

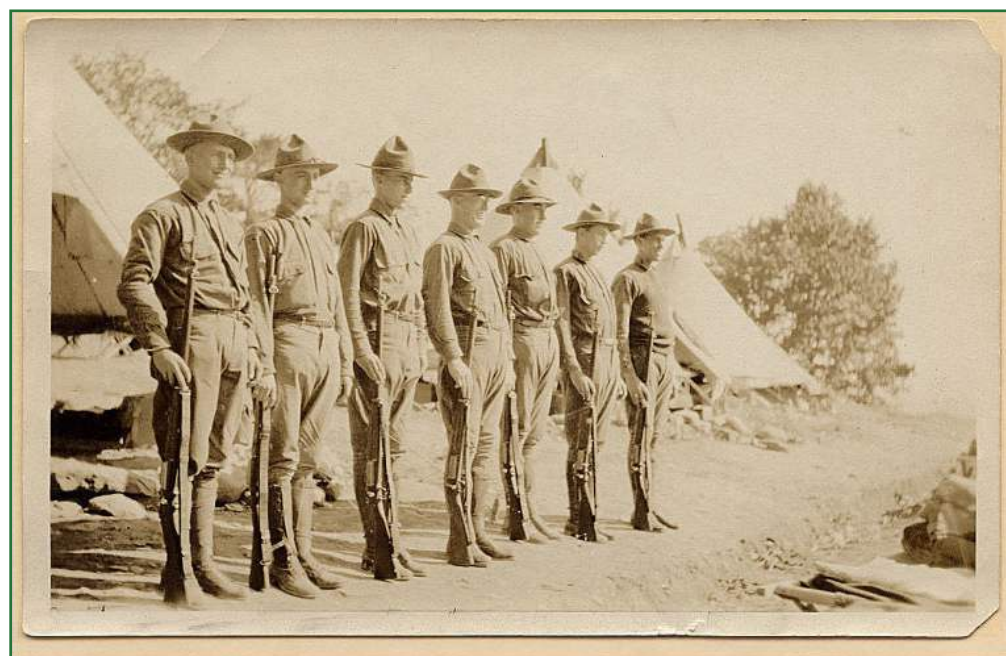
# CLARENCE EARL SHAFFER

PRIVATE FIRST CLASS  
U.S. ARMY

WORLD WAR I  
1898 - 1957

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National Guardsmen muster for World War I service, 1917. *Public domain*

**Clarence Earl Shaffer was born on April 27, 1898**, in Union District near Aurora in Preston County, West Virginia. Clarence's father Henry Jasper Shaffer worked as a blacksmith, while his mother Bedelia Catherine (McCrobie) Shaffer was a homemaker. Clarence was the eldest of eight siblings: William, Mildred, Della, Ethel, Sarah, Oscar, and Frank. The Shaffers lived in Rowlesburg, founded in 1858 and named after Thomas Rowles, a railroad engineer for the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad (B&O). An impressive, elevated iron bridge in Preston County supported B&O traffic across the Cheat River and opened the region for trade just before the Civil War, contributing to the county's Reconstruction-era development.

Clarence was born two days after the United States declared war on Spain. In a strange coincidence, the ensuing Spanish-American War would see West Virginia's First and Second Volunteer Infantry Regiments—the West Virginia National Guard—enter federal service for a war on foreign soil for the first time. The next time they did so, two decades later, Clarence Earl Shaffer would be among them.

Clarence attended school in Preston County, where curriculum differed from school to school and depended on the specialties of the available teachers. Clarence would have taken courses such as grammar, geography, languages, surveying, and science, along with arithmetic, while in Rowlesburg's only public school. In 1906, that school had only three teachers and a principal.

If Clarence attended high school later, it would have been with only 30 or so other students.

On March 31, 1917, Clarence joined the West Virginia National Guard (WVNG) at the age of 18, a week prior to the United States declaring war on Germany on April 6. Most of the men of the WVNG had just barely returned home from six months of service on the Mexican border, training and patrolling as a show of strength, following Mexican revolutionary leader Pancho Villa's raid onto American soil in 1916. Perhaps the WVNG's mustering and departure had fired up Clarence's imagination. Perhaps he simply heard that a new company was being organized in his hometown and wanted an adventure.

