

Biography of leonard a. funk, jr



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Bloody battles, raids in the night, and daring attacks on enemy positions: First Sergeant Leonard A. Funk, Jr. experienced them all firsthand. This legend of American military history was so tough that he became the most decorated American paratrooper of the Second World War. His legacy and achievements will live on for eternity. Herein is outlined some of Funk's greatest achievements and accompanying awards for the man lovingly referred to as " Napoleon".

Leonard Funk began life in Braddock Township, Pennsylvania. Details on his family life and history were difficult to uncover, but there was still much to tell. The diminutive five feet-five inches, 140 pound, small town boy would grow to be one of the most prolific war heroes of all time. His bravery and heroism outmatched his stature. When one thinks of a warrior, one does not often think of 1SG Funk's physicality, but it was his extreme tenacity and combat toughness that separated him from the pack and earned him the nickname that would last a lifetime.

While attending school as an adult learner, Leonard Funk joined the United States Army prior to the official entry of the United States into World War II as a draftee. Funk belonged to the historic 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment out of Camp Blanding, Florida. The 508th was the first, and so far, only, Parachute Infantry Regiment to have formed at the camp. Shortly thereafter, his duty station changed to England in order to continue training himself and his newly assigned subordinates. More importantly, it was from there that, then, Sergeant Funk participated in the " D-Day" invasion at Normandy on 06 June 1944. His 40-mile inland jump earned him a Silver Star for combat actions over a ten-day period while seeking to rejoin with other

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units. Even more incredibly, Sergeant Funk sprained his ankle on landing and fought through the pain the entire time. It was from there that his career began to skyrocket, and his acts of combat proficiency displayed time after time.

Newly (and quickly) promoted 1SG Funk parachuted into Holland with a minimal crew that consisted of himself and two others as support for “Operation Market Garden”. On 17 September 1944, Funk and his men were tasked with the improbable mission of rendering three 20 mm anti-aircraft gun inoperable and eliminating their crews. The guns were shooting US gliders out of the sky. 1SG Funk did not disappoint. He and his crew took the gun teams by storm and obliterated the enemy positions, killing 20 enemy soldiers that were fighting for the Third Reich. The skeleton crew then cleared a landing zone for incoming allied gliders and paratroopers without losing a single soldier in battle. “Operation Market Garden” was unsuccessful overall, but the actions of 1SG Funk stood out as a shining success. He earned the Distinguished Cross for his role, the second highest award given to military personnel.

Funk’s documented career continued from there. Just over a year after the infamous Operation Market Garden, 1SG Funk joined members of various units within the US Armed Forces to take a part of the equally (in)famous “Battle of the Bulge”. The battle was an effort to thwart German advances and would prove to be the last great offensive scheme by the Reich. It was during this battle that 1SG Leonard A. Funk solidified himself among the pantheon of immortal warriors. For in this battle, 1SG Funk earned the Medal of Honor for extreme bravery.

1SG Funk led his troops through 15 miles of tortuous, snow-covered terrain. In that time, his company's executive officer died in active service. Being the natural leader and next in the succession of command, Funk took charge of the men. To continue the offensive, he needed men. After searching in various places and companies, Funk was unable to rally enough hardened infantry soldiers to be effective. The 1SG displayed remarkable problem solving abilities and went to the company office.

There, he was able to recruit 30 clerks, each of them as unlikely a hero as their new leader and continued on to the battle to serve the Germans a dose of violence and display true American wherewithal. He somehow managed to sneak in a time for a little humor.

The makeshift platoon marched through barrages of enemy fire to find their way to the village of Holzheim, Belgium. They faced artillery impacts near them as they moved. 1SG Funk was able to lead his newly formed unit straight to the enemy strongpoint. He and his men sprang upon the enemy fighting forces and somehow managed to capture 30 enemy combatants. They combined their captives with that of another unit's, totaling 80 prisoners of war. The POWs were held in the fenced yard of a house nearby with only four American guards to keep watch. After assuring their safety, 1SG Funk rejoined the fight.

During his absence from the prisoners, unbeknownst to 1SG Funk, a passing patrol of German soldiers overtook the miniscule detail of guards and freed their compatriots. Despite heavy fighting, Funk found the time to return to the prisoner containment area to check on his troops. He saw white capes

and mistook the German patrol for friendly units; the capes were nearly identical to those used by allied forces at the time. Advancing to greet the unseen enemy, he slung his weapon and moved forward. Funk instead met the muzzle of a German machine pistol and a German officer giving commands in language that he did not comprehend.

In that moment, one can only imagine the thoughts that went through the American hero's head. Outwardly, 1SG Leonard Funk did the only thing that made sense; He began to laugh. Laughing only served to anger the German commander, who shouted even louder. The two bantered back and forth in this manner until the absurdity of the situation spread to the other German soldiers, who could not help but laugh at the situation also. The keen-sensed First Sergeant, however, did not let the moment escape. He was not done with the fighting.

Feigning surrender in the moment of seeming light-heartedness, 1SG Funk began slowly unslinging his weapon. When the moment was right, 1SG Funk turned the tables by firing his weapon into his surprised assailant. The officer died immediately. 1SG Funk rallied his men nearby. In under a minute, 21 Germans lay dead or dying, 24 Germans wounded, and the remainder recaptured. The Laughing Paratrooper earned his Medal of Honor on that day in January of 1945.

The Battle of the Bulge marked the last of 1SG Leonard Funk's major contributions to the war. He left military service in June of the same year with an honorable discharge. This, however, was not the end of Leonard's story. After separation, he continued serving other members of the Armed

Forces by working for the Veteran's Administration until his retirement as a division chief of the Pittsburgh regional office after 27 years. He continued to live out his life in his hometown in Braddock Township, PA. America's Napoleon died on 22 November 1992 comfortably in his hometown.

Leonard Funk never married and had no children. Still, there were fond memories of a man who had great respect for others and cared for them genuinely. 1SG Funk rests in Arlington National Cemetery. During his illustrious and short career, he was awarded the Combat Infantryman Badge, Parachutist Badge with 2 combat jump devices, WWII Victory Medal, European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal with Arrowhead device and 4 bronze campaign stars, American Campaign Medal, American Defense Service Medal, Army Good Conduct Medal, Purple Heart with 2 bronze oak leaf clusters, Bronze Star, Silver Star, Distinguished Service Cross, and the Medal of Honor.

Leonard Funk did not begin life setting out to be a war hero. His quiet beginning led to a career that was one for the ages. He did not volunteer, but he also did not shy away when called to serve. To call him a hero, is to undervalue his achievements. To call him a legend, is to neglect his memory. His short time in the Army was greater than most would ever achieve and to what all should aspire. First Sergeant Leonard A. Funk is and was an American icon.

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