

= Kenneth R. Shadrick =

Kenneth R. " Kenny " Shadrick ( August 4 , 1931 ? July 5 , 1950 ) was a United States Army soldier who was killed at the onset of the Korean War . He was widely but incorrectly reported as the first American soldier killed in action in the war .

Shadrick was born in Harlan County , Kentucky , one of 10 children . After dropping out of high school in 1948 , he joined the U.S. Army , and spent a year of service in Japan before being dispatched to South Korea at the onset of the Korean War in 1950 along with his unit , the 34th Infantry Regiment , 24th Infantry Division . During a patrol , Shadrick was killed by the machine gun of a North Korean T @-@ 34 tank , and his body was taken to an outpost where journalist Marguerite Higgins was covering the war . Higgins later reported that he was the first soldier killed in the war , a claim that was repeated in media across the United States . His life was widely profiled , and his funeral drew hundreds of people .

His death is now believed to have occurred after the first American combat fatalities in the Battle of Osan . Since the identities of other soldiers killed before Shadrick remain unknown , he is still often incorrectly cited as the first U.S. soldier killed in the war .

= = Early life and education = =

Shadrick was born on August 4 , 1931 , in Harlan County , Kentucky . He was the third of 10 children born to Lucille Shadrick and Theodore Shadrick , a coal miner . Growing up during the Great Depression , Kenneth Shadrick moved with his family to Wyoming , West Virginia , then to an outlying town called Skin Fork , 20 miles ( 32 km ) away , as his father was looking for coal mining jobs . Shadrick was described by his family as " an avid reader " throughout his childhood , who had a variety of interests , including Westerns and magazines . He also enjoyed riding his bicycle and , occasionally , hunting .

Shadrick enrolled in Pineville High School in 1947 and received top marks in his classes . During his sophomore year in 1948 , he developed an interest in football and made the school 's team , though he was small for his age . The team could not afford uniforms , and Shadrick 's father gave him five dollars to buy one , but it was stolen from his locker in October 1948 . The incident upset Shadrick so much he dropped out of school , reportedly refusing to return from that day forward . One month later , he and a friend enlisted in the U.S. Army . Shadrick 's father would later refer to the stolen school uniform as the reason Shadrick enlisted in the military , and said he felt it indirectly caused his son 's death .

On November 10 , 1948 , Shadrick left for basic combat training at Fort Knox , Kentucky . As he was 17 years old , Shadrick had to convince his parents to sign papers allowing him to enlist . Shadrick completed this training in February 1949 , and sailed for Japan to join the 34th Infantry Regiment , 24th Infantry Division , for post ? World War II occupation duties . Shadrick spent a year on Kyushu island with the division . According to his family , Shadrick enjoyed his tour in Japan at first , but by June 1950 he was growing tired of the country , and indicated in letters he was feeling depressed .

= = Career = =

On the night of June 25 , 1950 , 10 divisions of the North Korean army launched a full @-@ scale invasion of South Korea . Advancing with 89 @,@ 000 men in six columns , the North Koreans caught the disorganized , ill @-@ equipped , and unprepared South Korean army by surprise and routed them . North Korean forces destroyed isolated resistance , pushing steadily down the peninsula against the opposing 38 @,@ 000 front @-@ line South Korean men . The majority of the South Korean forces retreated in the face of the invasion , and by June 28 the North Koreans had captured the southern capital , Seoul , and forced the government and its shattered forces to withdraw southward .

Meanwhile , the United Nations Security Council voted to send assistance to the collapsing country

and U.S. President Harry S. Truman ordered ground troops to the country . U.S. forces in the Far East had been steadily decreasing since the end of World War II , five years earlier , and Shadrick 's division was the closest to the warzone . Under the command of Major General William F. Dean , the division was understrength and most of its equipment was antiquated due to reductions in military spending . In spite of these deficiencies the division was ordered into South Korea , tasked with taking the initial shock of the North Korean advances until the rest of the Eighth United States Army could arrive and establish a defense .

