

L. Kenneth Christian Biography

Pre-WSC Background

L. (Louis) Kenneth Christian was born on December 29, 1912 to Louis and Eva Cheesman Christian in Pullman, Washington.¹ Louis Christian, Sr.'s occupation was listed as a self-employed "Harness Maker," on his World War I draft registration card, signed on September 12, 1918.² Christian had two brothers; Gerald, born in 1916, and Dale, born in 1921.³ He attended Pullman High School, graduating in 1931, and enrolled in Washington State College (WSC) the same year.⁴

WSC Experience

Christian attended WSC intermittently between 1931 and 1937, pursuing a degree in Business Administration.⁵ He also worked with his father in the shoe repair business; the younger Christian was one semester shy of receiving his Bachelor's degree when he left school to work full time.⁶ He made the front page of the college newspaper, the *Washington State Evergreen*, on October 5, 1936, for opening deer hunting season by bringing down "the first Mule deer of the season in the Mount Misery district."⁷ Christian married Esther Wilhelm of Colfax, Washington on July 18, 1937.⁸ In the 1940 United States Federal Census Christian was

¹ C. James Quann, *WSU Military Veterans: Heroes and Legends* (Spokane, Washington: Tornado Creek Publications, 2005), 176; "Washington, Birth Records, 1870-1935 for Christian," *Ancestry.com*. While Quann's book states Christian's date of birth as December 30, all other documentation notes it to be December 29.

² "U.S., World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918 for Louis Belknap Christian," *Ancestry.com*.

³ "Louis Kenneth Christian 2nd Lt.," Brian Cheesman Family Tree, *Ancestry.com*.

⁴ Quann, *WSU Military Veterans*, 176.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ "Posthumous Award Given Pullman Man," newspaper clipping, Box 1, Folder 19, Washington State University Libraries' Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>.

⁷ "Christian Bags Deer," *Washington State Evergreen*, October 5, 1936, WSU 1, WSU Publications: Evergreens <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc/finders/wsupublist.htm> and part found in Evergreens (microfilm), AN48.P8 C65x at Washington State University Libraries' Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>.

⁸ "Washington, Marriage Records, 1854-2013 for L Kenneth Christian," *Ancestry.com*.

noted to be working as a laborer in Pullman.⁹ He was initially inducted into the Army National Guard in 1940.

Wartime Service and Death

Christian enlisted in the U.S. Army at Fort Lewis on September 24, 1941 as a First Sergeant, Infantry.¹⁰ He served with the 25th Infantry Division, 161st Infantry Regiment.¹¹ The 161st was ordered to Hawaii in December 1941 following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. In August 1942, the regiment, along with the rest of the 25th Infantry Division, received an alert for shipment to Guadalcanal in order to reinforce American forces already there and to prepare for an offensive launch to defeat Japanese forces on the island.¹² The 25th left Hawaii at the end of November 1942.

The 161st regimental combat teams (RCT) arrived on Guadalcanal on January 4, 1943. In addition to being assigned to manning defensive positions around Henderson Airfield, they were also tasked with eliminating 500 Japanese troops at the Matanikau River pocket.¹³ Despite heavy undergrowth on the ground and in the trees that helped camouflage enemy soldiers and slowed the progress of the Americans, the offensive was successfully completed by January 21, 1943. The 161st next moved northward through the island, meeting light Japanese resistance prior to seizing Doma Cove on February 8, 1943.¹⁴ With Guadalcanal now in American hands, the 25th

⁹ “Louis K Christian in the 1940 United States Federal Census,” *Ancestry.com*.

¹⁰ “Louis K Christian in the U.S., World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946,” *Ancestry.com*.

¹¹ “Louis K Christian,” *HonorStates.org*, <https://www.honorstates.org/index.php?id=122043> (Accessed July 8, 2019).

