



George Mergenthaler was born on August 5, 1920 in Rye, NY to Herman and Alice Mergenthaler. He was their only child.

He was the grandson of Ottmar Mergenthaler, who invented the Linotype machine and in doing so secured a family fortune for generations of his descendants.

George was well educated, having attended the Canterbury School (a private high school) in Connecticut (class of '39) and then Princeton University (class of '43) where he majored in English and History. He was an accomplished athlete at tennis and squash.

After war broke out George entered into an accelerated degree program and upon graduation entered the army and was sent to Fort Hood in Texas where he volunteered for tank destroyer detail. Due to his proficiency with speaking both German and French however he was later assigned to the 28th Calvary Recon Troop (v) and trained at Camp Pickett in Virginia. The troop was then attached to the 28th Infantry Division. With his family's wealth and connections George could have stayed stateside (as his father urged) and/or been commissioned but instead he chose to serve as a buck private.

The troop was eventually sent for training in England and Wales in 1943 ahead of the D-Day invasion. In late June, 1944 the troop entered the European Theater of Operation. Their job was to go in advance of the main infantry and scout enemy locations, strengths and movements and report back to command either with radio or messenger. They would also ride ahead of advancing columns and convoys to ensure that crossroads, bridges, etc. were clear of enemy activity. Although they were not expected to engage the enemy as they were a reconnaissance group, inevitably fighting did occur.

Following the fighting in the Huertgen forest, the troop was sent to the rear for R&R and headquartered in Eschweiler, Luxembourg just four miles to the north of the 28th Infantry Divisional command HQ in Wiltz. George and the rest of the troop would spend a month in the small town (pop. 200) and during that time he befriended the local priest as well many in the town. He often shared items from the care packages from home with those in the village. He was even billeted for a time in the parsonage of the church, St. Maurice. Again, his ability to communicate with the townspeople as well as his kindness and generosity soon made him a "favorite son" in town. He even played Santa Claus for the children during the town's St. Nicolas

Day celebration. Once again he shared whatever he had with the people, especially the children.

When the Battle of the Bulge broke out, the troop was sent to reinforce divisional headquarter in Wiltz. Late in the morning on December 18th, a convoy of six vehicles left Eschweiler and headed south towards Wiltz. As the line of vehicles neared the crossroads of Café Halte a German tank opened fire destroying the lead vehicle in the convoy. The GIs quickly ran for the cover of the surrounding woods but German troops were everywhere. The Americans had driven into an ambush. George, riding in the command jeep, the third vehicle in the convoy, immediately jumped up and manned the .50 caliber machine gun mounted on the jeep. As he sprayed the woods with machine gun bursts pinning down the enemy, the other GIs scrambled for cover or a way of escape. Then George's gun jammed. As he worked to clear the jam, the Germans began returning fire. Bullets sizzled the air or pinged off the sides of the jeep. One GI saw what was happening and began firing with his M1 Gerrand. He saw a German soldier with a submachine gun moving along a roadside ditch trying to get close to Mergenthaler. He took aim and fired hitting the German in the hand. It bought enough time for George to clear the jam, rethread the ammo and begin firing the .50 cal at the Germans once again. After a few short bursts, the gun jammed once more and again George tried to clear it. The wounded German saw what was happening, cradled his weapon on his arm and fired a burst at George, striking him in the neck.

Officially George had been listed as MIA, but in late March of 1945 his body was discovered in a shallow grave only a few hundred yards from the town that had come to love him. The townspeople reburied George in the cemetery of the church where he had spent so much time while he was in Eschweiler.

A few weeks later George's parents found out what had happened to their only son when the priest from St. Maurice wrote a letter informing them of their son's fate. The priest also explained how much George meant to the people of the town and how they felt as if George was "one of their own". Touched by the kindness the people of Eschweiler showed towards their only son, the Mergenthaler's offered to pay for the war-damaged church of St. Maurice to be rebuilt.

Today the church in Eschweiler stands as a tribute to George Mergenthaler. It is the only church in Luxembourg and perhaps the world that is dedicated to a single American soldier. Of the many tributes to George that the church has to offer, perhaps none is more striking as the mural painted on the back wall above the altar. There you'll see the figure of Jesus feeding the masses, aided by one of his apostles; an apostle wearing a field green American GI uniform and bearing the likeness of George Mergenthaler.