JOHN READY MAYHEW PRIVATE FIRST CLASS U.S. ARMY

WORLD WAR I 1891 - 1943

WRITTEN BY JAMES ROBBINS AND TOBY WHITE
UNIVERSITY HIGH SCHOOL
INSTRUCTED BY MEGHAN DUNN

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An engineer of the 317th pauses to be photographed by a train bringing supplies and troops to and from the Western Front. The 317th was part of the famed 92nd Division, the Buffalo Soldiers. *Courtesy of Gettysburg College*

John Ready Mayhew was born on April 13, 1891, in Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada. His father, George Leonard Mayhew, was born in Canada in 1855 and married Mary Alice (Gasby) Mayhew in 1874. She was born in April 1860, though records conflict as to whether her birthplace was Savannah, Georgia, or Maryland. Both were slave states in a nation on the brink of Civil War, and Mary may have been born into enslavement herself. By the 1870s, she had relocated to Canada and wed George. The two had 14 children, eight of whom survived to adulthood, with John being the middle child.

By 1900, John's family was living on the United States side of the Niagara River at 2219 Whirlpool Street in Niagara Falls, New York. John's father held a steady job as a "hod carrier," transporting bricks and other building materials to construction sites. As a Black family in Niagara Falls, the Mayhews were probably well aware of the initial meeting in their town of the Niagara Movement—the predecessor to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In 1905, influential Black civic leaders and activists, including W.E.B. DuBois, met on the Ontario side of Niagara Falls and hammered out a Declaration of Principles that would influence civil rights movements to the present day.

The Mayhew family moved to a rented home in Erie, Pennsylvania, by 1910. It was 115 miles south of Niagara Falls on the shores of Lake Erie. John's father and oldest brother worked as porters for the railroad depot, carrying baggage and assisting patrons. The same year, John himself was listed as working two laboring jobs—a landscape gardener and porter. John worked as a porter at the Union Depot Hotel, also near the Erie railroad depot. At the time, porters were the largest category of employment for Black laborers in Canada and the United States which set the framework for the Black middle class. Even with these opportunities, porters faced poor wages, long shifts, and persistent racism. Though several Mayhew men were working to maintain the household, John's two teenage sisters Ada and Ethel performed housework for other homes to make money for the family.

By 1917, 26-year-old John had moved still farther south to Butler, Pennsylvania, where he worked as a cook for the Standard Steel Car Company. As a cook, John may have prepared business banquets and provided meals for the thousands of Standard company workers, which were rapidly growing in number. Rather than construct railroad cars out of a combination of steel and wood, as most rolling stock was at the time, the company produced solid steel cars—a successful product that contributed millions of dollars to the Butler County economy. Prosperity also brought various ethnic groups and minorities to the city, which may have been what drew John to Butler.

The First World War contributed to this boom for the Standard Steel Car Company. Even amid the United States' neutrality in the conflict ravaging Europe since 1914, Standard produced more than $100 million worth of rolling stock for the French government—amounting to the staggering sum of 38,000 freight cars. As the United States itself entered the war in April 1917, production shifted to cars for the U.S. military's own buildup.

Like Butler and the Standard Steel Car Company, John's life was also transformed by the United States' entry into World War I. In June 1917, John and other individuals living in Butler's 1st District were ordered to register for the draft. A month later, John and 497 other men reported to the Butler County Courthouse for examination. On October 26, John was inducted into military service and assigned to Company A of the 317th Engineers, 92nd Infantry Division. The 92nd Infantry Division was nicknamed "Buffalo Soldiers," a moniker passed down from the Indian Wars of the American West. American Indians, who regarded Black U.S. cavalrymen as fierce foes, likened the soldiers' dark, curly hair to a buffalo's coat. This nickname gradually became synonymous with all African American soldiers, and the buffalo became the insignia for the 92nd Infantry Division—an all-Black unit.

Butler planned a farewell reception to honor the patriotic men who provided a "great contribution toward beating the Kaiser." John and other draftees were served a dinner in the Butler Community Building before they departed for Camp Sherman in Chillicothe, Ohio. At Sherman, John would have received weapons and trench construction training.

