

The Filthy Thirteen

The hard living, hard fighting renegades who fought on D-Day and inspired *The Dirty Dozen*

Fans of the 1967 movie *The Dirty Dozen*, and the novel by E. M. Nathanson, may not know that it was inspired by a real group of paratroopers who fought ferociously in some of the worst battles of World War II.

The Filthy Thirteen, as they were known, were part of the 101st Airborne Division. They were chosen and trained to destroy enemy targets behind the lines and acted as Pathfinders, parachuted in ahead of the main force to guide it in to the battlefield. Most of them were expected to be killed on these dangerous missions – and most of them were.

The Thirteen became famous when a photograph appeared in *Stars and Stripes* magazine showing two of the group's members wearing Native American Indian-style Mohawk hairstyles and applying war paint to each others' faces. The inspiration for this came from one of the men, Jake McNiece, who was part Choctaw.

The belief that the Filthy Thirteen was the inspiration for the book and

movie was supported by Barbara Maloney, the daughter of John 'Jack' Agnew, one of the members of the unit, who told the American Valor Quarterly that her father felt that "30% of the movie's content was historically correct", but he was adamant they were not criminals.

The real men were not convicts. They did, however, earn their soubriquet. While training for D-Day in England, they only washed and shaved once a week and never cleaned their uniforms. They habitually fought and drank and several spent time in the stockade on more than one occasion.

Jake McNiece was always in trouble with the Army authorities, mostly because of his firmly held belief that any activities not directly connected with killing the enemy were irrelevant. Undoubtedly a brave soldier, McNiece completed four combat jumps including D-Day and Operation Market Garden. His unit fought during the Battle of the Bulge and the 101st was one of the first divisions to liberate a German concentration camp. On D-Day, June 6, 1944, the Filthy Thirteen were assigned to take a bridge over the Douve River in France,

At the age of 90, McNiece was the guest speaker at veteran's organization meeting in Enid, in his home State of Oklahoma. The local newspaper, Enid News, reported that he described The Filthy Thirteen as "undisciplined in every way." The name, he said, was



The famous Picture Post photo that publicized the Filthy Thirteen

born when the unit had to "live in tents on dirt floors at the bottom of a mountain". But their unruly behavior sealed the name.

McNiece was unambiguous about his role in World War II. "War's hell, that's the way it is. It was a war that needed to be done and needed to be done quickly and effectively." He later added that it meant killing men and, if necessary, women and children. It was all about accomplishing a mission.

When he was asked, at the Enid meeting, how he stayed alive so long and survived his many battles during the war, McNiece said it was because God didn't know where to put him. The audience hooted as he said, "God didn't want to stick me in heaven or hell, in fear of me messing it up."

In 2008 the four surviving members of the Filthy Thirteen, Jake McNiece, Jack Agnew, Robert Cone, and Jack Womer, met for the first time since D-Day at the American Veterans Center's Annual Conference. McNiece explained how he had got into the Thirteen: "I had been working as a firefighter so I was exempt from



The survivors of the Filthy Thirteen met some awe-struck kids at the American Veterans Center in 2008

PHOTO: AMERICAN VETERANS CENTER

the draft. By 1942, however, I felt like I needed to get into the service.”

After getting into a fight and almost killing an old enemy, he decided to avoid the police by enlisting “where they couldn’t touch me”.

He tried to volunteer for the new, experimental paratrooper force. “Just begging for people to be stupid enough to jump out of a perfectly good airplane,” as McNiece put it. After the fight, he had lost a lot of hair and his face was scarred and although he was just 23, the recruiting sergeant thought he was over-age to join – the paratroopers had an age limit of 28. The sergeant told him “Your face and your head looks like its been used as practice for hand grenade tossing and wore out three bodies already.”

He did not settle easily into Army life. McNiece told the Conference audience, “They had a thing there they called retreat. It was observed by all military men everywhere. But I didn’t go to it. They reported me absent and unaccounted for, and told the sergeant to talk to me and get me straightened out, but I told him, ‘Well, I am a conscientious objector to standing retreat. My Dad was Irish; and of course, he is Catholic. My mother was Choctaw Indian, and she was a nature worshipper. I adopted her religion. It would just absolutely destroy every scruple of my religion to go out there and salute a handmade flag. We only pay respect to the sun, the moon, the stars, bugs, ants, spiders, things like that.’

“He was kind of shocked. He never had heard of it. I told him, “Look, if you get me over there, I will kill every Kraut I can find and everything standing close to him,” I said, “but I am not going to take part in retreat.”

Still refusing, the problem went right up to the company commander.

“He said, ‘McNiece, I don’t think you have any religion. We have eight million men in the military service, and you’re the only one who has ever projected something like this.’

I said, ‘Well, we are a very small group.’”

Eventually McNiece stood retreat, then went straight into town, drank and got into a fight with the Military Police. “I never did have to stand retreat again,” he laughed.

Although members of the unit were often hauled off to the stockade after some fight or misdemeanor, Jack Agnew said, “We weren’t murderers or anything, we just didn’t do everything we were supposed to do in some ways and did a whole lot more than they wanted us to do in other ways. We were always in trouble, thanks to Jake. I never went to town with him because I knew I would end up in jail. He was always our acting sergeant until he went to town. Then his stripes came off, and soon we got into some kind of trouble.”

Agnew explained how the ‘red Indian’ image arose.

“The thing that everybody seems to identify with us are the Mohawks and the war paint. Well, the Mohawks came about after Jake had given us a book about the First World War, which talked a bit about lice. We figured that the less hair we had, the less we had to worry about it, so we used the razors in our first aid pack to shave our heads prior to jumping into Normandy.

As far as the war paint goes, when the 82nd went into Italy, our Navy



shot down quite a few of our own planes. So this time they put recognition stripes on the planes around the wings and fuselage. While everybody thinks we used red paint on our faces, we actually just used the black and white paint right off the plane while it was still wet. We started making Indian signs all over, here and there and everywhere.”

Many stories about the Filthy Thirteen sound as if they could have been made up for the film, including the time they were found poaching the deer from the stately home they were based at, and the time that Jack Womer, camouflaged in a haystack during training manoeuvres, found himself being relieved on by Prime Minister Winston Churchill, but they’re true. You can find them, and more, in *The Filthy Thirteen* by Richard Kilblane and Jake McNiece, published by Casemate Publishers. ★