

Robert Skillings Munn

Introduction

By the Spring 1945, World War II was coming to an end. The Soviet Union was laying siege on Berlin and the Americans were moving through Austria. Germany officially surrendered to the Allies on May 7, 1945, however, casualty rates continued to mount up until the call for a ceasefire. Among the final casualties was Private First-Class Robert Skillings Munn who was killed in action on April 14, 1945. Munn, a Washington state native and Washington State College alumnus, belonged to the 473rd Infantry Regiment who fought valiantly in the Tunisian and Italian campaigns. As his unit pushed north toward Austria and Germany, they came under intense fire in multiple regions, but it was in northwestern Italy, in a town called Massa, where Munn made the ultimate sacrifice at the young age of 22.

Background

The 473rd Infantry regiment was created in Montecatini (northwest of Florence) in January 1945 to contribute to the Italian campaign. The unit was created from what is known as the “Flakfeet” veterans of the 434th, 435th, 532nd, and 900th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Automatic Weapons Battalions. Pfc. Munn belonged to the 435th which had fought in Tunisia in September 1943 and along the western coast of Italy until 1945.¹ The 435th was used as an anti-aircraft unit, however, by 1945, the Luftwaffe was mostly non-existent and the 435th along with other anti-aircraft artillery units were absorbed into the 473rd on January 14, 1945.

¹ Ernest F. Fisher jr., *United State Army in World War II: The Mediterranean Theater of Operations: Cassino to the Alps* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, US Army, 1993), 390.



Figure I. American soldiers of the 473rd enter the town of Massa, Italy on April 10, 1945. Courtesy of The National WWII Museum. <http://www.ww2online.org/image/members-473rd-infantry-regiment-enter-massa-italy-10-april-1945>.

The 473rd belonged to Lieutenant General Mark Clark's Fifth Army in Italy. After only 31 days of training, Clark decided to commit the unit to a defensive role to free up the 10th Mountain Division in Mt. Belvedere.² On February 17, 1945 Colonel William P. Yarborough – famous paratrooper and former commander of the 509th Parachute Infantry in Southern Italy – took command of the regiment. On February 23, the 473rd was attached to the “colored” 92nd Infantry Division.³ In March, the unit was recognized for its successful tank-infantry raids which knocked out the German outpost at Casa Broglia (near the town of Vergemoli, just south of Massa) which

² Lt. Jack F. Ramsberger, *Battle History: 473rd United States Infantry, World War II* (New Jersey: Dunellen, 1945), 2.

³ *Ibid.*

killed and captured 24 enemy soldiers.⁴ The 473rd worked its way north through the Apennine Mountain Range targeting enemy outposts.

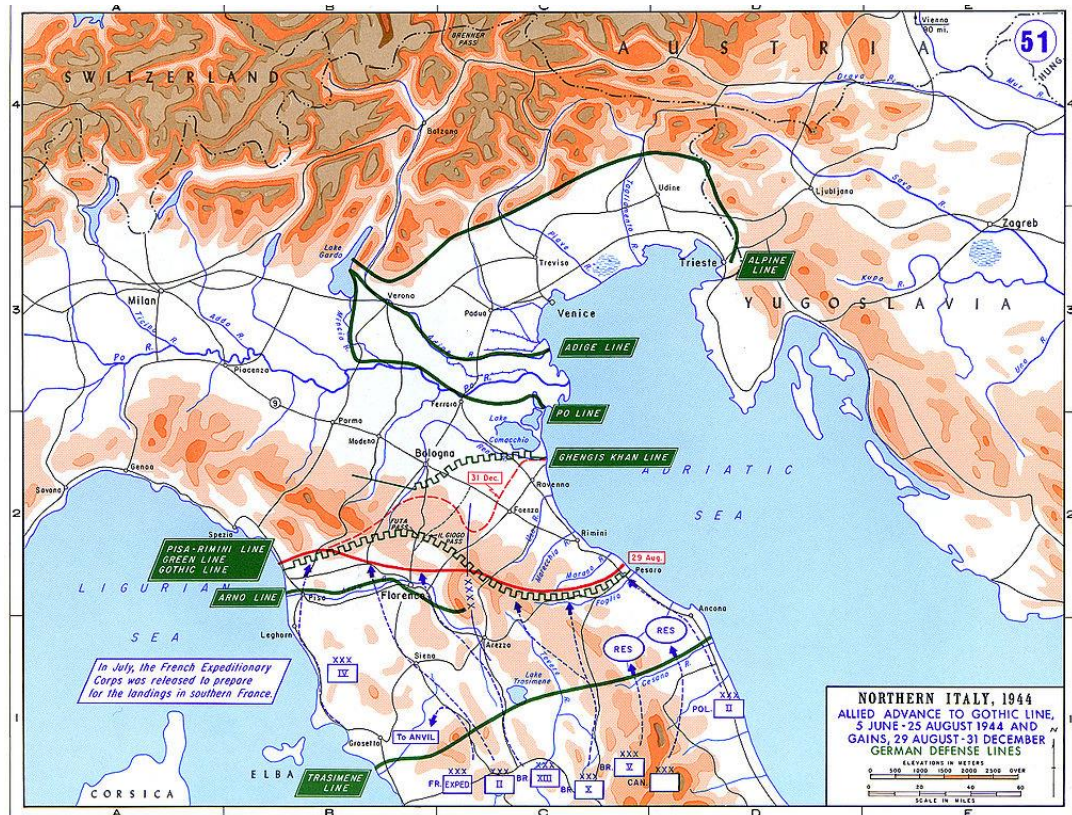


Figure II. American troop movements from August to December 1944. The 473rd pushed north along the coastline under B Company. Their ultimate objective was to push German troops back to Austria and eventually Germany. Map courtesy of Wikipedia. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ww2_europe_map_italy_june_until_december_1944.jpg

