

DENZIL RAY PHILLIPS

1923 –1945, WORLD WAR II

U.S. NAVY, SEAMAN SECOND CLASS

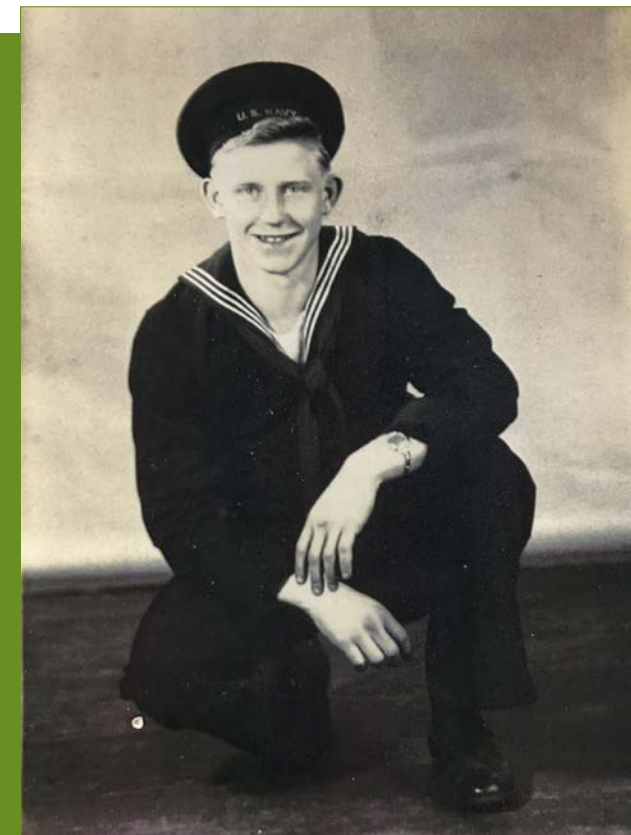
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Denzil “Buckey” Ray Phillips was born on December 10, 1923, in the Taylor County seat of Grafton, West Virginia. His mother, Mattie Lelan Phillips, was only seventeen years old, and Denzil’s early life unfolded in the household of his maternal grandparents in Fetterman, an unincorporated community within Grafton.

Denzil used his mother’s maiden name, perhaps because his father does not appear to have played much of a role in his childhood. Mattie ensured her son grew up with a strong family support system nonetheless. She and “Buckey,” as the family took to calling Denzil at an early age, lived on the farm of her parents, Samuel and Myrtle Belle Phillips. The Phillips farm also took in the children of extended family members and both their neighbors at various times. Samuel farmed, and Mattie’s older sisters labored in local factories.

Change came to the household in 1927, when Denzil’s grandmother Myrtle died. By the time the boy turned seven in 1930, he and Mattie were living with his aunt, Mattie’s older sister Maude Phillips Norris. Denzil was now able to grow up in the company of his many cousins, since Aunt Maude was raising eight children with her husband Hayward. Mattie was probably welcomed as an extra maternal hand, given the heavy responsibilities of such a large household.

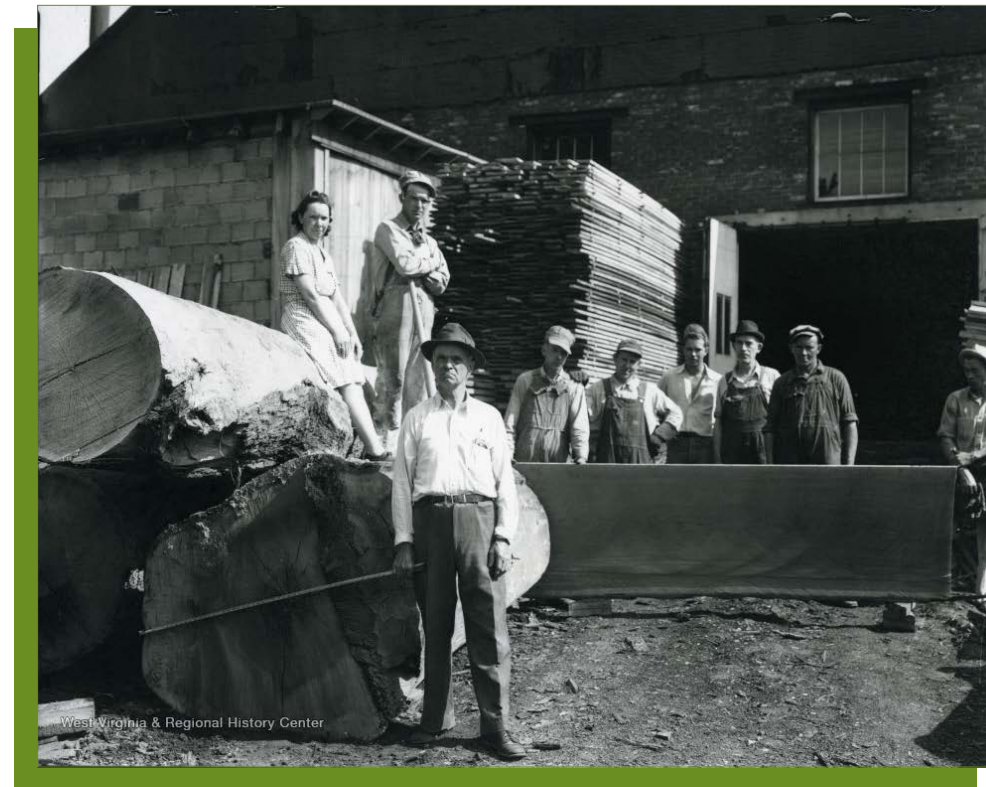
Denzil’s uncle Hayward Norris—whose sister was



“Buckey” in his Navy uniform. *Woodyard Family collection, courtesy of Connie Woodyard*

married to Mattie’s brother—had a stable job in Grafton’s railroad industry, where the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad (B&O) and supporting industries had provided work for laboring men in Taylor County since before the Civil War.

In 1931, Denzil’s family expanded when Mattie



Woodyard Lumber, where Denzil worked as a youth. The yard was owned by extended family.

West Virginia & Regional History Center, WVU Libraries

married Frank Thomas Sapp. Frank was a Grafton native who grew up, like Mattie, in a farming family. The new Sapp family made their home on the rural outskirts of Grafton. Denzil attended the McConkey school, which had only 21 students ranging from first through eighth grades. Denzil himself completed only seven and a half years of education, and never pursued high school, perhaps because he was so often needed on the Sapps’ 100-acre farm to help raise corn, livestock, and vegetables, as well as perform farm chores.

Small family farms, particularly those which survived the Great Depression, touched off by a catastrophic stock market crash in 1929, relied on the labor of all occupants to stay afloat. The Depression hit West Virginia hard. While Denzil’s family was relatively self-sufficient, the declining economy had an impact on farming families such as theirs, driving up the cost and scarcity of supplies and equipment. Crops and livestock typically provided the family’s cash income, so Denzil’s work was important in a financial context as well.

Still, Denzil’s teenage years were not without

breaks away from the farm. He later wrote of a love of hunting and trapping, which had the added benefit of contributing to the family’s food stores. After leaving school, Phillips worked for a time as a laborer in a local sawmill. He probably obtained the job through his maternal aunt, Lula Phillips Woodyard, whose husband’s family operated the W. A. Woodyard Lumber Company in Grafton. Soon, however, a new world war brought about Denzil Phillips’ separation from home and family entirely.

World War II officially began in 1939 with Nazi Germany’s invasion of Poland, but political tensions in Europe and Asia had been worsening since the early 1930s. On December 7, 1941, Japanese forces launched a devastating surprise attack on the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The assault catapulted the United States into war against the Empire of Japan, as well as Nazi Germany, and fascist Italy.

Sixteen-year-old Denzil’s world shifted, even in rural Taylor County, as the whole nation launched into military mobilization. Men left small communities like Grafton by the score, with more than 218,000 West Virginia men and 2,000 women

serving their country—the fifth highest rate per capita in the nation—by war’s end.

Denzil left the farm in September 1943 for work at a pottery factory, but the job was short-lived. Three months later, he presented himself for induction at the Navy Recruiting Station in Clarksburg in neighboring Harrison County, just ten days after his 20th birthday. He spent a final week at home with Mattie and Frank, then made his way to Huntington, West Virginia. His life was now in the Navy’s hands.

By December 28, Denzil reported to the Naval Training Center, Great Lakes, on the shores of Lake Michigan. More than one million new sailors passed through NTC Great Lakes for their initial training during World War II alone. Just over two months later, he transferred to Camp Shoemaker, California, with the rank of seaman second class.

Camp Shoemaker was massive, rotating about 2,500 personnel every day to new assignments and providing housing and training for thousands more between assignments. Showing his aptitude for Navy work, Denzil was put in charge of a group of sailors awaiting transfer to their new home: a tiny ship with no name, just a hull number, LCI(G)-70.