As with many other locations chosen for military camps, Chillicothe was transformed once the United States entered World War I, and the city's population grew from 15,000 to 60,000. Of more than a thousand structures built across the sprawling site, several were YMCA facilities that provided food, entertainment, and a communal library which was accessible to all, regardless of race. Frank E. Cochran, a fellow soldier in Company A, stated that "we drill a lot here every day and we go out on some long hikes. We have football, baseball, basketball and we play all kinds of games and have a real nice time." He also noted how Camp Sherman has "a good YMCA, where all the boys can go and write as much as they like." The 317th Engineers' chaplain, George Singleton, also worked diligently to increase the number of books by Black authors within the YMCA's library and gave soldiers like John access to "the best Negro thought from the four sections of the country."

Despite these opportunities, soldiers in the 92nd Infantry Division were commanded by White officers and faced severe racial prejudice—even physical abuse by White military personnel. At Camp Sherman, army officials were conditioned to see their African American troops as inferior and referred to Black soldiers as "emotional" and "extremely difficult to handle" compared to White soldiers. Due to these racist beliefs, some African American troops reported being treated like "conscripted criminals" instead of soldiers. To make matters worse, the 1918 influenza pandemic was sweeping through military camps nationwide, with over 5,600 cases reported in Camp Sherman—1,777 of which died from the illness.

Although nearly half of all African American doughboys remained in the United States throughout the duration of their service, the 317th Engineers served overseas in World War I as part of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF). In early June 1918, the unit moved to Camp Upton in Long Island, New York, to prepare for transportation to France. As one soldier in John's unit noted, "we had all our meals served on the train and had a fine place to sleep," and on the way to New York the "Red Cross met the train at all the large cities and served us refreshments." Once at Camp Upton, John and the rest of the 317th Engineers received "lots of good eats" and were "treated very fine" thanks to the theaters and good shows offered to the men. These

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317th Engineers soldiers at work on a narrow gauge supply railroad. *Courtesy of Gettysburg College*

experiences formed part of the contradictory treatment Black troops received from their countrymen throughout the war.

On June 10, 1918, the 317th Engineers left Hoboken, New Jersey, and embarked on their overseas journey aboard the USS *Mount Vernon* (ID-4508). After nine days of travel, the men arrived at Camp Pontanezen in Brest, France, where they organized baggage and equipment before moving by rail to a training area at Blondefontaine in eastern France. John and the 317th were the first of the 92nd Infantry Division to land in France. Their arrival on the Western Front coincided with the large number of American troops who provided a much-needed morale boost to the battle-fatigued Allied forces who had been fighting against the Central Powers since 1914.

At Blondefontaine, the 317th Engineers took part in a six-week intensive training program in practical military engineering and infantry tactics. Initially, the 317th's training was hindered by a lack of tools and equipment. Worse still, the regiment's African American officers, who had been with the regiment since its formation at Camp Sherman, were replaced wholesale by White engineer officers. On the surface these new officers possessed more military engineering experience. Time and again during World War I American military leaders demonstrated a lack of confidence in Black troops by underequipping their units, depriving them of combat opportunities, and removing Black officers from positions of authority. There is little doubt the change would have impacted the morale of John and the 317th Engineers.

With the assistance of French transport trucks, by August 20, 1918, the 317th Engineers had arrived in Saint-Dié-des-Vosges, a town in the rugged Vosges Mountains north of the Swiss border. Although fighting occurred in the region early in the war, by 1915 the mountainous terrain had caused the armies of both the Allies and Central Powers to look elsewhere for military breakthroughs. Because of this, the "Vosges Front" was used by the American Expeditionary Forces for training purposes before they entered their own front-line sectors. Here, John put his engineering training to use by assisting in the construction of shelters, repairing front-line trenches, and camouflaging roads. Despite the Vosges region being known as a "quiet sector," the 317th Engineers received "its baptism of fire" from intermittent German gas and shellfire attacks.

