



Railsplitter Obituary



Russell G. Shurr

Shurr, Russell G. Retired Lt. Col. U.S. Army Reserve of Sun City Center, FL formerly of Milwaukee, was Born To Eternal Life on February 6, 2019. He celebrated his 100th. birthday on July 25, 2018 surrounded by family and friends. Preceded in death by his beloved wife Agnes (nee Bluemle) Shurr. Loving father of Kris (Kent Aman) Shurr, Barbara (Michael) Peterka, Kathy (Gary) Chilver, Jackie (James) Marschall, the late Bette (David) Eckstrom and the late Russell H. (Renee) Shurr. Also survived by 11 grand and 18 great-grandchildren, other relatives and many friends. Interment Pinelawn.



Scroll down to see an article about LTC Shurr and his military experience.



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Former Railsplitter turns 100, reflects on extraordinary life

By Sgt. 1st Class Joy Dulen | 84th Training Command | Aug. 29, 2018



FORT KNOX, Ky. — He is 100 years old now and most, if not all, of his brothers in arms are gone. But he remembers them all and their days together helping America and its allies win World War II.

Russell Shurr spent more than three decades in the Army before retiring. He finished high school, went to college, enlisted in **the** National Guard, got married, went active Army, commissioned, deployed to World War II, crossed Omaha Beach, made it home, joined the Reserve, had six children, and retired as a lieutenant colonel.



And all this happened before most Soldiers serving today were even born.



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Yet Shurr doesn't miss an opportunity to meet with Soldiers and fellow retirees to reflect on his extraordinary service and life...so far. He's still going strong after turning 100 on July 25.

Shurr grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. After graduating high school, he went to the University of Wisconsin at their Milwaukee campus. He enlisted as a private in the Wisconsin National Guard Army Air Corps in 1941 while working as a draftsman during the day and attending college classes at night. He got married, finished his degree in engineering, and then decided to join the active Army. "My friend and I saw in the (Milwaukee) Journal that the 84th (Infantry) Division, which was now in active duty at Camp Beauregard, Louisiana, was starting an observation squadron," Shurr explained. "So my buddy and I thought, we'll go down and see whether they're interested in us. Oh they took us. My buddy looked and acted like a truck driver so that's what they did with him, but they didn't know what to do with me," he said.

The 84th Division (present day 84th Training Command) has lineage that dates back to World War I. In fact, their special designation "The Railsplitters" and unit patch insignia, which highlights an axe on the downward swing splitting wood, was selected to honor the legacy of lineage traced back to the Illinois Militia Company where Capt. Abraham Lincoln served. The 84th Division was constituted and mobilized in 1917 and then reconstituted in 1921 into the Organized Reserves (today's Army Reserve). The unit was activated again in late 1942 and was redesignated as the 84th Infantry Division. And this is when a young Shurr decided to join their ranks, for the first time.

"I was a draftsman in a firm that did middle work and commercial construction so they finally just put me with the medics," Shurr said. "They found out I could handle a typewriter without using the Columbus method - where you discover a key and hit it."

Shurr's observation squadron moved and operated out of Fort Dix, New Jersey, where he and fellow Soldiers would escape to nearby Trenton to grab a bite to eat or catch the latest motion picture.



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“One Sunday morning, we had a late breakfast and saw something about a movie we wanted to see so we got in the car, four of us, and drove into Trenton,” said Shurr. “On the radio we heard that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor and between the four of us, we all said, ‘where the hell is Pearl Harbor?’”

Shurr said everyone knew exactly where Pearl Harbor was by the next day and not too long after, his unit was relocated closer to the Atlantic. “Our observation squadron, they were flying along the coast watching for German submarines,” he added.

Then Shurr’s military career changed. He had made it to the enlisted rank of sergeant when he decided to go before a board to become a commissioned officer. They accepted him into the Army Corps of Engineers and after officer training, he received orders to report to a combat engineer battalion as a second lieutenant.

Combat engineer battalions were prevalent during World War II. They possessed both combat and combat support capabilities. To name a few: constructing, fixing or demolishing bridges, roads and airstrips; conducting river crossings by means of rafts or motor-powered assault boats; clearing debris or wreckage; even fighting as infantry when needed.

As soon as Shurr reported to his new battalion, they had already received orders to deploy in support of World War II. And he says he’s not even sure if they were told where they were going.

“We got off the boat, and there were all these kids asking for gum or candy,” Shurr said jokingly. “That was the invasion force we first had to fight. They boarded a train and eventually it stopped.

“We got off and that’s where we were supposed to build an airstrip,” said Shurr. “We still didn’t know where we were and then we came to find out it was England.”

At this time, Shurr moved into the role of battalion adjutant, working directly for the battalion commander. The year was 1944 and Shurr’s battalion received orders to take part in the invasion of France at



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Normandy. They crossed the English Channel and landed at Omaha Beach.

“I walked across Omaha - scared stiff. I was going across and I was thinking at any minute I’m going to feel something hit me, but it didn’t. I don’t know how I got across,” reflected Shurr, solemnly. After a long pause, his tone lightened. “Everyone in the battalion would tell you, ‘that damn lieutenant is so skinny, (the enemy) couldn’t even see him let alone hit him’.”

He laughed and then sat for a minute just thinking.

“They tell me that later on they called that ‘Bloody Omaha’,” he continued. “It was kind of a mess.”

Shurr spent more than 10 months overseas. When he deployed, he left behind his wife, Agnes. When he returned, it didn’t take long for the Shurrs to become three, giving birth to their first child, a daughter. He spent time with active duty units in both California and Washington and promoted to captain before his family settled back in Wisconsin where Shurr made another career change. He joined the Army Reserve.

He continued to serve his country into the 1970’s. At the end of his military career, Lt. Col. Shurr had gone full circle, serving once again under the 84th Division as a battalion commander. When it was all said and done, he had given 32 years to the Army and spent many of those years as a Railsplitter.

The Shurrs ended up as a family of eight. They had four more daughters and a son, including a set of twin girls. His oldest daughter and son both joined the Air Force.

Shurr’s life has been a roller coaster of experiences filled with tests, commitment, honor, joy and tragedy. After his active duty years, he worked as a draftsman and estimator for an ironworks firm. He and partners bought the company and years later, they sold the plant and closed the company down. He never had to work again.



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He and Agnes were married more than 60 years before she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and subsequently passed away. One of his twin daughters succumbed to cancer and Shurr's only son, an Air Force Crew Chief, was killed in an accident at Mitchell Air Force Base when his aircraft caught fire and exploded.

Yet there's an air of thankfulness and positivity when this new Centenarian speaks about his life. When Shurr lived in Milwaukee, he was so active in his church, he was known as Pastor Shurr. His other nickname is the Wisconsin Cowboy as he has always loved wearing western clothes, to include a ten-gallon hat, bolo tie and cowboy boots.

One of Shurr's daughters moved to Florida years ago where he and Agnes would visit during the holidays. He now lives in the sunshine state full-time and it was there, at the end of July, that more than 50 members of his family joined together from Colorado, Wisconsin and Florida to celebrate his 100th birthday in Sun City.

We called it the Shurr invasion," he joked.

After encapsulating his extraordinary life, Shurr still wasn't done talking about his years as a Soldier...or showing off his keen sense of humor.

"Oh, I forgot to say that I finally did get a call. I got called and told to report to the draft, my number was up," Shurr said with a smirk. "But I was already in! I told them, 'I'm sorry, the first sergeant won't let me go that far on a pass'."



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LTC Shurr in 2008

Age 90