

BESSIE GENEVIEVE ROSS

CORPORAL
U.S. ARMY AIR CORPS

WORLD WAR II
1925 - 1995

WRITTEN BY GABBY MAGO AND ADRIENNE REGER
UNIVERSITY HIGH SCHOOL
INSTRUCTED BY MEGHAN DUNN

DRAFT THIS IS A WORK-IN-PROGRESS
FOR TEMPORARY DISPLAY ONLY



Bessie (Vincent) Ross has not yet been identified in this photograph of her 1943 sophomore class at East Fairmont High.

Bessie “Genevieve” Vincent was born on February 7, 1925, in Marion County, West Virginia. Her parents were George E. Vincent and Bessie Olive Villers, both West Virginia natives. Bessie’s father, George, worked as a laborer in a bottle factory, as a truck driver, and later in the coal mining industry. Bessie stayed at home to raise the children: Mary Eliza (Graig), Marcus Roscoe, David Eugene, and Nathan Lee. The younger Bessie probably went by her middle name Genevieve to differentiate herself from her mother. Even in yearbooks and census records, she appears with this (sometimes misspelled) name.

While Genevieve was growing up, the Vincent family lived in a rural part of Marion County east of Fairmont, somewhere near the town of Winfield. The sparsely populated area had fewer than 4,000 of Marion County’s 66,000-odd residents. It seems likely that she and her siblings attended one of their district’s ten one-room schoolhouses somewhere along Prickett Creek or Grassy Run, since larger grade schools were miles away on the outskirts of Fairmont.

Genevieve was still a young girl when the Great Depression devastated the nation’s economy. In the decades prior, Marion County had seen a rise in employment due to the extraction of natural resources such as coal, oil, and gas, but the Depression cratered coal mining as industrial consumers idled their operations. Making ends meet for a large family may have been the reason why George Vincent’s occupation shifted several times. The 1940

census lists him as a truck driver “working on own account”—self-employed, in other words. Genevieve’s older sister Mary, by then 18, was working as a house servant while continuing to live at home.

Despite the small community the Vincents lived in, they were still closely connected to Fairmont just a few miles away—and to the rest of the nation by newspaper and radio. No doubt they were shocked by the sudden Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, that pulled the United States into World War II. Genevieve’s older brother, Marcus Roscoe, joined the Navy in 1943 and served for three years aboard the battleship USS *Nevada* (BB-36) and cruiser USS *Amsterdam* (CL-101).

Even if Genevieve wanted to serve her country right away, she did not turn 18 until 1943, and was still a sophomore in high school. She may have dropped out after that year, since she does not appear in any more East Fairmont High yearbooks, but this is speculative. For example, her brother Roscoe is not present in the 1941 yearbook, though he would have been a junior, but reappears as a senior in 1942.

However, her journey through teenagerhood evolved, and by 1945 Genevieve was ready to join the fight. On May 8, 1945, she enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps (USAAC), the predecessor of the present-day Air Force. Tragically, her



Pilots undergo high altitude pressurization training. Dental issues could trigger problems for pilots at high altitudes. *Medical Support of the Army Air Forces in World War II* (1955)

mother Bessie passed away unexpectedly two months later, very likely when Genevieve was away at basic training. From this point forward—perhaps as a way to honor her mother—Genevieve seems to adopt her true first name, Bessie, when appearing in official documents such as census records.

Though Germany’s surrender brought an end to the war in Europe just weeks before Bessie Genevieve enlisted, the battle against Japan in the Pacific was still at full pitch. The Battle of Okinawa was raging, and only a relative handful of people knew an atomic bomb was being prepared to unleash against Japan if surrender did not come soon. Indeed, the decision to actually use “Fat Man” against Hiroshima was not made until around the end of July 1945. Thus, American armed forces were still training and preparing for an invasion of the Japanese home islands, with the expectation that over half a million men might become casualties in the attempt. In the face of such cataclysmic events, the service of an army dental technician seems trivial. Nevertheless, that was the role Bessie Genevieve was to play in the war’s final months, and it was neither easy nor trivial.

World War II witnessed the coming of age for U.S. military dentistry, which had still been a primitive and underappreciated practice when the Army

BESSIE GENEVIEVE ROSS



Army dental technicians in training study sets of dentures.
Medical Department, United States Army, in World War II (1975)

Dental Corps was created in 1911, just before World War I. Army dentistry underwent serious growing pains in a few short years. When war broke out, the Army had a mere 2,905 dental officers. By 1944, their numbers had peaked at 15,292, roughly half of whom served overseas. This figure includes only male commissioned officers, not the tens of thousands of enlisted men and women who assisted them. Unfortunately, this was still a relatively small number of specialists to saddle with managing the dental hygiene of over 11 million U.S. Army personnel who served during the war.

As a result, dental officers and their technicians were often overworked. A July 1945 survey found over a thousand backlogged cases of dental prosthetic care in the Fifth Air Force alone. Making matters worse, proper equipment could be hard to come by: "Unit dental surgeons furnished many outstanding examples of improvisation of equipment. Spare motors, compressors, operating lights, and other equipment were utilized with great ingenuity in order to render more efficient care." To top it off, dental health standards had been lowered for inductees in 1942 so more recruits could be accepted.

