

2LT Leo Wilton Fisher

1916 to 1971

Early Life

Leo Wilton Fisher's life began on January 11th, 1916, in Pittsylvania County, Virginia, as an orphan. He was placed in a foundling home until he was adopted by John Wilton Fisher and his wife Ruth. The 1920 census lists the family living in Highland Springs in the Fairfield District of Henrico County, near Richmond, Virginia.

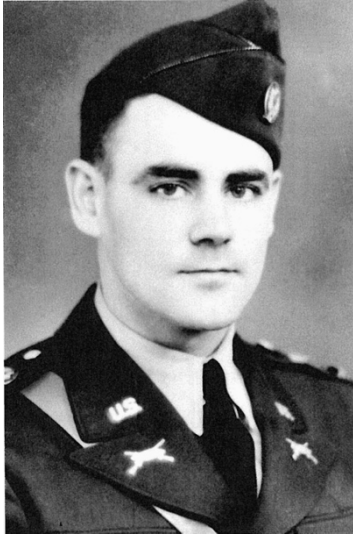
Family life in Highland Springs was great, according to Leo, until Ruth died of a brain tumor when he was 12 years old. At the time of the 1930 census, when he was 14, Leo was reported living in Radford, Henrico County, Virginia, with his father John W. and stepmother Ivey Fisher. Later that year, Leo came home from school to find his father and stepmother gone. They had abandoned him.

For the next year or so Leo lived outside of Danville, Virginia on his grandparents' (Ruth's parents) tobacco farm in the summer and spent the school year living with various aunts and uncles in Richmond, Virginia. At the same time the Great Depression was worsening and making life difficult for Leo's extended family. He eventually decided to leave and joined many, many other jobless young men as itinerant workers, popularly known as hobos. He partnered up with another hobo and the two traveled together for three or four years, hitching rides on freight trains to get from town to town and job to job. Every fall they settled in a small town, found jobs to take them through the winter months, and Leo would enroll himself in the local school.

Determined to finish high school and collect a diploma, Leo finally decided to leave the hobo life and settle in Monmouth, Illinois. He got a room and board job with the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) and enrolled in school. He received his high school diploma in 1937, aged 21. He enrolled in Monmouth College, a private liberal arts college associated with the Presbyterian church. He attended Monmouth College for two years but funds were getting tight so he enlisted in the United States Army Air Corp. His plan was to complete his college education after his time in the military.

World War 2 Experience

After joining the Army Air Corp, Leo started his training at Pope Army Air Field in North Carolina adjacent to Fort Bragg. At some point he left flight



school and was reassigned to the Infantry. The United States was not yet at war but Fort Bragg was undergoing a massive expansion in 1941, preparing for large numbers of new soldiers. Leo would have been a member of a relatively small Army contingent. While at Fort Bragg he became friends with a soldier from Spartanburg, South Carolina. Leo would go home with him at times on the weekend. He met his future wife, Shell West, on one of those visits to Spartanburg, and they began dating.

On July 15th, 1940, the 1st Armored Division was activated at Fort Knox, Kentucky. On October 9th 1941 Leo had transferred to Fort Knox to attend the Armored Forces Officer Candidate School. While at Fort Knox he proposed by mail to Shell West and they were married December 24th, 1941. Leo graduated from the Armored Forces Officer Candidate School on January 8th, 1942 and was assigned to the 1st Armored Division as a Second Lieutenant. Finding a small apartment off post, Shell remained in the Fort Knox area until the division was shipped overseas.

On April 11th, 1942, the division was ordered to Fort Dix, New Jersey, for deployment overseas. Their first destination was Northern Ireland, arriving on May 16th, 1942. The division trained on the moors until October 29th, 1942, when they were shipped to England. From England, over the next two months, the division was shipped to North Africa. Those units assigned to Combat Command B fought in Operation Torch, the invasion of North Africa which began on November 8, 1942. 2LT Fisher's unit, however, was likely assigned to Combat Command A. Upon arrival, that command was committed to the Tunisian campaign.

On the morning of February 14th, 1943 2LT Fisher was commanding a platoon of 5 Sherman M4 tanks outside the town of Sidi bou Zid, Tunisia, on the plains between Faid Pass to the East, controlled by the Germans, and Kasserine Pass to the West, controlled by the Allies. Early that morning the Germans poured through Faid Pass and Maizila Pass to the South, aiming to drive the Allies out of Tunisia. The attack was overwhelming. As Leo Fisher described his personal experience:

My tank—in fact my whole platoon was destroyed. I and three of my men were all that I know of that was left from my crew of 25 men. I was burned and had a compound fracture of both bones in the right leg. Behind the Barbed Wire, part 1

Capture and Prisoner of War Experience

2LT Fisher was picked up by the Germans and turned over to the Italians for medical treatment. He spent the next year in prison camp hospitals: in Italy until the September 1943 surrender, then Austria, Germany, Czechoslovakia and finally, on February 17, 1944, Oflag 64 in Szubin, German occupied Poland. He went to work on the camp newspaper, *The Oflag 64 Item*. His name appears on the staff list for the first time in the May 1, 1944 edition and for the last time in the August 1, 1944 issue. The July 1, 1944 issue contains an article with his byline titled “‘Betty’ Keeps Busy at Home but She’d Be Mighty Glad to See Us”.

