

2LT Wilbur Blaine Sharpe

1922 – 2022

(Battery D, 17th Field Artillery)

Wilbur Blaine Sharpe, born in 1922 in Indiana, the Crossroads of America state, entered the US Army while in high school (1938) by enlisting in Battery C, 139th Field Artillery Battalion and the Indiana National Guard. Ordered next to Camp Shelby, Mississippi, Sergeant Sharpe's assignment consisted of training newly-drafted personnel. America's entrance into WWII changed his posting to Ft. Sill, Oklahoma where he completed Officer's Candidate School and the Basic Battery Officer Course in July 1942.



Sharpe (right) in Algiers in 1942.



17th Field Artillery

New orders rerouted Sharpe to England where he became Assistant Executive Officer, Battery D, US Army 17th Field Artillery Battalion. Entering the war in North Africa, his unit, suffering very few casualties, conducted an historic invasion at the town of Oran on 8 November 1942 as part of the plan to engage Rommel's Panzer Division across the Sahara Desert. The "tide" turned, however, on 14 February 1943 when outnumbered Americans were captured at Faid Pass near Sidi Bou Zid, Tunisia, known officially as the beginning of the Battle of Kasserine Pass and considered by

many military historians to be the first large-scale engagement between German and American forces in World War II. Information acquired later revealed that Germany was not fully prepared to take American prisoners because the U.S. had so recently entered the war.

American survivors of the battle were quick-marched from the battlefield and then trucked to Tunis where they loaded onto German JU-52 transport planes and flown to Capua, Italy. After processing, the Germans forced the captive American officers into overcrowded boxcars known as 40-and-8s (40 men or 8 horses) bound for Germany. Oflag IX A/Z in Rotenburg an der Fulda (primarily used for British officers) became the home for the newly-captured American officers until the camp became overcrowded. The American officers were loaded onto boxcars which American planes bombed and strafed several times during their long hazardous trip to Szubin, Poland.

Arriving safely at the newly-created Oflag 64 POW camp for U.S. Army Ground Forces in Szubin on 6 June 1943 with 14 other 17th Field Artillery officers captured with him at Sidi Bou Zid, Sharpe lived on starvation rations and endured the frigid winters of 1944 and 1945 with little or no heat. Sharpe remained a Kriegy in Oflag 64 until 21 January 1945.



Sharpe Oflag 64 ID card.



Sharpe is 2nd from the left.

Musical recitals and theater presentations helped to break the boredom and reduce the stress of the daily routine encountered at Oflag 64. During one of the first entertainment events, Sharpe sang, *This Is Worth Fighting For*, accompanied only by a trumpet played by LT Robert “Bob” Rankin from Brooklyn, New York, a band member.



Sharpe in *Brother Orchid* (2nd from left)

Eventually, a theatre was built and Sharpe performed in many productions. The first major production in the theater was the three-act play *Brother Orchid* in which Sharpe played one of the Brothers living in a monastery.

Sharpe had a sense of humor as is evidenced in a passage in LTC Doyle Yardley’s book *Home Was Never Like This*:



Sharpe is on the left.

“While rehearsing a coming play, Lt. Wilbur Sharp(e), the high-school ‘girl,’ the flirt, all dressed up with skirt, brassiere and wig, ran out of the theater, pursued by a ‘Kriegy’. The ‘Goon’ guard, outside, got all excited and called the Sergeant of the Guard. He thought a Polish female had been smuggled into the camp! Our stage make-up man had done a good job.”

Sharpe also participated in camp talent shows, a third venue of theatrical entertainment for the Kriegies. The picture on the left is from the 1944 *Your Kind Indulgence* variety show.

Many years later in 2014, Sharpe repeated his moving performance of this ballad, *This Is Worth Fighting For*, on YouTube where he briefly discussed the efforts of The Little Theatre in Oflag 64 to celebrate, through a patriotic musical program, our American Independence Day, July 4, 1776. Standing tall and being accompanied on piano by his friend, Dean Lawrence, Sharpe sang this song, clearly and strong, as a reminder of the experiences which drew together the Kriegies of Oflag 64.

As word spread that the Russians were advancing, notification of a relocation forced march to begin on 21 January, the Kriegies packed their belongings and marched out the gate escorted by armed guards. On the eighth day, Sharpe and two friends hid in a barn near the route and escaped from the forced march. They connected with the local Polish underground but were unwillingly conscripted into the Soviet army three days later. While with the troops under the command of General Zhukov, they witnessed the liberation of a civilian concentration camp. A month later, Sharpe and two others were able to commandeer a jeep and drive to Lublin where they were put on a train to Odessa. From there they caught a boat to Port Said, Egypt before boarding a ship which would carry them home. Gratefully viewing the American coastline with others onboard, he arrived in Boston on 9 April 1945 which was, coincidentally, his Mother’s 53rd birthday.

In the summer of that year, Sharpe completed a refresher course at Fort Sill and awaited reassignment at Camp Stoneman in California for new Far East orders. Fortunately, WW II ended before these orders came and he was released from active duty in 1946. Another reason for celebration this year was his marriage to Mary Glenn of Indianapolis.



Wilbur and Mary Sharpe in 1946.



Sharpe in 1946.

Deciding to join the Army Reserve Unit at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Sharpe was recalled to active duty in 1950 during the Korean War where he served as Battery “B” Commanding Officer of the 424th Field Artillery Battalion, Army IX Corps where he fired the first combat salvo in the Korean War from his battery of 8” howitzers. He returned to the U.S. after serving in Korea for 6 months.

In 1957, Sharpe received a conditional release from the US Army Reserve for the purpose of accepting an appointment in the Pennsylvania Guard and was later discharged with the rank of Captain. He spent the next 50 years in the Washington D.C. area working for Kay Jewelers, Woodward & Lothrop, Burberry, and Charles Schwartz & Son Jewelers. Sharpe retired in 2001.



Sharpe in 2018.

2LT Sharpe’s medals include the Europe-Africa-Middle East Campaign Medal, the WWII Victory Medal, French Croix de Guerre (awarded to the 17th Field Artillery for their heroism in North Africa), American Defense Medal, American Campaign Medal, Korean Service Medal, and the WWII POW medal.

Wilbur Sharpe passed away on July 3, 2022, 9 days after his 100th birthday in Ashburn, Virginia. He and his wife, Mary who predeceased him, were buried together at Arlington National Cemetery on December 7, 2022.

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers