TRUMAN HENRY WHITE

1930–2001, KOREAN WAR

U.S.ARMY, SERGEANT FIRST CLASS

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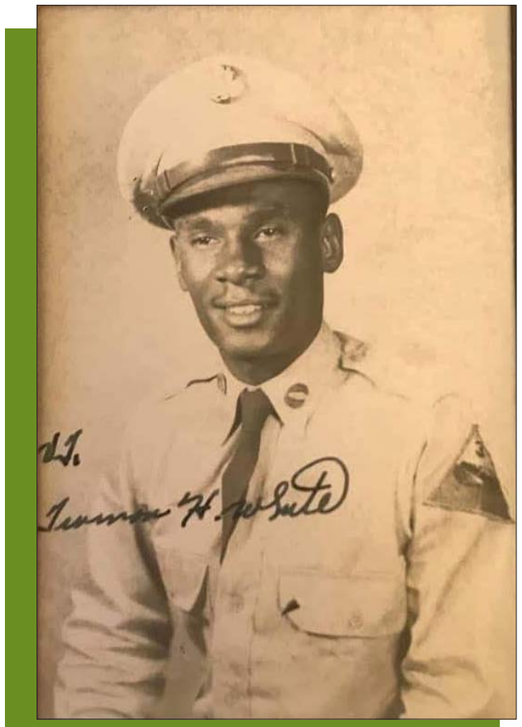
Truman Henry White was born May 26, 1930, in the coal mining community of Galloway, Barbour County, West Virginia. Young Truman grew up in difficult circumstances, especially when his father died while Truman was still an infant. His mother, Katie Mae, soon married Walter Simmons.

Like Truman's biological father, Walter Simmons was a coal miner for the Mountain Fuel Company in Brownton. He was one of only about a hundred Black coal miners in Barbour County at the time. The work was challenging and not always rewarding. His managers only provided 20 weeks of work in 1939—less than half the year—limiting his yearly income to $600. This made for a difficult living situation for Truman's family, who rented their home and tried to make ends meet as best they could.

Multiplying the hardships of the Great Depression, the White family lived in a state where segregation was the law of the land. Black students had access to only five small schools in Barbour County, which served 131 students during the 1937-38 academic year up through eighth grade. Barbour County Black children wanting to pursue a high school education, however, had to travel outside the county.

Truman thus attended Kelly Miller High School in Clarksburg, Harrison County, beginning in 1943. Founded in 1903 and named after the first Black scholar to attend Johns Hopkins University, Kelly



Truman Henry White in uniform.
Courtesy of Stormi White

Miller was a proud center of African American learning, athletics, and culture. Instead of the small classes Truman was used to, attending high school in Clarksburg placed him amid more than 200 fellow students.

LEFT: Coal miner's family in Brownton, Preston County.

RIGHT: Kelly Miller High School in Clarksburg.

West Virginia & Regional History Center, WVU Libraries

He embraced the rigorous curriculum, and luckily did not have to make the long journey from Galloway to Harrison County every day. It seems that Truman was able to attend Kelly Miller by living with his maternal grandparents, Robert and Ella, who lived right across the street from the high school at 411 Water Street.

The young man graduated in 1947. Upon receiving his diploma, Truman moved back in with his mother in Barbour County. His help was probably needed, since his stepfather Walter had died in 1944. Truman worked as a car washer at a local garage, but more was required to keep the family solvent. As the new decade approached, Truman considered his options.

On June 25, 1950, thousands of North Korean soldiers invaded South Korea, intent on seizing the U.S.-backed republic. The United Nations pledged to support South Korea with arms, provisions, and soldiers. White found himself swept up in his country's mobilization and enlisted in the United States Army on July 19, 1950.

Basic training flew by, and Private Truman White was deemed ready for action in November 1950. He was assigned to the 503rd Field Artillery Battalion, which remained an all-Black unit through the first two years of the Korean Conflict, a remnant of the army's segregationist policies only recently curtailed by President Harry S. Truman in 1948. The 503rd had been mobilized and sent to Pusan, South Korea, with nearly 650 men in mid-August of 1950. They had only been in Korea about three months longer than White, therefore, but those months made all the difference in terms of combat experience. The battalion had been in combat from the moment they set foot on the Korean Peninsula.

