

WILLIAM MCKINNEY

BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE



William “Bill” McKinney was born on February 1, 1923, in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, to Ethel and Jamem McKinney, who served in the trenches in France during World War I. William and his five

brothers and four sisters grew up in a large house in Pittsburg. As a child, William and his younger brother would pick wild berries from the woods for their mother to make jellies.

In June 1943, immediately after high school graduation, William was drafted into the United States Army at the age of nineteen. He scored high marks on a Morse code communications test and was assigned to the air base security battalion at Camp Rucker in Alabama. About a month later, he was transferred to Camp Shelby in Mississippi. There, William experienced segregation and racism to a much greater degree than at any prior point in his life. He and the other African-American soldiers were called names and fights ensued. As a result, William’s outfit was transferred to Camp Forrest in Tennessee to complete their basic training.

In March 1944, William, who had become a member of the 978 Combat Services Supply Company by this point, was shipped to Liverpool, England, from Camp Shanks in New York. Three months later, in June, they crossed the English Channel and arrived on Omaha Beach two days after D-Day. They marched to Paris, reclaiming towns from the Germans along the way. They continued through Belgium and crossed over the Rhine River in Germany.

On May 8, 1945, William and his outfit reached Weimar, Germany near the Buchenwald concentration camp. William had heard of the Nazi camps previously, but recalled he was not prepared for what he was about to witness. When he entered Buchenwald, he saw laboratories with human remains and pits filled with dead bodies. These images, along with the condition of the survivors who looked near death, were difficult to process. William met and befriended two young orphans who remained by his side for a couple of days before William’s outfit was told they were continuing on to Erfurt, Germany. They were then transferred to the occupation forces and remained in Europe until the winter.

In the winter of 1945, William returned home to the United States and was discharged in December. He married his fiancée, Wilma, in October 1948, and they had three children: William, Christofer, and Michael. At the time of his interview in 1997, William was living in Pittsburg and was married to his second wife, Eunice, and had one grandson, Mathew.



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