That Denzil’s training at Great Lakes and Shoemaker totaled less than six months underscores the state of the war in its fifth year. LCI(G)-70’s new crew shuffled aboard in San Francisco Bay on June 6, 1944, the same suspenseful day hundreds of thousands of Allied soldiers, sailors, and airmen assaulted the beaches of Normandy in western France. Fighting in the Pacific—where Denzil and his crew were headed—was also reaching a fever pitch, with upcoming major offensives against the Mariana Islands and the Philippines fast approaching. More than ever, the Allied war effort needed men at the front, and fast.

Sometime during that summer of 1944, Denzil was able to return home on leave for a couple of weeks. The visit was short, but Denzil helped his mother

pick green beans from the garden. Like so many families of the era, especially in times of shortage and want, Mattie canned what they picked so the beans could last for years if needed. The mason jars from summer 1944 went on the shelf to await better days. Buckey went west on a train, and then across the Pacific on a ship.

Denzil’s new floating home offered scant protection against a war such as this, but large landing craft were also an innovative and essential tool for the conflict being fought. In order to liberate thousands of miles of lost territory scattered across huge distances of ocean, the Allies needed to build and employ vast fleets of amphibious support ships designed to land massive amounts of men and supplies—safely and quickly, even while under fire. The new vessels needed to be durable and operable in waters ranging from North Africa to Norway, and from New Guinea to Iwo Jima.

In July 1942, U.S. military planning boards estimated the construction of 12,000 new landing craft was required to meet war demand. Various types of amphibious transports began production with different names and acronyms. Over 80,000 individual landing craft were built in the United States over the course of the war. To crew these vessels, four major and four smaller Amphibious Training Bases (ATBs) were quickly established with total facilities for over 30,000 men.

The multipurpose Landing Craft Infantry (LCI) was capable of carrying just under 200 combat troops directly to the beach. Over 1,200 LCIs were constructed, but 330 of these were converted at various times to provide close fire support to troops landing ashore. Of this latter number, 218 were LCI(G) ships (Landing Craft Infantry–Gun, or Gunboat) like the vessel Denzil Ray Phillips was now settling into for his first patrol, LCI(G)-70.

The design of the LCI(G) gunboats, like many wartime conversions, arose from challenges not foreseen before the war. As the Allies slowly fought their way across the Pacific, retaking island after island from stubborn Japanese defenders, naval

tacticians discovered that neither large ships offshore nor air cover ahead could fully protect waves of landing craft from enemy defenders on the beach. Converted LCIs armed with guns, rockets, or mortars, however, could get very close to their targets and keep Japanese troops suppressed while U.S. soldiers and marines swarmed ashore. At the same time, LCI(G)s could help protect larger ships from the growing threat of kamikazes—suicide pilots who crashed their planes into their targets—by adding more antiaircraft fire and masking the larger ships with smoke screens.

LCI(G)-70 was armed with a 40mm gun on the bow and 3”/50 as its largest armaments. Four 20mm and two .50 caliber machine guns, along with a depth charge rack, completed the arsenal. These gunboats and similar craft typically operated in 36-ship flotillas which split off into smaller squadrons depending on mission requirements.

LCI(G)-70 was in the Solomon Islands, part of the humorously named “Bougainville Navy” (after one of the largest Solomon landmasses) when Phillips reached the ship in June 1944. Buckey had three or four months of relatively routine operations during

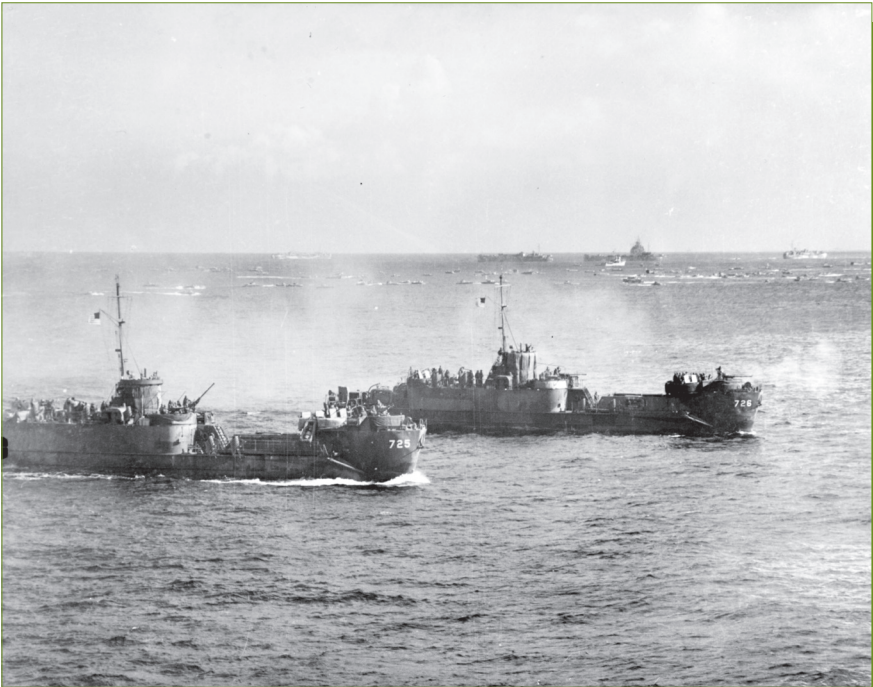
which to acclimate to his crew of five officers and 65 enlisted men. There were still pockets of Japanese resistance in and around the Solomon Islands, but nothing that could threaten American forces building up in the area for the upcoming liberation of the Philippines. As a seaman second class, Denzil “did the deck work and manned the armament. If a boat had a full crew, however, it was considered fortunate,” according to one historian. Denzil probably had to wear many hats and take on plenty of extra duties, especially as one of the new men aboard.

