

Dirk Jan Cornelius Vlug

Born

August 20, 1916, Township of Corrina, Maple Lake, Wright

County, Minnesota

Entered Service

April 21, 1941

Kalamazoo, Kent County, Michigan

U.S. Army

126th Infantry, 32d Infantry Division

World War II

Died

June 25, 1996, Grand Rapids, Kent County, Michigan



Early Years

Few people earn a moniker during their lifetime, but that was the case with Dirk Vlug. At the time of his passing in 1996, he was known as the man who single-handedly destroyed five Japanese tanks. Like so many of our Medal of Honor winners, Mr. Vlug's beginnings were humble.

Dirk Jan Cornelius Vlug was born to 30 year old Dutch immigrants from the Netherlands.ⁱ The second son and fourth child of Isaac Vlug and Mietje (pronounced Met-cha) Dekker, Dirk was born in the Township of Corrina, Maple Lake, Wright County, Minnesota on August 20, 1916.ⁱⁱ He joined siblings Peter (born 1909), Alida (born 1912) and Wesselina (born 1914). Farmers in Minnesota, the Vlugs had two more children after Dirk, Gertrude born in 1918 and Marian born in 1922. However, when Dirk was six years old the family moved to Michigan.ⁱⁱⁱ By 1930 Isaac Vlug had settled the family in Grand Rapids, Michigan taking up carpentry as a trade to support his family.

The War Years

Like many of the greatest generation, Mr. Vlug answered his country's call to service on April 21 1941 at Kalamazoo, Michigan.^{iv} Enlisting in the United States Army as a Private First Class, Mr. Vlug was assigned to the 126th infantry, 32d Infantry Division. Mr. Vlug was a cannoneer in the "Red Arrow" Brigade and was soon sent to the Pacific theatre to participate in several campaigns. By December 15, 1944 Mr. Vlug was stationed in the Philippines. He was guarding the American road block on the Ormoc road near Limon, province of Leyte in the Philippines. Alone in a foxhole armed with his rocket launcher and only six rounds of ammunition, Mr. Vlug heard the slow rumble of eight Japanese tanks coming towards his battalion.

Without hesitation or concern for his personal safety, Mr. Vlug "destroyed the first tank killing its occupants with a single round. As the crew of the second tank started to dismount and attack him, he killed one foe with his pistol and forced the others to return to their vehicle which he destroyed with a second round."^v As three more tanks approached Mr. Vlug "flanked the first and eliminated it, then despite hail enemy fire pressed forward to destroy another. With his last round of ammunition, he struck the remaining vehicle, causing it to crash down a steep embankment."^{vi} This created an opening for his fellow soldiers to rush through and attack the enemy. According to a 1992 interview with the Grand Rapids Press, Mr. Vlug said "I would load, take a shot and dive back in the hole. I felt that anytime I could

die, and it would only take one shot in the right place.”^{vii} Lasting only 30 minutes and with only six rounds of ammunition, Mr. Vlug single-handedly destroyed five Japanese tanks.^{viii} Along with his time in Leyte, Mr. Vlug also participated in the campaigns of New Guinea, Papuan, Southern Philippines and Luzon.^{ix}

The Post War Years

Following his discharge from the service on June 14, 1945, Mr. Vlug returned home to his parents.^x Less than a year later on May 23, 1946, the War Department announced that due to his “single-handed destruction of five Japanese tanks in the Philippines” Mr. Vlug would be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.^{xi} That honor was bestowed on Mr. Vlug by President Harry S. Truman on June 7, 1946 at the White House.

After his release from the United States Army, Mr. Vlug’s service to his country continued. He entered the Michigan Army National Guard serving from May 23, 1949 until being honorably discharged as a Master Sergeant on January 25, 1951.^{xii} Soon after the war’s end Mr. Vlug would find time to marry. On August 16, 1946 Mr. Vlug married Angie Sikkema in McBain, Missaukee County, Michigan.^{xiii} Together they raised three daughters: Carol, Margie and Meribeth.

In 1950 to support his young family Mr. Vlug became a postal carrier in Grand Rapids retiring his position in 1976.^{xiv} On Veteran’s Day 1992, Dirk Vlug received Michigan’s highest military honor, the Distinguished Service Medal.^{xv} Lt. Col. Brian Downey, spokesman for Michigan’s Department of Public Affairs declared “The state wanted to do something to recognize the service of its veterans who epitomize valor, and that kind of service to state and country.”^{xvi}



In retirement Mr. Vlug enjoyed such hobbies as golfing, bowling and making bird houses, but perhaps his favorite activity was staying in contact with his fellow veterans.^{xvii} He and Angie hosted monthly picnics in an effort to stay in touch with those he served with.^{xviii} Mr. Vlug enjoyed traveling too. In 1994, Mr. Vlug and his wife went to Leyte to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the battle of the Philippines.^{xix} According to Angie Vlug both her and her husband were “treated like royalty” during their visit to the island.^{xx} In 1996 the Military Order of Foreign Wars of the United States bestowed upon Mr. Vlug an honorary membership.^{xxi} Shortly thereafter on June 25, 1996, Mr Vlug passed away in Grand Rapids. Remembered by his friends as an intensely humble man who rarely spoke of his heroics, Angie Vlug was quoted as saying “A lot of other people flaunt it, and he was very upset about other Medal of Honor Winners who flaunted it. He just wasn’t that way.”^{xxii} At the time of his passing Mr. Vlug was survived by his three daughters and sons-in-law Carol and David Shirk, Margie and Bernie deWit, and Meribeth and Victor Eerkes as well as 7 grandchildren and one great grandchild.^{xxiii} By the time of her death on January 7, 2013, Angie Vlug had seen 16 great grandchildren added to the family since Dirk’s passing.^{xxiv}

In October 1999 there was an honor given posthumously to Mr. Vlug. The United Veteran’s Council sought and received permission from the Grand Rapids City Commission to rename a street along Veterans Memorial Park “Dirk Vlug Way.”^{xxv}

Dirk Vlug and his wife Angie are interred in Greenwood Cemetery in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

