

1945 September 3-9

The Top Kick



First Sergeant insignia, United States Army
(Priorservice.com)

When General George Washington wanted to instill some organization and professionalism into the rag-tag colonial army during the American Revolution, one of the men he hired to do it was the professional Prussian soldier, [General Baron Von Steuben](#).

The nascent American army had no manuals to guide its operations, so Von Steuben wrote the book on how it should be done. In his [Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States](#), one of the things Von Steuben set up was five ranks of noncommissioned officers to lead other enlisted soldiers based on the traditions of European armies. The noncommissioned officers, or NCOs, were corporal, sergeant, first sergeant, quartermaster sergeant, and sergeant major.¹

The status and duties of the first sergeant have been relatively consistent since its creation. The first sergeant is the senior NCO in companies, batteries, and troops. The first sergeant is responsible for:

- motivation and discipline in the enlisted ranks
- routine company administration, such as morning reports and duty rosters
- assisting the company commander in conducting operations.

Qualities needed for the rank are personal leadership skills, excellent performance, dedication to duty, moral character, integrity, and military bearing.²

In Army slang, the first sergeant is sometimes called the "Top Kick," or simply "Top."³

One of the first sergeants from La Crosse County during World War II was **Francis Murphy of La Crosse**.



(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 September 9, page 11)

His parents were Mr. and Mrs. E. L. Murphy. He had three brothers and four sisters.⁴ As a youth attending [St. Mary's Grade School](#) in La Crosse, Murphy went door-to-door selling magazines and the *La Crosse Tribune*.⁵

Murphy enlisted in the U.S. Army in June 1935. He served with the U.S. harbor patrol in Alaska and was also involved activation and mobilization of troops before being sent to the European Theater of Operations in October 1944.⁶

In Europe, First Sgt. Murphy was part of the [411th Regiment](#) in the [7th Army](#).⁷ The 411th Regiment was activated on November 15, 1942, at [Camp Claiborne, Louisiana](#). After organization and training in the United States, the 411th Regiment, and its parent unit the [103rd Division](#), arrived in Marseilles, France on October 20, 1944. In November the 103rd Division went into combat in east-central France as part of the 7th Army's offensive into the [Vosges Mountains](#) and the area of Strasbourg. The men of the Cactus Division seized heavily-defended mountain passes. One of the cities they liberated during this time was Ebersheim, France.⁸

Murphy said his unit was crossing a bridge at Ebersheim when it was blown up underneath them. They were stranded "in neck-high water for 24 hours," all the while fighting German troops. Their communications were cut until a soldier was able to patch a wire with adhesive tape. Then they were able to contact an artillery battery for fire support to cover their withdrawal after 24 hours in the river.⁹

A [German offensive](#) launched on New Year's Eve against the 7th Army led to several weeks of hard fighting. On January 19, 1945, a tank battalion and Murphy's company of infantry were ordered to take Sessenheim, France.¹⁰ Murphy said there were supposed to be 200 [German SS](#) troops in the town. What they ran into was 200 SS troops plus 200 German paratroopers. In two hours of combat, the Americans lost ten tanks and Murphy's company suffered 128 dead and wounded out of 160 men. Murphy, wounded in the back by a [German 88mm](#) shell, had to take command of the company because all of the officers were casualties. He refused to leave his unit, so he was not treated in a hospital until March 2nd.¹¹



411th Infantry Regiment insignia, "Ready to Strike"
(University of Southern Mississippi)



103rd Infantry Division insignia
(USAMM)

In mid-March, the 103rd Division punched through the [Siegfried Line](#) and reached the Rhine Valley in Germany on March 23, 1945. As the war ended, the 103rd Division was in Austria. The 103rd Division was returned to the United States in early September 1945.¹²

First Sgt. Francis Murphy had gotten back before his comrades because of his wounds, returning on a hospital ship in May 1945. Murphy came home to La Crosse where he had 70 days of convalescent and regular furlough. Murphy was to leave La Crosse on September 14 and report to Miami, Florida for another two weeks of rest. At that time, Murphy planned to make the Army his career.¹³

The 103rd "Cactus" Infantry Division was deactivated on September 22, 1945.¹⁴

Francis Murphy remained in the Army and retired as a master sergeant. He and his wife, Christine, had a son and two daughters. They were living in Sacramento, California, when Francis Murphy died on October 22, 1960, at the Letterman Hospital in San Francisco. He was just 42 years old.¹⁵

Fifteen years after his 1945 furlough, Francis Murphy came back to La Crosse for the final time. His funeral services were in the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in La Crosse, and he is buried in the Catholic Cemetery.¹⁶

Francis Murphy was a professional soldier whose role was defined by another professional soldier before the United States even became a country. He had exemplified what it meant to be the "Top Kick."

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Sources & Notes:

¹ Jerold E. Brown, ed., *Historical Dictionary of the U.S. Army* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001), 339. Sergeant Major, page 424.

² Brown, 175.

³ "In the Army and Marines, the First Sergeant is often referred to as 'Top,' or 'Top Kick.' Why is this so offensive to some?" *RallyPoint.com*, 2015 January 27, <https://www.rallypoint.com/answers/in-the-army-and-marines-the-first-sergeant-is-often-referred-to-as-top-or-top-kick-why-is-this-so-offensive-for-some>. As can be seen from the comments on this article, the practice is not universal.

⁴ "Francis Murphy," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1960 October 25, page 14.

⁵ "Tells Of Unit Losing 128 Men, 10 Tanks In Two Hours During Savage Sessenheim Battle," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 September 9, page 11.

⁶ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 September 9.

⁷ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 September 9.

⁸ "The 103d Infantry Division (Cactus) in World War II," *Dale Center for the Study of War & Society* (University of Southern Mississippi), accessed 2020 September 12, <https://103divwwii.usm.edu/world-war-ii.html>.

⁹ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 September 9.

¹⁰ *Dale Center for the Study of War & Society*.

¹¹ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 September 9.

¹² *Dale Center for the Study of War & Society*.

¹³ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 September 9.

¹⁴ *Dale Center for the Study of War & Society*.

¹⁵ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1960 October 15.

¹⁶ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1960 October 15.