

STEVE DEKATOR SHIELDS

PRIVATE FIRST CLASS
U.S. ARMY

WORLD WAR II
1918 - 1952

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DRAFT THIS IS A WORK-IN-PROGRESS
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Planes Back 92d Attack in 5th Problem



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In the fifth exercise of the "D" series, the problem is the perfect coordination of ground troops, combat planes and artillery. No success is possible without this perfect teamwork. Your part in this is as important as the planes and the guns. In order to achieve this coordination, you must do your part, whatever it may be, and complete the perfect team.

Steve Dekator Shields was born in Elkhorn, Pike County, Kentucky, on December 12, 1918. He lived in the lower Elkhorn District with his parents, Alather and Anna Shields, and his older sister Susie. Alather was born in Tennessee and Anna was born in Virginia, but by 1917 the young couple had moved to Pike County, where the Kentucky coal towns may have provided them an escape from Jim Crow laws, racial oppression, and threats of lynching that were more daily realities for Black communities further south. The Shields' move to central Appalachia also coincided with the First Great Migration, as Black miners in Appalachian coal towns frequently "found that salaries, housing, and health care offered by coal companies often far outstripped anything available to them in the rural South." To support the family, Alather worked as a coal loader at the Superior Coal Company, which provided them with enough money to rent a home near the mines. African Americans born in the South at the turn of the century had few educational opportunities. Neither of Shields' parents attended school, but they were nevertheless both literate.

By 1927, nine-year-old Steve's life had changed drastically. His parents had separated, with his sister Susie remaining with their mother Anna. Steve meanwhile joined his father Alather in West Virginia. On December 26, 1927, Alather was remarried to Beatrice Hanner. Although it is unclear when and why the Shields family moved to Fayette County, Alather likely used his coal mining skills to get a job in one of the various mines located along the New River, which were some of the most productive in the region during the first half of the 20th century. Beatrice gave birth to Steve's half-sister Janie on January 9, 1929. Shortly later, the blended family of four moved to Columbus, Franklin County, Ohio. Another daughter, Aretha, was born on March 11, 1930.

In Columbus, Steve's father worked as a janitor in an office building while Steve attended public school. He completed one year of high school and likely attended Champion Avenue School, an all-Black institution located near his home address at the time. It is unclear why Steve did not complete his high school degree, though the ongoing Great Depression seems a likely contributing factor. For the entirety of his teenage years the Depression was in full swing, as Steve was only 11 years old when it started in 1929. Ohio, a vastly industrial state, was hit hard by the widespread unemployment epidemic.

By 1932, the state had reached a 37 percent unemployment rate. Historians have identified a higher unemployment rate for Black workers during the Depression, particularly in larger cities like Columbus. With the decrease in industrial jobs, many of Ohio's major cities lost large proportions of their populations. Due to a more diverse economy, the city of Columbus emerged

from the Great Depression significantly better off than most cities in the state. However, little is known about Steve's employment during his time in Columbus.

By 1940, Steve was 22 years old and had moved to New Church in Accomack County, Virginia, where he worked for the canning company owned by Horace Edward Kelley. The company was a staple in the community and canned tomatoes, sweet potatoes, green and wax beans, peas, and lima beans. Particularly during the Great Depression, it was common for Eastern European immigrants and African Americans to work in various canning industries throughout the east coast, which may explain Steve's move to Virginia.

Following his time in Virginia, Steve moved to New Brunswick, New Jersey, where he worked as a semiskilled chauffeur, likely driving taxis or buses to make money. Due to the United States' entry into World War II on December 7, 1941, New Brunswick saw an influx of military and civilian personnel who worked at the various training bases, military airstrips, and munitions factories in the area. This likely meant Steve had a lot of customers as a driver, though he was soon to be part of the war effort himself. After passing his physical examination, on December 17, 1942, Steve was drafted into the United States Army in Newark, New Jersey. The following week, he and the other selectees were presented with a gift by the local community and the American Legion before marching to the Pennsylvania Railroad Station to entrain for Fort Dix.

Shields became a private first class in Company A of the 365th Infantry Regiment. This regiment was part of the 92nd Infantry Division, which was known as the Buffalo Soldiers. The Buffalo Soldiers were a group of all African American troops whose nickname dates to the all-Black 10th Cavalry Regiment who fought in the Plains Wars in the late 19th century. Their Native American opponents called the cavalymen Buffalo Soldiers, a reference to their curly dark hair which reminded them of a buffalo's coat. As with previous African American veterans, the Buffalo Soldiers of World War II would endure segregation and scant recognition for their military contributions.

The 365th Infantry trained at Camp Atterbury in Indiana, about 25 miles south of Indianapolis, which was constructed to support the massive training efforts of World War II. Shields was one of over 275,000 soldiers who trained at Camp Atterbury, which occupied 1,780 buildings. Atterbury later served as an internment camp for German and Italian prisoners of war. In basic training, the 365th largely focused on physical conditioning and military fundamentals. The men learned survival techniques, how to identify mines and booby traps, basic medical and first aid practices, map reading, tank and

The December 1943 issue of *The Buffalo*, official publication of the 92nd Infantry Division at Fort Huachuca. Shields would have been at Huachuca when this was published. *Arizona State Library*

STEVE DEKATOR SHIELDS



92nd Division mortar crews blast Axis positions in Italy, 1944. NARA

aircraft identification, military discipline, and simulated battle training.