August through November 1950 brought victory after victory for the South Korean, American, and United Nations forces, but circumstances reversed in late November, when hundreds of thousands of Communist Chinese troops suddenly joined the fight. At a crossroads called Kunu-ri, the 503rd was nearly surrounded. A total of 327 officers and enlisted men were killed, wounded, captured, or went missing. It was a complete rout, and only after U.N. forces stabilized the front was the battalion able to reorganize. It needed new manpower to function as a fighting force again.

White, along with around 350 other replacement troops, joined the battalion as they regrouped

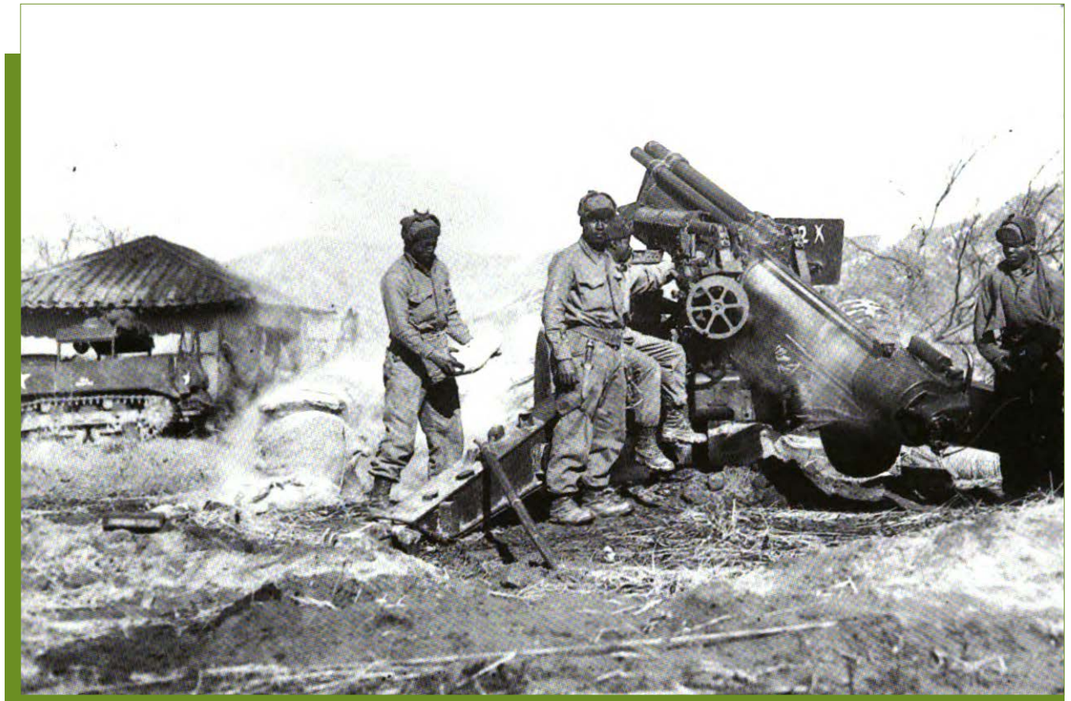
503rd Artillery undergoing inspection, Washington State, 1950. *National Archives*

near Seoul at the end of the year. Young Truman spoke to the combat veterans and quickly learned the essentials of campaigning in Korea. Though White himself was classified as a light weapons infantryman, he was required to be proficient in the operation of the battalion's 155mm howitzers, and through the harsh winter of 1950-51, the artillerists rebuilt their unit up to a 70 percent combat readiness.

Ready or not, the 503rd would soon find itself in combat. For several weeks, the battalion was split up to support various U.N. contingents. Battery A went to Wonju with an ad hoc formation called Support Force 21, while Battery B joined a larger force 20 miles southwest at the crossroads town of Chipyong-ni.

While the battalion was thus scattered, Chinese troops attacked on February 11-13. Support Force 21 was badly mauled, and most of Battery A's artillerymen were captured or went missing. Battery B was luckier. From February 13-16, they and additional U.N. forces fought Chinese troops to a standstill in a victory at Chipyong-Ni subsequently called the "Gettysburg of the Korean War" because it halted further Chinese expansion southward.

