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Lt. Charles Milton Kate Jr. (September 16, 1919-December 27, 1944)

45th Division, 157th Regiment, Third Battalion, Company L

Written by Sofia Bastidas

Early Life

Charles Milton Kates Jr. was born in Philadelphia on September 16, 1919, to Charles Milton Kates Sr. from Key West, Florida and Helen Busser from Philadelphia.¹ His maternal grandparents were from Pennsylvania², and his paternal grandparents immigrated from the Bahamas in 1886 for economic opportunities in the sea sponge industry. During his teens, Charles Sr. worked in a cigar factory in Key West.³ In his twenties, he moved to Philadelphia where he married Helen in 1916. The couple had three children, Mary (1917), Charles Jr. (1919), and William (1922). For several years, the Kates lived with in-laws, and Charles Sr. worked as an iron worker in the construction industry.⁴

Charles attended Frankford high school in Philadelphia where he played on the tennis team.⁵ It is likely that upon Charles' high school graduation in 1938, the Kates relocated to Miami. Remarkably, in the midst of the Great Depression, Miami had become "the fastest growing community in the US with the highest per capita building rate in the country."⁶ This was in part due to the federal government response to the economic devastation of the Great Depression when a vast public works program

¹ "1920 U.S. Census;" database, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/52066725:6061>): Accessed on September 20, 2022), entry for Charles Milton Kates, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

² "1910 U.S. Census;" database, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/180168315:7884>): Accessed on November 16, 2022), entry for Hellen Busser, Pennsylvania.

³ "1910 U.S. Census;" database, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/180168315:7884>): Accessed on September 20, 2022), entry for Charles Milton Cates, Key West, Monroe, Florida.

⁴ "1920 U.S. Census."

⁵ "U.S., School Yearbooks, 1900-2016," database, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/954154695:1265>): accessed October 02, 2022), entry for Charles Milton Kates Frankfort High School.

⁶ John A. Stuart and John F. Stack, *The New Deal in South Florida: Design, Policy, and Community Building, 1933-1940* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), 106

known as the New Deal was implemented. In the South Florida area, these included the construction of the Orange Bowl, and the Overseas Highway linking Miami and Key West.⁷ As Charles Sr. had become a construction worker in Philadelphia, his skills must have served him well in South Florida, where economic possibilities and family connections greatly improved the family's prospects. About a decade after Charles Sr. moved with his family to Miami, he became a prosperous business owner in the steel industry of the booming building economy of South Florida⁸. By that time, the Kates lived in a prosperous area in Miami and the family volunteered in several community activities.⁹

By 1940, Charles attended the University of Florida, and in October of that same year he registered for military service.¹⁰ During his college years, Charles was active in the student community serving as president of the University of Florida Chapter of the Chi Phi Fraternity. He also played tennis for the Gators team at UF. Upon receiving his bachelor's degree in 1943, Charles began law school at UF.¹¹ According to his family, he was "Well respected by his classmates, quiet, intellectual, and a true gentleman with the makings of a judge."¹²

Military Service

Although Charles registered for the service during his sophomore college year in October of 1940,¹³ he did not enlist until July of 1943 when he dropped out of law school to answer the call of

⁷ John A. Stuart and John F. Stack, 61

⁸ "1950 U.S. Census;" database, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/180168315:7884> Accessed on November 16, 2022), entry for Charles M. Kates, Miami, Florida

⁹ "Steel and Ornamental Erectors Form South Florida Association," *The Miami Herald* (Miami, FL) 8 Sep. 1953. Gold Star Mothers Plan Installation Rites Sunday," *The Miami News* (Miami, FL) 02 Jan. 1953 Newspaper.com

¹⁰ "U.S., World War II Draft Cards Young Men, 1940-1947," database, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections>: accessed October 02, 2022), entry for Charles Milton Kates, service number 0534977.

¹¹ "Six Trek to Altar," *The Miami Herald* (Miami, FL). March 16, 1944. Newspaper.com

¹² Email correspondence with Kathe Davis. September 22, 2022. Ms. Davis is Lt. Charles Kates' niece. We are grateful for her assistance with this project.

¹³ "U.S., World War II Draft Cards Young Men, 1940-1947," database, *Ancestry.com* Entry for Charles Milton Kates

duty.¹⁴ However, Charles nearly missed qualifying for the service as he had poor eyesight. Eager to join the war effort, he memorized the eye exam to pass the Army medical and be accepted in the service.¹⁵

In August 1943, Charles entered the Tank Destroyer Officer Candidate School at Camp Hood, TX, from where in December of 1943, he obtained his commission as a second lieutenant.¹⁶ In March of 1944, Charles married his fiancée, Hazel Martin, from Miami and they lived in Texas where he was stationed.¹⁷ By the summer of 1944, Charles was transferred to Camp Blanding's Infantry Replacement Training Center (IRTC) in Florida to be retrained in the infantry.¹⁸

