UCF Veterans Legacy Program

Frank Spencer (1919-1943)

https://vlp.cah.ucf.edu/biographies/sanc/BD-0-135-F.html

Frank Luke Spencer was born on October 31, 1919, to William Nelson and Sarah (Sallie) Spencer in Key West, FL. He had three older brothers and six younger siblings. Frank's father worked as a sponge fisherman, which was an important and lucrative industry in South Florida at the time.

In October 1928, Frank's mother became very sick and died. Frank was only eight years old. After her death, the family's life changed dramatically. His father struggled to care for all ten children.

When Frank turned eleven, he went to live with a neighbor family, Mr. and Mrs. Olson, as their foster son. Later, at age sixteen, Thomas and Blanch Roberts adopted him. Frank started at Key West High School in 1938, but when his adoptive father died, Frank left school and began working as a sponge fisherman in 1940.

On July 1, 1941, Frank registered for the draft. He was twenty-one years old. He stood five feet, seven inches tall and weighed 117 pounds. He had blond hair, blue eyes, freckles, and a scar on his forehead.

Frank joined the Army on Oct. 9, 1941, at Camp Blanding, FL. After training, he joined Company C, 39th Infantry Regiment, 9th Infantry Division.

In November 1942, as World War II raged on, the Army sent Frank and his Infantry Division to Algiers, Algeria, as part of Operation Torch. This mission helped push the German troops out of North Africa. Frank likely saw his first combat there. In a letter home to his adoptive mother, he wrote, "I am seeing plenty of action now."

Over the next four months, Frank and his division fought in many battles as they moved across North Africa. By April 1943, they reached northern Tunisia. There, they faced heavy fighting, strong enemy fire, and sustained many casualties. On April 23, 1943, Frank L. Spencer was killed in battle near Jefna, Tunisia. He was twenty-three years old.

Frank became the first Army soldier from Key West to die in WWII. People in his hometown remembered him for the impact he had on families and friends, and honored his sacrifice. On January 6, 1947, his younger brother, Eugene, and his wife, Ada, named their son Frank Luke Spencer in his honor.

The Army first buried Frank in the American II Corps Cemetery in Mateur, Tunisia, near where he died. Then, in 1949, his family chose to have him reinterred (reburied) in St. Augustine National Cemetery, in Section D, Site 135. This meant that Frank could be nearer the community he had been such an important part of in life.

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