Whatever the reason, he did not have long to wait for activity. The Rowlesburg men of Company B, commanded by Captain David W. McVicker, soon joined the rest of the First Regiment WVNG in Fairmont, Marion County, for about two months of mustering, training, and equipping. In the first few months of paranoia following the declaration of war against Germany, fear of German saboteurs and spies spurred the WVNG to post guards at bridges and railroad crossings throughout the state.

Company B muster rolls from the unit's tenure in Fairmont note a lack of uniforms and equipment, along with plenty of personnel transfers and soldiers going AWOL (absent without leave) as the whole WVNG organization shook itself out for deployment in federal service. With only a small regular U.S. Army upon entering the war (though the conflict had already been raging in Europe for three years), the country's many National Guard contingents represented the largest pool of semi-trained military manpower. The National Defense Act of 1916 had strengthened total National Guard figures to 225,000 men, though many more would be needed before the conflict drew to a close. The *Wheeling Intelligencer* newspaper reported President Woodrow Wilson's July 9 mobilization proclamation on its front page, noting that West Virginia was one of 11 states in the first wave.

Despite the WVNG's rapid mobilization and accompanying growing pains, Clarence did well. After only three months, he was promoted to private first class in July 1917. Unfortunately, the young man did not have much longer to remain with his fellow Mountaineers. In September 1917, Clarence and the First Regiment WVNG were sent to Camp Shelby in Mississippi to integrate into the 38th Infantry Division. At Camp Shelby, the Army broke up Clarence's regiment and assigned its men to four different engineer, ammunition train, and machine gun companies. While not a rare occurrence, it also was not typical: the Second Regiment WVNG was kept mostly intact as



National Guard camp for 20,000 men on the U.S.-Mexico border, 1916. *El Paso Public Library*

the 150th Infantry Regiment. Over half of the 28th Division was made up of Pennsylvania National Guard troops that remained together.

The Army assigned Clarence to Company B, 137th Machine Gun Battalion, 38th Infantry Division—and then kept the unit at Camp Shelby for another year. This was probably a bitter disappointment to Clarence and his comrades, who endlessly drilled, exercised, dug trenches, and were confined to military life on the sprawling campus for 36,000 men. To make matters worse, such high concentrations of people invariably led to health hazards. In April 1918, a mild version of the influenza pandemic quickly struck down 2,000 men, overwhelming the base hospital and requiring barracks buildings to be converted into makeshift infirmaries. The situation did not improve much when the 137th Machine Gun Battalion moved to Camp Mills, New York, in the fall. Thousands more influenza cases were hospitalizing soldiers there, too, with a higher mortality rate than at Shelby.

Clarence must have avoided the worst of it, since he departed with the unit from New York Harbor for Le Havre, France, on October 6, 1918. He sailed on the SS *Zealandia* with the rest of the battalion, arriving in France around October 22. Shortly thereafter, the 38th Division encamped near Nantes, where they underwent additional training.



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Though it was not obvious at the time, the end of the war was only a few weeks away. The 38th Division had missed the fighting, and Clarence would not see combat. In this he was fortunate. The war's final sustained combat, the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, was the bloodiest campaign in American history where 26,000 Americans lost their lives, and over 90,000 more were wounded.

As the fighting died down in November 1918 and the world looked toward peace, the U.S. Army decided to use the 38th Infantry Division as a replacement unit and "skeletonize" its formation to help reinforce front line outfits which had suffered heavy losses in recent campaigns. Clarence's machine gun unit, along with the division's infantry regiments, transferred to Le Mans where they awaited reassignment. What remained of the 38th Infantry Division dwindled to its original cadre before returning to the United States that December.

Clarence was reassigned to Company B, 308th Machine Gun Battalion, 78th Infantry Division. A veteran outfit that had suffered heavy casualties in the final two offensives of the war, it had been rotated off the line before Armistice Day on November 11. Clarence was likely transferred to the division as a replacement while it was stationed in Dijon, France.