April proved to be a month of intense fighting for the 473rd. On April 9, the 473rd engaged in a firefight against the Germans in factory buildings southwest of Massa. The Americans were successful and on April 10, B Company moved into Massa. The terrain of Massa was flat which

⁴ Ibid, 3.

provided no cover from enemy fire.⁵ One journalist in the area called Massa a “suicide courtyard.”⁶ It was on April 14, that Pfc. Robert Munn was killed by enemy gunfire. Only two weeks later, on April 28, the 473rd accepted German surrender thus completing their mission in Italy.⁷



Figure III. Photo of P.F.C. Robert Skillings Munn taken prior to his deployment to Tunisia and Italy. Courtesy of Sarah Skillings Munn.

Private First-Class Robert Skillings Munn

Robert Skillings Munn was born in Olympia, Washington on July 13, 1922 to Robert E. Munn, Senior and Sarah Skillings Munn. His father, was born in Orieka, North Dakota on October 3, 1886, but his family moved to Centralia, Washington in 1887.⁸ Sarah was born in

⁵ Ibid, 8.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, 20.

⁸ “Robert Skillings Munn: Army Serial Number 19134318,” Manuscripts, Archives, & Special Collections at Washington State University, Pullman, WA, 1944-1949. Accessed September 27, 2017.

Westbrook, Maine and moved to Tacoma in 1917 where she met Robert Munn, Senior. The two married on July 28, 1921 and lived on a farm outside of Olympia. They welcomed Robert Skillings Munn, or Bobby as he was known at home, less than a year after their marriage and moved to Tacoma where their son, his brother Allen P. Munn, and sisters Mary Pat and Salley Janet grew up.⁹ The Munn children attended Larchmont School, Fern Hill School, and Stewart Elementary School for their primary education.¹⁰ During the summers, the Munn family camped at Boston Harbor, near Olympia where Robert, Jr. became a proficient swimmer, “past-master at rowing a boat,” and leaned to handle an “outboard motor.”¹¹ As a child, Munn’s hobbies included roaming the beach along the Puget Sound, digging for clams, and beach-combing.¹² As a teenager, Munn developed a profound interest in Fort Lewis Dairy – an interest that would carry on through college. In 1940, Robert Munn graduated from Lincoln High School.

Robert Munn enrolled at Washington State College in the fall of 1940 in the School of Dairy Manufacturing. During his first semester at WSC, he became a member of the Alpha Gamma Rho Fraternity – his brother Allen would also pledge after Robert’s death in 1944. Robert attended WSC until fall 1942 during his junior year when he enlisted in the U.S. Army Reserves and was called up on March 2, 1943. He was initially sent to the Fort Lewis Reception Center, but after a brief month, Robert was sent to Camp Callan, California where he underwent basic training. In August 1943, after just two months of training, he was deployed to Africa with the 435th Antiaircraft Artillery Automatic Weapons Battalion. Munn would fight with the 435th

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Letter from Robert Skillings Munn’s Chaplain to Robert E. Munn, Senior and Sarah Skillings, 1945. Manuscripts, Archives, & Special Collections at Washington State University, Pullman, WA, 1944-1949. Accessed September 27, 2017.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

until 1944 when his unit was transferred to Italy and was absorbed by the 473rd Infantry Regiment.



Figure IV. Robert S. Munn at Alpha Gamma Rho fraternity at Washington State College around 1942. Courtesy of his parents Robert E. Munn and Sarah Skillings Munn.

On April 14, 1945, Munn was killed in action in Massa, Italy. He was survived by his parents, his sisters, Mary Pat Munn, WSC graduate, Sally Janet Munn, WSC graduate and graduate student at Iowa State College, and his brother, Allen P. Munn, WSC graduate.¹³

Graveside services at the New Tacoma Cemetery for Pfc. Robert S. Munn were held following the war and was officiated by Reverend Paul, B. Horn.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "PFC. Robert S. Munn," *Find a Grave*, May 4, 2011. Accessed November 1, 2017. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/69357237/Robert-Skillings-Munn#>.

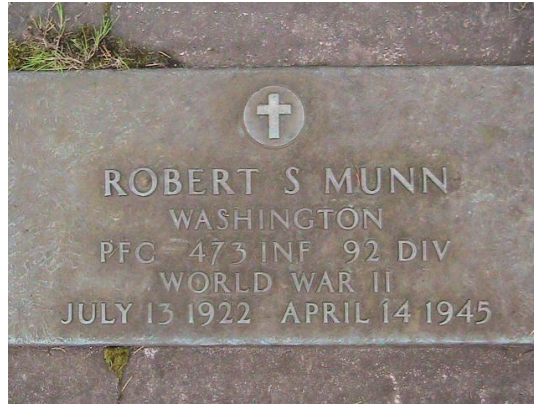


Figure V. Robert S. Munn gravesite at the New Tacoma Cemetery in Tacoma Washington. Photo courtesy of Find a Grave. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/69357237/Robert-Skillings-Munn#>.

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