"When the dental standards for induction were lowered greatly, the Dental Corps assumed the responsibility of putting the mouths of soldiers in a condition necessary to maintain health. This service required a large increase in the number of artificial teeth." The 1944 Annual Report of the [Army] Surgeon General estimated at least one artificial tooth and 3.6 fillings per man in the Army.

To top it off, the Army Air Corps into which Bessie was thrust had additional special considerations. Good teeth were required in every military branch to keep soldiers in the fight, but the pilots and aircrews of the USAAC had another factor to consider. Early in the war, befuddled Air Corps commanders discovered that bad fillings could cause debilitating headaches during high-altitude flights. The pain could grow so excruciating that pilots would be forced to abort missions. Professional dentistry thus became crucial to this new aerial theater of war.

In the year that she served as a USAAC dental technician, Bessie rose to the rank of corporal, indicating a ready aptitude for the work—in which she had no training prior to enlistment. Given that Japan surrendered only a month or two after Bessie should have completed her training, it is very unlikely she ever served in an overseas post. Instead, Bessie was probably assigned to a replacement center: a large base where tens of thousands of men were processed and parceled out to their next assignments.

A few months later, her role would have shifted as Operation Magic Carpet brought millions of soldiers home from the war. Many would have received checkups and care as they waited for official discharge from service. On October 23, 1946, Bessie received her own discharge. She returned home to Marion County.

The year 1947 was a year of weddings for the Vincent family. Bessie's father George remarried to a woman named Pearl Fink, introducing three new stepsiblings to the Vincent household. Bessie herself was in the process of exchanging the Vincent name. That year she married Charles Emmitt Pethtel, a U.S. Navy seaman from Marion County who had served in the Pacific on the fleet oiler USS *Tomahawk* (AO-88). The new couple soon had two baby boys, Charles Jr. and Robert, born in 1948 and 1949, respectively. Charles took up work as a miner with the Consolidation Coal Company (Consol) in nearby Shinnston.

Tragically, the Pethtels' family life was torn apart on November 26, 1949. A string of mining cars broke loose in Consol's Owens mine and struck Charles, killing him. He was only 24 years old and had survived dangerous campaigns in the Pacific only to lose his life in a West Virginia coal mine. He was buried in his hometown of Catawba, Marion County, where he and Bessie were raising their children—only a few miles from where Bessie grew up. Their youngest son Robert was only a few months old when Charles was killed.

For the next few years, Bessie supported her two boys by managing a restaurant, the Parkette. In 1956, she married Frank Ross, a Korean War army veteran three years younger than herself. Frank was the third-born child of Italian immigrants, the Rossi family, who Americanized their name to Ross. He, too, had grown up in Marion County, where his father was a coal miner. Frank also returned from war to the coal mines, working as a buggy picker for the Mountaineer Coal Company. Buggy pickers opened doors that brought fresh air into the mines, an important role in the occupation of coal mining because of the often-hazardous air. Frank and Bessie later had a son, Dwaine Franklin Ross.

Bessie and Frank settled into a long life together. They passed away only a month apart in 1995 in Marion County. Bessie was buried at the West Virginia National Cemetery in Pruntytown in April of 1995, where she shares a marker with her husband Frank.

Military headstone application for Bessie's first husband, Charles Pethtel, who was killed in mining accident in 1949.

CHECK TYPE REQUIRED (See Instructions attached)		APPLICATION FOR HEADSTONE OR MARKER (Please make out and return in duplicate)	
<input type="checkbox"/> UPRIGHT MARBLE HEADSTONE	ENLISTMENT DATE 10-27-43	SERIAL NO.	8953616
<input type="checkbox"/> FLAT MARBLE MARKER	DISCHARGE DATE 4-7-46	PENSION NO.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> FLAT GRANITE MARKER		STATE	W.Va.
<input type="checkbox"/> BRONZE MARKER		RANK	5 th Lt.
		COMPANY	
NAME (Last, First, Middle Initial) PETHTEL Charles Emmitt		U.S. REGIMENT, STATE ORGANIZATION, AND DIVISION U.S. Navy	
DATE OF BIRTH (Month, Day, Year) July 27, 1925	DATE OF DEATH (Month, Day, Year) Nov 26, 1949	LOCATION (City and State) Catawba, W. Va.	
NAME OF CEMETERY Catawba Cemetery		NEAREST FREIGHT STATION (City and State) Fairmont, W. Va.	
SHIP TO (I CERTIFY THE APPLICANT FOR THIS STONE HAS MADE ARRANGEMENTS WITH ME TO TRANSPORT THE STONE FROM THE FREIGHT STATION TO THE CEMETERY) George C. Vincent		POST OFFICE ADDRESS OF CONSIGNEE 350 Hoult Rd Fairmont, W. Va.	
DO NOT WRITE HERE		I certify this application is submitted for a stone for the unmarked grave of a veteran.	
FOR VERIFICATION ORDERED 19 JUN 1950		I hereby agree to assume all responsibility for the removal of the stone promptly upon arrival at destination, and properly place it at the decedent's grave at my expense.	
APPLICANT'S SIGNATURE Bessie J. Pethtel		DATE OF APPLICATION Mar 9, 1950	
ADDRESS (Street, City, State) Hoult Road, Fairmont, W. Va.			

DDMG FORM 623
REV 8 FEB 49

IMPORTANT—Complete Reverse Side

10-11453-8 GPO



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



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

