Humanities Council
 1310 Kanawha Blvd E, Charleston, WV 25301
wvhuman@wvhumanities.org
www.wvhumanities.org
 304.346.8500



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 Department of Veterans Affairs
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