In September 1944, LCI(G)-70 was assigned to the invasion of Morotai, an island in the Moluccas, the taking of which would provide airbases for attacking the Philippines. As he watched waves of landing craft roll into Morotai’s beaches on September 15, Denzil probably felt himself lucky to be in a gunboat instead of a standard LCI loaded with troops. The invasion beaches proved to be some of “the worst beaches in the Southwestern Pacific,” and many landing craft were forced to deposit their troops in the water far from shore. New beaches had to be scouted on the fly, while Denzil probably stood tensely at one of the ship’s



Landing craft move in on the beaches of Mindoro, covered by LCI(G) gunboats and other ships.

National Archives



Two LCI(G) gunboats fire their machine guns at the shores of Saipan, June 1944. LCI(G)-70 performed similar fire support duties during multiple amphibious operations.

National Archives

Denzil’s crew during his first major amphibious operation.

Over the next few days, LCI(G)-70 helped land equipment for a radar unit, and shuttled equipment ashore for Army engineers scrambling to construct airfields. It would

guns. According to LCI(G)-70’s action report, the gunboats’ support of the Morotai landings on White Beach mirrored closely the method described by military historian Gordon L. Rottman:

Four to eight [gunboat] vessels could be assigned to each landing beach—six was a common number. They then proceeded toward the beach [ahead of the landing craft], covering the assault waves with 40mm and 20mm automatic weapons fire. This purely suppressive fire actually hit little, but created a great deal of noise, dust, and rapid explosions, plus a spectacular tracer display. The fire helped keep the enemy’s heads down, created confusion, added to the shock effects of the general bombardment, and degraded [enemy] morale while greatly improving the assault troops’ confidence.

Denzil’s ship appears to have executed something like this, expending about 3,000 rounds of ammunition. Unfortunately, one of the nearby LCI(R) craft (Landing Craft Infantry – Rocket) fired too early, and three of its projectiles exploded near LCI(G)-70’s stern, wounding two men slightly. Fortunately, this was the worst incident to befall

soon be time to move to the Philippines. But first, on October 1, Denzil Phillips was promoted to seaman first class.

For the next several months, LCI(G)-70 was involved in several massive operations across the Philippines, beginning with the invasion of Leyte, but Denzil and his ship were first assigned to Task Group 78.3 for a smaller, supporting mission. On October 20, 1944, as General Douglas MacArthur waded ashore from a different landing craft on one of Leyte’s primary invasion beaches, Denzil Ray Phillips was 70 miles south at Panaon Strait. LCI(G)-70 was one of only five landing support gunships protecting the operation of the 21st Regimental Combat Team (RCT).

Like clockwork, the task group landed the 21st RCT and secured the Panaon Strait, which is only a few hundred feet wide and could easily be covered by the infantry regiment’s weapons. The 21st’s successful insertion sealed the strait to any Japanese reinforcements trying to move northward against the American landings, and safeguarded the transit of any American vessels in turn.

On December 15, 1944, LCI(G)-70 supported

landings on Mindoro, another stepping stone on the way to Luzon and the Philippines’ capital city of Manila. The ship’s report records another smooth operation in the same style as the Morotai landings months before. With Mindoro under American control, the invasion force moved decisively forward with the liberation of Luzon. But the long stretch of smooth sailing for Denzil and his crewmates was about to come to an abrupt and violent end.

The main landings on Luzon would not begin until January 9, 1945, but the invasion fleet needed to maneuver into position. On January 3, LCI(G)-70 and 164 other ships moved through Surigao Strait toward jump-off points in Lingayen Gulf. The flotilla came under attack from Japanese suicide planes—“kamikazes”—a desperate but deadly tactic employed by the Japanese toward the end of the war.