After sufficient training, in late August the 317th Engineers, along with the rest of the 92nd Infantry Division, moved north to the Argonne Forest. John's unit was to take part in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, the largest operation by the AEF and, as it turned out, the knockout blow that ended the war. John was one of more than 650,000 American soldiers sent to the Argonne region in preparation for an offensive attack against the German line. The AEF intended to drive the Germans out of the Argonne Forest, which had been a contested region since the start of the war.

The Argonne Forest is a narrow strip of rugged territory in northeastern France. Because of the difficult terrain and impassable forests, Allied armies found German defenders extremely hazardous to dislodge. To make matters worse, only two main wagon roads and one railroad crossed through the sector, which made supply and troop movements particularly challenging. For these reasons, the role of engineering units like the 317th was critical. With so many troops crowding the Argonne Forest, poor road conditions led to congestion and delays. The 317th Engineers constructed dirt connecting roads to enable troop transfers between the main routes. John and his comrades filled shell holes and mine craters to pave the way for trucks and wagons.

Even so, the engineers lacked materials and time. Vehicles and artillery pieces bogged down in the mud, forcing the engineers to haul the equipment by hand. Despite these hardships, more than a year of training allowed John and his fellow engineers to facilitate the transportation of food, lumber, railroad materials, and 2,000 tons of ammunition to the front lines. During this time, John's Company A was singled out by a regimental officer for working "in mud and rain for three days and nights with four hours rest, part of the time under fire, and part of the time on short rations—with not a word of complaint."

The Meuse-Argonne Offensive was the deadliest campaign in American history with over 26,000 soldiers killed in action and more than 120,000 total casualties. Despite the 317th Engineers taking on a supporting role throughout the campaign, the men often had to work under machine gun and shell fire. As one officer noted, "the conduct of the men was very commendable as it requires considerable nerve to work away under fire of different kinds without a chance to strike back." While the 317th certainly suffered casualties, John remained unscathed throughout the conflict. Thanks in part to the engineers' herculean efforts, by October 31 the American Expeditionary Forces had advanced ten miles and cleared the Argonne Forest of German troops. On November 10, the Allies reached the major German ammunition and supply depot in Sedan and cut the crucial rail line there. The next day, on November 11, 1918, the armistice was declared, formally ending the First World War's fighting. After nearly a year of overseas service, John boarded the RMS *Caronia* in Brest, France, on February 25, 1919. Nine days later, John returned to the United States. He was honorably discharged at Camp Dix, New Jersey, on March 21, 1919.

Following his military service, John returned to Butler, Pennsylvania, and by 1930 he was lodging with Walter C. Lowe and his family at 418 Negley Avenue. The Lowes were an African American family who had lived in Butler since the 1910s. Like John, Walter's son Royal worked for the Standard Steel Car Company before being drafted into military service on July 18, 1918. Royal also served overseas in the 803rd Pioneer Infantry Regiment during World War I. With this service in common, it is possible that Royal and John knew each other from their time in France. Royal may have also helped John acquire a job as a chef at the Nixon Hotel in downtown Butler. The hotel was about a half-mile from the Lowes' house and was described as "the greatest thing known to Butler."

On April 8, 1943, John was admitted to the Veterans Administration Hospital in Pittsburgh. Four days later, John Ready Mayhew passed away from bronchogenic carcinoma, more commonly known as lung cancer. John never married or had children. On April 16, 1943, he was buried in Grafton National Cemetery in Taylor County, West Virginia, surrounded by his military brotherhood and the gratitude of his adopted nation.

Two soldiers of the 317th stand in a massive shell crater on the Western Front. *Courtesy of Gettysburg College*

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West Virginia National Cemeteries Project

SOURCES

FULL BIBLIOGRAPHY TO BE INCLUDED IN FINAL VERSION

SOURCES

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

ABOUT THE PROJECT

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.

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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

WEST VIRGINIA HUMANITIES COUNCIL

Veterans Legacy Grant Program
Department of Veterans Affairs
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