¹² “161st Infantry Regiment,” *25th Infantry Division Association Tropic Lightning*, <https://www.25thida.org/units/infantry/161st-infantry-regiment/> (Accessed July 8, 2019).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Division remained on the island to defend against potential Japanese attempts to recapture the island and spend the spring and summer of 1943 training and cooperating.¹⁵

Following his service on Guadalcanal, Christian received his commission as a Second Lieutenant. Attention turned toward the remaining Solomon Islands, with specific attention paid to the island of New Georgia, the location of a key airfield the Japanese built at Munda.¹⁶

Christian and the 161st landed on New Georgia on July 21, 1943 and attached to the 37th Infantry Division. While supporting the 37th Infantry Division in their attack on Bibilo Hill, the 161st came under heavy fire from a ridgeline, later to be named Bartley's Ridge.¹⁷ The Third Battalion of the 161st attacked the ridgeline from the front beginning on July 25, with the First Battalion flanking their position. The initial attack was only partially successful, and after a brief break the 161st resumed the attack on July 28, successfully clearing the ridgeline.¹⁸ It would take another month before fighting on New Georgia ended.

Christian was killed in action on July 27, 1943 at Bibilo Hill. In a letter written by Captain Donald C. Downen to Christian's father, the details of the latter's death were revealed. Downen wrote, in part, the following:

On July 27th, Kenneth's company and another company were attacking a hill strongly held by the enemy. The taking of this hill was vital to the success of our offensive operation...Kenneth's company advanced into position from which it delivered effective fire into the enemy while the adjoining company maneuvered

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Duane Colt Denfeld, Ph.D., "161st Infantry Regiment, Washington National Guard," *historylink.org*, February 1, 2012, <https://www.historylink.org/File/10021>.

¹⁸ "161st Infantry Regiment," *25th Infantry Division Association Tropic Lightning*, <https://www.25thida.org/units/infantry/161st-infantry-regiment/> (Accessed July 8, 2019).

to the right. The enemy returned heavy mortar, machine gun and rifle fire from the hill. About mid-afternoon a mortar shell landed close to Kenneth and large fragments of shrapnel entered the back of his head and right hip. The battalion executive officer saw he was wounded and went forward to help him. He asked Kenneth how he felt. He painfully flashed that ever-ready grin of his and lapsed into unconsciousness...As many of us who knew him looked at him and remembered our many associations together, we resolved to do our job a little better. The doctor said Kenneth felt very little pain and that the wounds were so severe even the most immediate medical attention would not have saved his life.¹⁹

Postwar Legacy

Christian is buried at Manila American Cemetery, Manila, Philippines.²⁰ He posthumously received the Purple Heart. In his letter to L.B. Christian, Captain Downen wrote that the younger Christian was “well-liked” by those who knew him, and that everyone “was his friend.”²¹ He noted that a hill on New Georgia was renamed “Christian Hill,” and that Christian “made the supreme sacrifice for his fellow soldiers and countrymen in our fight to preserve the liberty and ideals we treasure so highly...Kenneth’s sacrifice will not have been in vain.”²² Erich S. Klossner, a WSC graduate in Modern Languages, composed a poem honoring both Christian

¹⁹ “Capt. Downen Tells How Lt. Christian Met Death In Battle,” newspaper clipping, Box 1, Folder 19, Washington State University Libraries’ Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>.

²⁰ “Louis K Christian,” *HonorStates.org*, <https://www.honorstates.org/index.php?id=122043> (Accessed July 28, 2019).

²¹ “Capt. Downen Tells How Lt. Christian Met Death In Battle,” newspaper clipping, Box 1, Folder 19, Washington State University Libraries’ Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>.

²² *Ibid.*

and another WSC graduate who died on New Georgia, Kenneth French. The poem reads, as follows:

TO THOSE YET LIVING

(In Honor of Kenneth French and Kenneth Christian)

*We could not know, we could not see
How great the sacrifice might be.*

*When we went forth two years ago...
We could not see, we could not know.*

*The chart must now unfold for all:
If freedom shall stand or free men fall,*

*So little it is each pays and gives
Who offers his gold the while he lives...*

*Only those who have gone before,
Who keep their silence for evermore.*

*Only they, of all, might say:
"All of myself, I had to pay..."*

*Lest anyone boast how much he gives,
'Tis little enough, if he yet lives!"*

- Erich S. Klossner²³

Christian was survived by his wife, Esther; his father, L.B. Christian; his brothers Gerald and Dale; his grandmother, Mrs. Lovina Christian; an aunt, Mrs. Katherine Barrett; an uncle, Ira Christian. Christian's mother died in 1941.

²³ Erich S. Klossner, "TO THOSE YET LIVING," newspaper clipping, Box 1, Folder 19, Washington State University Libraries' Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>.