

1LT Martin Joseph Higgins, Jr.
1916 to 2007

EARLY YEARS

Martin Joseph Higgins Junior was born January 29, 1916, in Jersey City, New Jersey, to Cecilia E. Higgins and Martin Higgins. He grew up in Jersey City and graduated in 1939 from Saint Peter's College (now University), a private, Jesuit college in Jersey City.

MILITARY SERVICE

On November 20, 1939, Martin enlisted as a private in the 101st Cavalry Regiment, a New York State National Guard Regiment. He gave his civilian occupation as accountant and his home address as in Brooklyn, New York on his enlistment form. He had probably secured a job in New York City after graduation from college. He was assigned to Troop B, a machine gun troop, of Squadron C. National Guard Service normally was part time, with training on evenings and weekends. But with war raging in Europe, the 101st Cavalry Regiment was inducted into federal service on January 21, 1941, well in advance of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Martin became a full-time soldier.

The regiment trained at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, from February 2, 1941 to March 10, 1943. Martin had been promoted to sergeant. He left the 101st Cavalry Regiment in September 1942 to attend Cavalry Officer Candidate School at Fort Riley, Kansas. He completed the program and received a Second Lieutenant's commission in December 1942. On December 29, 1942, he was assigned to Troop B, 10th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Cavalry Division, stationed at Camp Lockett, California.

The 10th Cavalry Regiment was a segregated, African-American unit, originally formed September 21, 1866, at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. They were historically nick-named "Buffalo Soldiers" by the Native American people, whom they had been mobilized to subdue. As of November 1942, the 2nd Cavalry Division was re-activated by the War Department as an African-American Division, divided between Texas and California. The 10th Cavalry Regiment, together with the 28th, made up the 4th Cavalry Brigade at Camp Lockett. Unit history reveals that during 1943 the 10th and the 28th fought forest fires in the Cleveland National Forest in Southern California. Family photos show that Martin participated in the 10th Cavalry Horse Show of 1943, winning a first prize ribbon and cup. And on October 9, 1943, he married Marjorie Ellen Jewkes.

Although the soldiers of the 2nd Cavalry Division received basic combat and Cavalry operation training, the War Department planned to use the Division

as service, or non-combat units. During March of 1944 the entire Division was shipped to Oran in what was then French North Africa. There the Divisional units were inactivated and the African-American soldiers were sent to support and service units. 2LT Higgins, however, was not barred from combat service, and he volunteered to join the Infantry.

Between March and July 1944 Martin attended Infantry Training School. Upon completion, he was assigned to the 1st Platoon, Company A, 141st Infantry Regiment, 36th Infantry Division, arriving in time to participate in Operation Dragoon, the Allied invasion of Southern France. This operation continued from August 15 to September 3, 1944, when United States and French troops reached Lyon, France.

During this time period, Martin was promoted to First Lieutenant. In September 1944, he assumed command of Company A, 141st Infantry Regiment, 1st Battalion, 36th Infantry. The 36th Infantry was attached to the French First Army moving north and east across the Moselle and into the foothills of the Vosges Mountains, participating in a 7th Army action named Operation Dogface.

On October 24, the 1st Battalion of the 36th Division, which included 1LT Higgin's Company A, ran into serious trouble in the Domaniale de Champ Forest in the Vosges. During the night of October 24 to 25 the Germans cut off the 1st Battalion from the 36th Division and surrounded it. The Battalion was trapped behind enemy lines until October 30, 1944. While trapped, 1LT Higgins was elected acting Battalion Commander by his fellow Company Commanders. He directed the 1st Battalion's defense until rescued on October 30 by the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, a segregated unit of Nisei (second generation Japanese American) soldiers. Martin was awarded a Silver Star for his leadership of what came to be called the "Lost Battalion". The "Hall of Valor Project" website explains why he received this award:

The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress, July 9, 1918, takes pleasure in presenting the Silver Star to Captain (Infantry), [then First Lieutenant] Martin Joseph Higgins (ASN: 0-1030984), United States Army, for gallantry in action while Commanding Company A, 1st Battalion, 141st Infantry Regiment, 36th Infantry Division, in action from 23 to 31 October 1944, in France. When the 1st Battalion was completely surrounded by hostile troops and isolated from other friendly units, Captain Higgins assumed command of the organization and, despite heavy artillery and mortar fire, skillfully directed his men in establishing a perimeter defense. Although the troops were without food and water and were subjected to a series of strong German attacks, Lieutenant Higgins worked tirelessly and courageously to maintain the morale of his men and, bravely exposing himself to hostile fire, directed elements of the battalion in repelling the attacks with heavy losses to the enemy. After five

and a half days of continuous effort he succeeded in arranging for supplies to be dropped by planes, and, when some of the supplies landed in hostile territory, he personally conducted patrols to recover them. During this trying period his courageous and resourceful leadership inspired his men and kept them well-organized and encouraged until help arrived. His actions, without regard for his own safety, reflect great credit on himself and the Armed Forces of the United States.

CAPTURE

In November and December Martin's Company A continued to push eastward through the Alsace region, toward the Rhine River, amid continuous fighting. His luck ran out about eight weeks after the "Lost Battalion" action, around Christmas 1944. The Germans launched the Ardennes offensive on December 16, 1944, which led to fierce fighting in the Alsace region as well. 1LT Higgins was captured. Two days after his capture he was promoted to Captain.

Martin was interrogated by Heinrich Himmler, head of the Nazi SS, before he was transported to Oflag 64 in Szubin, German occupied Poland. On January 21, 1945, he began the long march that ended at Stalag III-A in Luckenwalde, Germany. As the end of the war approached and systems broke down, he was one of the many prisoners who escaped to Allied lines prior to the official end of the war. Martin Higgins' name appears on an Army list, dated May 19, 1945, of individuals "assigned for movement" to the United States. His "Address of Recuperation" was his family home in Jersey City, New Jersey. He was discharged from the Army on August 15, 1945.

HOME AT LAST

After the war, Martin and his wife Marjorie settled in Demarest, New Jersey, where they raised their children, Mary Pat and Michael. Martin worked in sales for the United States Playing Card Company, which was acquired by Diamond International in 1969. He retired as an executive from Diamond International in 1979.

From 1948 through 1950 Martin lobbied Congress on behalf of legislation that became law as the Immigration Act of 1952. The act formally ended Asian exclusion as a feature of United States immigration policy and allowed the Issei (Japanese born) parents of Nisei (American born) Japanese Americans to finally become citizens. He donated his papers concerning this activity to the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, California.

Martin was an active participant in Boy Scouts of the USA, his church, and the local Republican party. He served as president of the Republican Club

and as district campaign manager for the Republican senatorial candidate in 1960.

After retirement, Martin and Marjorie moved to Lake Murray, South Carolina, in 1980. Martin went back to school, earning a master's degree in education from the University of South Carolina in 1982. He worked with adult literacy programs as well as tutoring juvenile offenders in the South Carolina Department of Youth Services (now the Department of Juvenile Justice). Marjorie died October 1, 1997, and two years later Martin moved to Anna Maria Island, Florida. He died there on February 26, 2007 and was buried at Arlington National Cemetery on May 15, 2007, with full military honors.

MILITARY AWARDS

Silver Star

Croix de Guerre avec Etoile de Vermeil

Bronze Star

Bronze Star with V Device

Purple Heart

Prisoner of War Medal

Combat Infantryman's Badge

Presidential Unit Citation

Europe-Africa-Middle East Campaign Medal with three campaign stars and one amphibious arrowhead

American Campaign Medal

World War II Victory Medal

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