Dean 's plan was to airlift one battalion of the 24th Infantry Division into South Korea via C @-@ 54 Skymaster transport aircraft and to block advancing North Korean forces while the remainder of the division was transported on ships . The 21st Infantry Regiment was identified as the most combat @-@ ready of the 24th Infantry Division 's three regiments , and the 21st Infantry 's 1st Battalion was selected because its commander , Lieutenant Colonel Charles B. Smith , was the most experienced , having commanded a battalion at the Battle of Guadalcanal during World War II . On July 5 , Task Force Smith engaged North Korean forces at the Battle of Osan , delaying 5 @,@ 000 North Korean infantry for seven hours before being defeated . The 540 @-@ man force suffered 60 killed , 21 wounded and 82 captured , a very heavy casualty rate . In the chaos of the retreat , most of the bodies were left behind , and the fates of many of the missing were unknown for several weeks .

During that time , the 34th Infantry Regiment set up a line between the villages of Pyongtaek and Ansong , 10 miles ( 16 km ) south of Osan , to fight the next delaying action against the advancing North Korean forces . The 34th Infantry Regiment was similarly unprepared for a fight , with few soldiers experienced in combat . At this time , Shadrick was part of an M9A1 Bazooka team with 1st Battalion , 34th Infantry .

= = Death = =

About 90 minutes after Task Force Smith began its withdrawal from the Battle of Osan , the 34th Infantry sent Shadrick as part of a small scouting force northward to the village of Sojong @-@ ni , 5 miles ( 8 @.@ 0 km ) south of Osan . The small force , under the command of Lieutenant Charles E. Payne and consisting mostly of bazooka teams and infantry , halted at a graveyard in the village , where they spotted a North Korean T @-@ 34 / 85 tank on a road to the north . Shadrick and the other bazooka operators began firing on the tank from long @-@ range concealed positions at around 16 : 00 . With them was Sergeant Charles R. Turnbull , a US Army combat photographer . Turnbull asked Shadrick to time a bazooka shot so its flash could be caught in Turnbull 's photograph , and Shadrick complied . Shadrick made the shot and paused , then rose from his concealed position to see if he had successfully hit the tank , exposing himself . The T @-@ 34 returned fire with its machine gun , and two bullets struck Shadrick in the chest and arm . Shadrick died moments later .

Payne 's patrol retreated without destroying the tank , taking Shadrick 's body with them as the only casualty . The force returned to the 34th Infantry Command post in Pyongtaek to report to Brigadier General George B. Barth and Colonel Harold B. Ayres , who were commanding the troops in the town . Also present was Marguerite Higgins , a war correspondent for the New York Herald Tribune . Higgins subsequently reported Shadrick 's death , referring to him as the first American killed in the Korean War .

Shadrick 's family was informed of his death by a neighbor who had heard his name on a radio broadcast , and the news from the military came via telegraph several days later . The family was immediately inundated by reporters and local well @-@ wishers . Shadrick 's body was returned to the United States , and on June 17 , 1951 , a funeral attended by hundreds of local residents was held in Beckley , West Virginia . The service was set to coincide with the anniversary of the start of the war . His flag @-@ draped casket was escorted down the streets of the town on a horse @-@ drawn carriage , and he was buried at the American Legion cemetery in the town .

= = Legacy = =

Higgins ' account of Shadrick 's death was widely republished . Time magazine published a story about Shadrick 's death on July 17 , 1950 , citing Shadrick as the first " reported " death in Korea . Life magazine reported Shadrick for up to a year as the first US soldier to die in the war , and the claim has often been repeated , including as recently as July 4 , 2011 , in the local newspaper in Huntington , West Virginia , The Herald @-@ Dispatch .

American Legion Post 133 erected a monument to Shadrick at the Wyoming County courthouse . The monument cites Shadrick 's unit , date of death , and notes him as the " first casualty of the Korean conflict " with an epitaph that reads , " He stands first in the unbroken line of patriots who have dared to die that freedom might live , grow and increase its blessings . Freedom lives and through it he lives ? in a way that humbles the undertakings of most men . " It is one of several memorials to local residents who served in the military .

Subsequent publications have shed doubt on the accuracy of the claims of Shadrick 's distinction . Eyewitness accounts at the Battle of Osan point to the first death as a machine gunner in the 21st Infantry Regiment , who had been killed at around 08 : 30 , eight hours before Shadrick 's death . This soldier was killed when a different T @-@ 34 tank was disabled at the battle and one of its crew members attacked nearby troops with a PPSH @-@ 41 " Burp Gun " . In the confusion of the battle , many of the wounded and dead troops were left behind by retreating American troops , and a large part of the force was also captured ; consequently , the identity of this first combat fatality remains a mystery .

= = Awards and decorations = =

Shadrick 's awards and decorations include :