In January 1944, Camp Blanding expanded to meet the demand for replacement troops by providing training to infantry replacements of front lines casualties.¹⁹ During the invasion of France which began in June 1944, the US Army faced an infantry shortage due to heavy losses of infantrymen.²⁰ According to a survey conducted by the US Army Center of Military History, during the first six weeks following D-Day, infantry companies lost "nearly sixty percent of their enlisted men and more than sixty eight percent of their officers."²¹ As a result, the War Department implemented new policies to expand the existing Army personnel replacement system and address infantry shortages.²² These policies called for the transferring of personnel from supportive branches of the Army to infantry divisions by sending them to infantry replacement training centers to be retrained as infantrymen²³. Charles was among those servicemen selected to retrain for the infantry to meet the demand of infantrymen in the front

¹⁴ "United States of America, World War 2, Enlistment," database, *Ancestry.com* Entry for Charles Milton Kates

¹⁵ Email correspondence from Kathe Davis. September 22, 2022

¹⁶ *The Miami Herald* (Miami, FL) 27 Aug 1943, *Newspaper.com*; 12 Dec 1943

¹⁷ "Six Trek to Altar," *The Miami Herald* (Miami, FL). March 16, 1944. *Newspaper.com*

¹⁸ W. Stanford Smith, *Camp Blanding: Florida Star in Peace and War* (Varina: Research Triangle Publishing, 1998) xiii

¹⁹ W. Stanford Smith, *Camp Blanding: Florida Star in Peace and War*, 117

²⁰ Roland Ruppenthal. *Logistical Support of the Armies: September 1944-May 1945*.

<http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USA/USA-E-Logistics2/USA-E-Logistics2-11.html>, 310 and 313

²¹ Harry Yeide, *The Tank Killers* (Havertown: Casemate Publishers, 2004), 127.

²² Roland Ruppenthal, 320.

²³ Leonard L. Lerwill. *The Personnel Replacement System in the US Army*, (Department of the Army, 1954), 452

lines.²⁴ In the Fall of 1944, Charles was deployed to Europe where he was reassigned to the Third Reinforcement Battalion²⁵ and stationed in a replacement depot most likely in Neufchateau, France, which served the Seventh Army.²⁶

Nicknamed “America’s forgotten army,”²⁷ the Seventh Army comprised the 3rd, 36th, and 45th infantry divisions that led the amphibious invasion of Southern France, known as Operation Dragoon beginning on August 15, 1944.²⁸ Under the command of General Patch, the Seventh Army secured the French Riviera coast as the troops continued to liberate Southern France while being greeted by cheering civilians in every town, city, and village in that region. Assisted by the French Forces of the Interior (FFI), known as the Maquis resistance, the Seventh Army pursued the retreating Germans while pushing up to the Rhone Valley²⁹ until reaching the “impenetrable” Vosges Mountains, a natural fortress blocking the access to the Franco- German frontier, which was ordered by Hitler to “be defended to the last man³⁰. Accordingly, from this point on, the Seventh Army began to meet bitter German resistance as fighting became increasingly fiercer³¹ as they neared the Third Reich frontier. Nevertheless, the Seventh Army slowly but surely advanced through the Vosges, successfully reaching the Alsace region in Eastern France³², despite the odds, but at a high cost.³³

As a result, as winter approached, the infantry shortages situation in the European theater of operations (ETO) went from critical to severe, especially following the unexpectedly fierce German

²⁴ Roland Ruppenthal, 318.

²⁵ Morning Report. 157th Seventh Regiment. Company L. December 25, 1944. Thanks to Hugh Foster and Leonard Cizewski for their assistance and for providing me copies of these archival records which are not widely available.

²⁶ Leonard L. Lerwill. *The Personnel Replacement System in the US Army*, (Department of the Army, 1954), 454.

²⁷ Harry Yeide, *The Tank Killers* (Havertown: Casemate Publishers, 2004), 187.

²⁸ Anthony Tucker-Jones, *Armored Warfare from the Riviera to the Rhine* (S. Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2016), 38.

²⁹ Anthony Tucker-Jones, *Armored Warfare from the Riviera to the Rhine*, 73

³⁰ Keith E. Bonn. *When the Odds Were Even: the Vosges Mountains Campaign, October 1944-January 1945*. (Novato: Presidio, 1994), 104

³¹ Army & Navy, *The History of the 157th Regiment* (Baton Rouge: Army & Navy Publishing Company, 1946), 113

³² Army & Navy, *The History of the 157th Regiment*, 120

³³ Army & Navy, *The History of the 157th Regiment*, 113

Ardennes offensive which began on December 16, 1944, and which took a heavy toll on the Army infantrymen³⁴. Furthermore, the fierce fighting coupled with one of the coldest winters on record created non-combat issues such as sickness and frost bite adding to the infantrymen shortage problem. During this “Black December” of 1944, the US Army reached its highest casualties at 134, 421 soldiers in the ETO³⁵.