As the needs of the war wound down, the 78th Infantry Division began relocating to port cities and discharging personnel as it prepared to return to the United States. On March 16, 1919, the Army discharged Clarence from service. For the next month, Clarence remained in camp awaiting orders to return to the United States. From the port city of Marseilles, Clarence and his comrades boarded SS *Patria* on April 26, 1919, and embarked for Brooklyn, New York.

After completing his military service, Clarence returned to Rowlesburg. He soon followed in his father Henry's footsteps as an employee of the B&O Railroad. Henry had been a general laborer for the company when Clarence

was growing up. Now Clarence became a railroad fireman. Sometimes called stokers or boilermen, the job of firemen entailed tending to the fire used to power the locomotive's steam engine. Other steam-powered machinery in railyards required firemen, too. It was an intensely physical job that directly affected the safety of people and equipment. His younger brother William also worked as a fireman, so they may have labored side by side.

In 1923, Clarence married Pansy Arthur. Clarence and Pansy divorced in 1942. Sometime after, Clarence married Clarabell Bohon. In January of 1943, Clarabell and Clarence welcomed their first child, Johnnie Earl Shaffer, born in Preston County. Two short years later, however, Clarabell contracted pulmonary tuberculosis and died on February 2, 1945. Clarence's final marriage was to Myrtle Aldean Funk, three decades his junior, with whom he had five children: Clara Louise, Clarence Jr., Beverly Ann, David Arnett Shaffer, and Mike Shaffer.

Clarence lived in Rowlesburg with his wife and children for the rest of his days, working as a B&O engineer until his retirement. He passed away on April 19, 1957, in Clarksburg, Harrison County, at the Louis A. Johnson Veterans Administration Medical Center, and was interred on April 23, 1957, in Grafton National Cemetery.

TOP: 137th Machine Gun Battalion, Company A, at Camp Shelby. *Indiana State Library*

RIGHT: Clarence Earl Shaffer's West Virginia National Guard enlistment papers, 1917. *WV State Archives*

Born *April 27 - 1898*  
**NATIONAL GUARD**  
 STATE OF WEST VIRGINIA  
 ENLISTMENT PAPER OF  
 Shaffer Clarence E.  
(Surname) (Christian name)  
 Was enlisted at Rowlesburg, W. Va. on  
 the 31st day of March, 1917  
 by Capt. David W. McVicker  
 for Co. B. 1st. Inft. (White) W.V.N.G.  
(Organization or arm of service. See Instruction 2.)  
 PRIOR SERVICE.  
(See Instruction 4.)  
 INSTRUCTIONS.  
 1. An enlistment paper will be made in the case of each soldier enlisted or reenlisted for the National Guard and filed with the records of the organization to which the soldier is assigned. When an organization is called or drafted into the service of the United States the enlistment paper of every member thereof, whether present or absent, will be delivered to the United States recruiting officer to be indorsed by him as indicated on the last page of the form and forwarded to The Adjutant General of the Army. The enlistment paper of a soldier enlisting or reenlisting for an organization of the National Guard in the Federal service will be forwarded directly to The Adjutant General of the Army with the recruiting officers tri-monthly report. A duplicate of each enlistment paper will be furnished to the adjutant general of the State, Territory, or District of Columbia by the recruiting officer.  
 2. The recruiting officer will enter, in the appropriate space, the organization or arm of service for which the soldier was enlisted, showing also whether white or colored, e. g., "Co. M, 97th Inf. (white), N. Y. N. G.;" "1st. Reg. Bn. Inf. (colored), D. C. N. G.;" "Btry. C, 4th Field Arty. (white), R. I. N. G.;" "Quartermaster Corps (colored), N. Y. N. G.;" "Signal Corps (white), Pa. N. G.," making the designation as definite as practicable in each case.  
 3. The correct name of the recruit will be ascertained. The christian name will not be abbreviated, but if it consists of more than one name, only the first will be written and signed in full, the others being represented by their initials. Great care will be exercised that the name is correctly written and signed wherever it appears on the enlistment paper.  
 4. The recruiting officer will enter in the appropriate space all prior service of the soldier in the National Guard, Organized Militia, Regular Army, Volunteer Army, Navy or Marine Corps, as the case may be, giving dates and, except for Navy and Marine Corps, organization and arm of the service.  
 From No. 22-1, A. G. O.  
(For National Guard)  
 (1)



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