Steve and the rest of the 365th Infantry proved their mettle by setting a new fastest pace during military training marches at the camp. Because of their impressive efforts, the observers commended the regiment, saying that “the Buffalo has got his horns and it won’t be long before his strength will greatly add to the striking power of the armies of our country.” By the 11th week, 92 percent of the men could complete a 25-mile march in less than eight hours. Along with this rigorous military training, Steve also received more traditional educational classes to address illiteracy and basic educational deficiencies. Various recreational activities such as softball and boxing were particularly popular among the 365th Infantry Regiment, as well.

After more than five months of Army training, Steve and the rest of the 365th Infantry Regiment joined the entire division at Fort Huachuca. When they arrived in the rugged Arizona mountains, the men took part in division-scale combat operations, offensive and defensive maneuvers, and firing tests. In December 1943 the training intensified still further, when the 92nd Infantry Division moved into the desert surrounding Fort Huachuca for a 20-day field exercise before they returned to the barracks. Along with the rigorous military drilling, Black soldiers at Fort Huachuca faced extreme racial tension. Due to the “isolated location of the post, the mostly White officer corps, the segregation of facilities, and the paucity of recreational activities,” African American soldiers took part in multiple boycotts and violent protests to push

for equality. These instances of racism impacted the morale of the 92nd Infantry Division and may have also negatively influenced Steve’s view of the Army—many Black soldiers felt they were fighting enemies both abroad and at home.

In January 1944, Steve and the rest of the 92nd Infantry Division arrived in Merryville, Louisiana. Along with the 44th and 75th Infantry Divisions, the Buffalo Soldiers took part in the Louisiana Maneuvers, which were designed for the armies to hone their craft in battlefield management, movement, and combined arms tactics. After four months of intense training in Merryville, the 92nd Infantry Division was rated “satisfactory” and ready for combat. Their first chance to face the enemy came in late November, when the entire 92nd transited to Italy.

By the summer of 1944, Allied forces had pushed the Germans almost 500 miles and taken possession of Rome. The campaign’s main objective then shifted toward an advance into northern Italy to break the “Gothic Line,” where the Germans formed their last major defensive position along the Apennine Mountains. The Italian Campaign was a brutal series of battles, with American casualties compounded by the sudden removal of many experienced units pulled out of Italy to augment the Allied invasion of southern France (following the Normandy invasion in June 1944).

To plug one such gap in Italy, the 92nd Infantry Division was sent to the westernmost end of the Allied front in the Serchio Valley, where they faced mountainous terrain and man-made defensive works. Along with these difficult military odds, the 365th faced extreme racism. Lieutenant Baker, a fellow Buffalo Soldier alongside Shields, stated how “sometimes it was hard to tell who the bigger racists were—the Germans in front of us or the commanders behind us.” Even against these odds, the Buffalo Soldiers would develop a reputation for fighting “with spirit and guts.”

Immediately after arriving in Italy, Steve took part in intensive reconnaissance patrolling, with special attention placed on the Cinquale Canal area that formed a natural barrier between the Allies and Germans north of Lucca. The 365th Infantrymen also faced heavy artillery and mortar fire that rained down from the many high mountain peaks that the Germans occupied, which was particularly destructive during the daylight hours. Throughout the rest of 1944, the Buffalo Soldiers had to navigate through a network of enemy bunkers, tank emplacements, minefields, and tunnels and anti-tank ditches, which created interlocking fields of enemy fire. They advanced northward at a crawl, village by village.

In February 1945, the 92nd Infantry Division prepared for a coordinated attack to seize the Strettoia hill mass north of the Cinquale Canal and advance into the Serchio Valley. On February 4, the 365th reached the foot of the Lama di Sotto Ridge. On the following day, the unit moved forward to occupy the town of Lama and surrounding hills despite strong enemy resistance. On

February 8, a German counterattack overran the town of Lama and pushed the Buffalo Soldiers back 500 yards. Despite the setback, the 365th stayed in the fight and retook Lama on February 10. During this counterattack, the men were bombarded with heavy artillery fire and assaults by panzer grenadier units but pushed back into the town and captured 55 prisoners. The Germans were determined to keep Lama di Sotto and counterattacked three more times. One beleaguered company withstood eight assault waves.

During this battle, Steve was one of the 293 casualties from the 365th Infantry Regiment, shot in the forearm and abdomen. Steve was admitted to a military hospital where he underwent different treatments, specifically myorrhaphy (the restitching together of muscles and other muscle repair surgeries). He was discharged from the hospital in May 1945 and recovered enough to serve with his fellow Buffalo Soldiers, who were now busy processing the surrender of enemy units in Italy following Nazi Germany’s surrender.

Although the 92nd Infantry Division returned to the United States on November 26, 1945, and were inactivated two days later, Steve remained overseas until the following year. He returned home on March 3, 1946, and was honorably discharged seven days later. Due to his combat wound, Steve was awarded the Purple Heart. After his discharge, Steve moved back to Columbus, Ohio, to live with his father Alather and took a job as a clothes presser.

At 27 years old, Steve married Florence Martin on June 2, 1946. She was an African American woman who had lived on the same street as Steve in Columbus. Although wed, the two continued to live in separate housing and the couple eventually divorced, with Florence remarrying in January 1951. Following their separation, Steve moved to Nutter Fort in Harrison County, West Virginia. At the age of 33, Steve was admitted to the VA Hospital in Clarksburg where he passed away from pneumonia on August 11, 1952. His suffering was complicated by tuberculosis and hemorrhaging in the eight months prior to his death. Steve Shields was laid to rest in Grafton National Cemetery on August 15, 1952.



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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