It was during this critical time that Charles was deployed to the combat zone in the Alsace Plains by the Franco-German frontier, which the 45th and 103d Infantry Divisions had recently crossed on December 16³⁶. On December 21st, 1944, Charles was assigned the Seventh Army’s 45th Infantry Division³⁷, known as the Thunderbirds, which by the end of October, had not received “a single replacement” soldier³⁸. Charles served under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Felix Sparks, who had led the 157th regiment liberation march from Sicily to Southern France, and from the Rhone to the Rhine.³⁹ However, at the time Charles was assigned to Felix Sparks’ 157th Regiment, Third Battalion, Company L,⁴⁰ Charles found a “demoralized and depleted battalion” that had just been ordered to stop the advance towards the Reich⁴¹. Nevertheless, the 157th regiment continued the fight from house to house to liberate towns and villages in the Alsace Franco-German border.⁴²

Despite the prevalent low morale of the 157th regiment in December 1944, Charles first combat experience resulted in a jubilant victory for the 157th regiment, as two days before Christmas, the regiment liberated two platoons from the First Battalion and Second Battalion which had been trapped

³⁴ Roland Ruppenthal. 321

³⁵ Roland Ruppenthal, 316; 317

³⁶ Keith E. Bonn. *When the Odds Were Even: the Vosges Mountains Campaign*, 172

³⁷ Morning Report

³⁸Alex Kershaw. *The Liberator* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012), 164

³⁹ Army & Navy, *The History of the 157th Regiment*, 121

⁴⁰Morning Report

⁴¹ Keith E. Bonn. *When the Odds Were Even: the Vosges Mountains Campaign*, 174

⁴²Army & Navy, *The History of the 157th Regiment*, 128

for six days in Bundenthal, a town besieged by the Germans in the Alsace region.⁴³ Surely, the rescue made a nice Christmas story and gave a needed boost to the morale of the troops. On Christmas Eve, Charles and his new comrades had “Christmas dinner complete with turkey and all the trimmings” after spending the day holding their defensive positions⁴⁴. On the following day, the 157th regiment spent Christmas Day exchanging “presents with the Germans in the form of artillery fire.”⁴⁵

On December 27, as the Third Battalion approached the town of Obersteinbach in the Alsace region while under enemy fire⁴⁶, Charles, another officer, and two enlisted men, went missing in action.⁴⁷ On the 8 of January 1945, their status was changed to killed in action (KIA).⁴⁸ Charles was 25 years old. According to Army records, battle casualties were at an all-time high in December of 1944.

Legacy

Charles rests in the Lorraine American Cemetery nearly sixty miles from where he fell fighting the Nazi forces in the Franco-German border. Although his military career with the Thunderbirds was cut short, the 45th Infantry Division continued to fight into Germany, withstanding Operation Nordwind which was the last German offensive, and which was launched four days after Charles was killed. Likewise, on the Spring of 1945, the Thunderbirds went on to liberate the Dachau concentration camp in Central Germany, and it was Charles’ Third Battalion of the 157th regiment, “the first to see the sickening horror that lay behind the pomp of Nazi Germany⁴⁹.” Indeed, the gruesome scene that Charles’ company

⁴³ Army & Navy, *The History of the 157th Regiment*, 128

⁴⁴ AARs, 157th Regiment. December 1944. Pg. 12; 11. The 45th Division in World War II: The Thunderbirds. Facebook Page Public Group. Thanks to Leonard Cizewski for facilitating this document and for his contribution to this project.

⁴⁵ Alex Kershaw. *The Liberator* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012), 179.

⁴⁶ Army & Navy, *The History of the 157th Regiment*, 128.

⁴⁷ Morning Report. 157th Regiment. Company L. December 30th, 1944 Thanks to Hugh Foster and Leonard Cizewski for facilitating me this document and for their contribution to this project.

⁴⁸ Morning Report. 157th Regiment. Company L. January 8th, 1945. Thanks to Hugh Foster and Leonard Cizewski for facilitating me this document and for their contribution to this project.

⁴⁹ Army & Navy, *The History of the 157th Regiment*, 163

encountered in Dachau allowed the Thunderbirds to “realize the full evil of the thing they were fighting.”⁵⁰ On the following morning, the rest of the Seventh Army marched triumphant into Munich, the birthplace of Nazism.

Charles was survived by his parents, his brother George, his sister Lucille, and his wife Hazel. His brother George Kates had also joined the Army serving the PTO. Upon his discharge from the military, George attended the University of Florida on his GI bill and studied law to honor the memory of his brother. Likewise, George’s daughter, who is Charles’ niece, also graduated from the University of Florida School of Law.

The sacrifice of the Thunderbirds who fought and died in the Alsace area has not been forgotten by the locals of that French region, as to this day, Alsatians carry out a tradition to honor the sacrifice of the American soldiers who paid the ultimate price to liberate, not only their region, but the rest of the free world from Nazism.

⁵⁰ Army & Navy, *The History of the 157th Regiment*, 169

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