As the sun set on January 5, 1945, a flight of six Japanese “Zero” fighter aircraft attacked LCI(G)-70’s convoy while the American ships were under way to Lingayen Gulf. One dove directly at Denzil’s ship without firing or dropping bombs—indicating that LCI(G)-70 was facing one of the dreaded kamikazes. All of the ship’s antiaircraft (AA) guns opened fire, pumping rounds into the Zero and scoring hits, but its dive continued.

Ship’s Cook Third Class Royal Wetzel survived the attack, and remembered hearing the ship’s general quarters alarm calling men to their battle stations when the kamikazes appeared. Under general quarters, Wetzel was a loader for the starboard side rear 20mm AA gun. The incoming Zero swooped in low over the water while Wetzel’s gun and LCI(G)-70’s other AA emplacements “fired everything they had.” Angling in slightly too high to destroy the ship’s conning tower, the enemy

Artist’s rendition of the kamikaze attack on LCI(G)-70. Joe Ortiz, permission pending



” THE UNSINKABLE 70”
BY JOE ORTIZ

plane instead sheered off masts and antennae and narrowly missed the 3-inch gun before crashing into the LCI's forward 40mm gun tub.

Denzil Ray Phillips was probably part of the 40mm crew, or at least very near the gun when at battle stations. The gun's crew was obliterated along with their equipment. A fire broke out on the bow and flooding had to be contained in one of the compartments, but damage control was so efficient that the ship was able to participate in the invasion several days later. Indeed, the ship remained combat-ready while the fire was put out, splashing two more Zeros that attempted kamikaze attacks.

LCI(G)-70 lived to fight another day, but Buckey Phillips did not. He was first listed as "missing" because his body was thrown off the ship by the plane's violent crash. While several crew members who jumped overboard were pulled out of the water before darkness fell, Denzil's body was never recovered.

His mother Mattie waited an excruciating year for any changes in Denzil's "missing" status. On February 4, 1946, the U.S. Navy declared Denzil Phillips dead. Their notification to his mother likely crossed paths in the mail with a poignant request from Mattie, who was seeking to obtain her son's personal belongings and learn the final assessment of her son's fate. After the official notice of Buckey's death reached her, Mattie received a life insurance settlement as his only beneficiary. It was cold comfort in the face of her loss.

Mattie did have one memento from Denzil's final visit to Grafton: the green beans he picked with her in the summer of 1944. Family members recall how important those mason jars became to the grief-stricken mother. For years, Mattie shared the beans at special dinners, reminding the family each time that Buckey had helped pick them. For decades, Denzil's only memorial was his inscribed name on the Tablets of the Missing at the Manila American Cemetery and Memorial. It is possible that Mattie and Frank requested a marker in West Virginia's Grafton National

Cemetery between 1961 and 1987, a quarter-century period when the cemetery had been filled and no new markers could be requested. After decades of agitation by veterans' groups, a much larger cemetery at last opened four miles away, and Denzil Ray Phillips had the opportunity to be memorialized in his hometown.

Sadly, neither Mattie nor Frank lived to see Denzil's marker placed. Mattie passed away in 1984, and Frank in 1996. Denzil's marker was installed on January 6, 1997, at the West Virginia National Cemetery in Pruntytown. At last, Buckey Phillips was home.



PLACE OF INTERMENT:
Grafton National Cemetery
SECTION A
SITE 155



Coast Guardsman mourns a fallen comrade during the Lingayen Gulf amphibious landings that took place days after Phillips' death. Coast Guard personnel often crewed landing craft alongside the Navy.
National Archives

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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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, among many others.

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For readability, bibliographies have been omitted from this publication. Student research for these biographies relies heavily on primary sources—census records, city directories, draft cards, muster rolls, and more—made available digitally through Ancestry and Fold3. Yearbook repositories and the digitized collections of many universities and archives have been invaluable resources. Most newspaper research was conducted digitally via Newspapers.com, NewspaperArchives, and the Library of Congress’s *Chronicling America* database.

Servicemembers’ Official Military Personnel Files (OMPFs) and Individual Deceased Personnel Files (IDPFs) are another essential part of project research, provided free of charge in most cases by the National Archives through standard records requests.

As the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project has grown and matured, the team has found that new sources sometimes surface for veterans researched in prior project years. To better maintain a “living bibliography” of all its veterans, a single master document is kept up on the project’s webpage under the “Programs” tab at www.wvhumanities.org.

Views and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Archives of the United States, or any other federal agency. For more information about the Veterans Legacy Memorial and the Veterans Legacy Grant Program, visit www.vlm cem.va.gov.