Leo’s broken leg had never been properly treated nor had it healed. He spent his months in Oflag 64 wearing a full leg cast. Although, he could not participate in the digging, he would stand watch while tunnel digging and escape operations were underway. In September 1944 his imprisonment ended when he was repatriated to the United States through an exchange for seriously sick and wounded prisoners of war. His leg cast had one last job to perform. It was replaced by prisoner medics and the new cast was filled with documents containing information about the camp, provided by the Oflag Military Intelligence unit.

On September 8, 1944, Leo was put on a train to Sassnitz, Germany, then a train ferry to Trelleborg, Sweden. The Swedish ship *Gripsholm*, chartered by the United States, carried Leo and 233 other repatriated prisoners home from Sweden. Before boarding, all prisoners with casts were taken aside by the Germans and their cast was X-rayed. Prior to being X-rayed, all the prisoners were asked if there was anything in their casts and all said no, despite the threat of being shot. By God’s providence, nothing was found and all prisoners boarded the ship.

Leo was back in the United States by September 18th, 1944 and a patient at Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, District of Columbia. It was there that his cast with the documents was removed and the first of many surgeries took place. In late November of 1944 he was transferred to Robert T. Oliver General Hospital in Augusta, Georgia. General hospitals were war time military hospitals that provided more complex medical or surgical care in specialist areas, such as orthopedic and plastic surgery, both of which would have benefited Leo Fisher. In December 1944 he was still a patient at Oliver General Hospital and now a First Lieutenant. That month he composed a letter, which was mimeographed and mailed to over 300 addresses collected from fellow POW’s at Oflag 64. He had promised to report the “dope on the dump” to as many relatives as possible. In that letter he predicted correctly:

Many of you wonder if the Camp will be rescued by the Russians. My personal opinion is that the Germans will move the Camp further into Germany before this happens. The Name On The Wall, Frank N. Aten, p 102

Postwar Life

Leo Fisher was eventually released from Oliver General Hospital, promoted to Captain, and received a medical discharge from the United States Army. Sometime in early 1945, when he knew that many of his fellow POW's had been liberated and some were on their way home, he wrote an account of life "*Behind the Barbed Wire*" for his local newspaper and the Central Press Association. It was published in three installments and provides a colorful and informative picture of life in Oflag 64.

Part One tells the story of a day in the life of *The Oflag 64 Item* staff as they assemble the monthly newspaper and endure a Gestapo led search. Leo tells the reader how the paper is created and printed and he also uses assistant editor 2LT Frank Diggs to explain why the camp newspaper was called "the item".

"Vy do you call it der Item? Does not dat vord mean small or little?"

"It can mean that," replied Frank, "but it can also mean a SUM entered AGAINST AN ACCOUNT...a sort of record to be kept lest we forget how we have lived here..." Behind the Barbed Wire, part 1

Part Two vividly describes a bombing raid by the Allies, from the point of view of a Kriegie (prisoner) locked in a basement bomb shelter. Part Three begins with a short history of Oflag 64 but the bulk of the piece praises the "Little Theater" organized by the Kriegies. In Leo's opinion, these entertainments were the greatest morale building activities available to the prisoners.

They, more than any other factor besides letters from home kept the prisoners' minds whole and facing a brighter future. Behind the Barbed Wire, part 3

Leo Wilton Fisher worked for the United States Postal Service most of his life. Out of his love of reading and writing, he often picked up parttime work with the local newspaper writing news copy and occasionally covering special events. He and Shell had a son and a daughter and remained married until his death from congestive heart failure in 1971. He was buried in Wood Memorial Park, Duncan, Spartanburg County, South Carolina.

I wish everyone could have known my father. Like many soldiers, he came home with both physical and emotional scars. With God's incredible help, the love of his wife and family he overcame those challenges and was a wonderful father and the most incredible man I have ever known. Steve Fisher, son, email April 25th, 2023.

Military Awards

Purple Heart

Resources

Fisher, Leo W., "Behind the Barbed Wire – parts 1, 2 and 3", *Newspaper name unknown*, 1945

Atkinson, Rick, *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942-1943*, Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2002

Aten, Frank N., *The Name on The Wall*, Figure 8, Fisher Letter

Fisher, Leo, "Betty' Keeps Busy at Home But She'd Be Mighty Glad To See Us", *The Oflag 64 Item (Altenburg)*, July 1, 1944, p 4

"Repatriates from Germany", *Prisoners of War Bulletin*, American Red Cross, February 1945, p 9

Memories of Steve M. Fisher, son of Leo W. Fisher

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Anne M. Trujillo