Truman White participated in one of these two battles and was wounded, although his lack of recorded battery designation makes it difficult to know which battle for certain. Both batteries experienced around-the-clock combat, surprise attacks by Chinese troops who infiltrated close to their artillery positions, and enemy counterbattery fire. White fell victim to the last of these on February 13, when he was struck in his thorax by shell fragments. He was quickly admitted to an Army station hospital for about a month of recovery.



Gun of Battery B, 503rd Artillery, in action in Korea, 1951. *National Archives*

After his wound healed, he returned to "duty for general service" with the recovering 503rd. The 503rd Field Artillery Battalion spent the rest of 1951 on the defensive. Battle lines became more permanent as negotiations proceeded between the warring powers. But just as the conflict started to stabilize, the future of the 503rd became uncertain. Army officials, who were already three years late implementing President Harry Truman's executive order to ban segregation in the military, began to understand the drawbacks of segregated units in combat. On November 1, White troops were transferred into the battalion, and the 503rd became an integrated unit.

Just over a week later, the 503rd was folded into the 12th Field Artillery Battalion. Truman White concluded his 12-month tour in Korea in November 1951. After a period back in the United States, the Army sent him to France.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) chose France as its international headquarters and supply base for supporting Western capitalist allies during the Cold War. United States troops spent time in the country from World War II in the mid-1940s until the late 1960s, when nationalist French President Charles de Gaulle asked them to leave. At the height of the American presence, approximately 70,000 soldiers and their families lived and worked in the republic, occasionally butting heads with the locals.

Rather than engaging hostile enemies directly, America's NATO troops fought the Cold War by participating in readiness drills, guarding military facilities, and constructing bases that strengthened the alliance across western Europe to guard against the possibility of war with the Soviet Union and its equivalent military alliance, the Warsaw Pact. White would have participated in many of these tasks during his 17-month stint in France, where

he doubtless also learned of the Korean War's conclusion. His foreign service ended in early June 1954, and he was honorably discharged on June 25.

After the Army journeys that had taken him to Europe and Asia, Truman returned home to West Virginia. In 1956, he moved back to Clarksburg and into the home at 411 Water Street where his grandparents lived across from his alma mater. Even as White settled into civilian life, however, he never strayed too far from military service.

In January 1957, three years after he left active duty, he enlisted in the U.S. Army Reserve. The Army never formally mobilized White during his Reserve tenure, but that did not exempt him from certain service requirements. Every year, he attended 15-17 days of training at the headquarters of the Field Artillery or Engineering group he was a part of at the time. Most of the time he stayed in Clarksburg, but occasionally he traveled to military installations in Kentucky or Virginia.

His hard work and prior military experience led to various Reserve promotions over the years. After reentering as a private, he quickly advanced to private first class in 1957 and then to a corporal in 1958. In 1959 he became a sergeant, in 1963 a staff sergeant, in 1967 a section chief, and in 1969 a platoon sergeant. He reached his highest rank of sergeant first class in 1972. For the last decade of his military career, he served as a bridge specialist, responsible for overseeing rapid construction of temporary crossings for military units. White ended his Reserve service on April 3, 1978, nearly 28 years after his first enlistment.

During his time in Clarksburg, White embraced the opportunities his neighborhood offered. He became a proud member of the Mount Zion Baptist Church, located just three doors down from his home. A post office was just a convenient five-minute walk, where White secured a long-term maintenance job in 1963.

Perhaps the most important part of Truman White's life in Clarksburg was also discovered in the neighborhood. Jeannette Rucker lived a block away. She was five years older than Truman and made an independent living for herself as an elevator operator at a nearby hotel. Nevertheless, she saw something she liked in her veteran neighbor. The two fell in love and married on January 23, 1965. Jeannette moved into Truman's home, which became theirs officially when they bought it from his maternal uncle Robert Gholston Jr. in 1973.

Truman and Jeanette raised seven children together: Keith, Jacqueline, Birthenia, Thelma, Truman Jr., Constance, and Elvina. They also got to know 15 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren during their lifetimes. Truman died from an extended illness on April 9, 2001, at the Louis A. Johnson veterans hospital, less than three miles from his home. He was interred in West Virginia National Cemetery on April 13.

PLACE OF INTERMENT:
West Virginia National Cemetery
SECTION 1
SITE 133

Louis A. Johnson Veterans Hospital, Clarksburg, where White spent his last days.
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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SOURCES AND COPYRIGHT

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**.

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