

**Frederick A. Shuler  
Veteran**

**Mike Russert  
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Interviewers**

**Interviewed on  
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Johnson City, New York**

Q: Please tell us your full name, date of birth and place of birth.

FS: Frederick A. Shuler. I was born March 30, 1925 in Owego, New York.

Q: What was your educational background prior to entering service?

FS: I graduated from high school on a Monday and on Wednesday I left for the service.

Q: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

FS: We were drafted. But at our pre-physical in April, I learned about the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division and the National Ski Patrol System from the older brother of one of my high school buddies. This older brother, Johnny Watkins, was home on furlough. He had been at Dartmouth and the whole Dartmouth ski team and their coach had joined the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division. When I told Johnny I was concerned about going to the South Pacific because I hate hot weather, he told me to join the Ski Troop and come out to Colorado with him. The National Ski Patrol System sent me all of the forms and I filled them out and I was accepted.

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Q: Had you been a skier?

FS: I was a barnyard skier. Back then there weren't ski resorts, just a few rope tows. But my grandfather's farm had a short, steep run with a barbed wire fence at bottom [Laughing] and a narrow gate. The design of a good skier was that he didn't come home all cut up [unclear]. I was an eagle scout and that helped me to be prepared.

Q: Do you remember where you were and your reaction when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

FS: I was a sophomore or junior in high school and the attack was announced on the Sunday night radio news. When we got to school the next day, everybody was talking about it. Almost everyone was late because they were out in the bicycle shed wondering and talking about what they were going to do.

Q: So you were sent to the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division?

FS: I went in with a bunch of draftees from Owego and Binghamton. We went to Camp Upton on Long Island. After three or four days the whole gang that I went in with from home was called out one by one and taken by train to Camp Croft, South Carolina, right in the middle of June. Boy, was I glad not to be going there! I was held at Camp Upton for a week to ten days with about six others who had volunteered to go to Camp Hale, Colorado. There were a couple of boys from Lake Placid and Saranac, one from Buffalo, one from the New York City and myself. We were consigned to a regular train, not a troop train and arrived in the middle of the day at a railroad station in Pando, Colorado. The train station was all that was there.

I started with E Company, the 2nd Battalion, the 6<sup>th</sup> regiment as a rifleman in the mortar squad. They had sixty-millimeter mortar. On the way out to the rifle range, there was a dog kennel with about ninety dogs that had been donated. The dogs were trained for war and after the war they were retrained to be sent back home. Many of the dogs didn't adjust to normal life so the Army bought them and used as they had used mules and horses. I was lucky enough to get in the dog detachment but good things never last and they shipped the dogs out to Louisiana and then to the South Pacific while I stayed at Camp Hale. At that point, I didn't know where I was going. They kept me in the 86<sup>th</sup> but moved me to the 1st battalion medics. They gave me a choice of being in the aid station or an aid man with a line company. I chose to be an aid in the line company and told people I was the best damn aid man in C Company (I was the only aid there!) [Laughing] When we got to Texas, they sent in more recruits and they added two more aid men to each rifle company.

Q: What kind of specialized training did you receive as an aid man?

FS: Not much more than what I had gotten in Boys Scouts. I knew how to use sulfa powder, Band-Aids, and morphine. I really didn't have any expertise. I just tried to make the men feel good and give them confidence that I knew what I was doing. [Laughing] It ended up that there were three aid men in each platoon in the company. You basically stayed with your platoon unless there were casualties somewhere else in the company, and then you would help another rifle platoon. They helped us and we helped them. But that was the end of my doctor career.

In the states, the aid man was always the last one in a line. We had a ten-minute break every hour but, while we were patching up blisters, the company would move out and then we'd have to go like the devil to catch up with them.

Overseas, there were roughly forty to forty-four riflemen in a platoon. The aid man was the last one in line and if they needed him, they would call for him. When we went up Riva Ridge in Italy, riflemen were saying they were the first one on the top of Riva Ridge. I can confidently say that I was the forty-second man on the top of Riva Ridge in C Company. [Laughing]

Q: How much specialized ski training were you given in this unit?

FS: The riflemen were on skis while the mortar men and machine gunners were in snowshoes. When I was with the dogs, I was on snowshoes, but when I went with the rifle company as a medic, I was on skis. I learned a lot; it was good training.

Q: Did you find that the equipment they gave you was adequate?

FS: We were testing a lot of equipment. Some of it was better than others, from [unclear] to machines smaller than our snowmobiles, winter 10 in 1 rations, K-rations, C-rations, some had ski boots, some shoe bags, mukluks, and bunny boots if it was a real dry snow.

Q: Was your sleeping gear adequate or warm?

FS: The sleeping bags kept you from freezing to death but if it was 30 or 40 degrees below zero you were safe, but you may not be comfortable. They were 100 % better than the old army blankets.

Q: As a medic, did you carry any weapons?

FS: Well, I wasn't supposed to and I didn't. I started playing the game right, but up on Riva Ridge we had our first encounter and the Germans shot maybe 4, 5 or 6 in our company and wounded many more including two of our riflemen who were out front, Jack Bell and Allen [unclear]. I went out to get them. The Germans had a machine gun and a sniper after me but luckily I got through that. Carl, a soldier in the 3rd platoon came down while I was in the hole with one of the wounded men in the [unclear] we had dug out. Then the whole platoon came running down screaming. I guess it scared the Germans but it was a good sight for me to see them coming towards me. It reminded me of the movies! After that experience, I said, "If they are going to play this way, I need to do something." I got an English Sten gun, like a Berk gun with a magazine that goes in the side instead of the bottom. I got a hunk of burlap and covered my white Red Cross helmet with that. A captain saw me and said, "Boy, you shouldn't be doing that." And I said, "I know, but I'm going to." He said, "I didn't see it, but you know if you get captured and they find out you are a medic with a gun, it won't go well." I said, "I realize that but I'm not planning on getting captured."

Q: How did you capture the Germans on Riva Ridge?

FS: The Germans wanted to give up. They had some hard core SS, really dedicated Germans, and then they had some slave troops, Romanians, Hungarians, old men and young kids who we ran into later. There was a soldier named Hans [unclear]. When he turned eighteen, the Germans wanted him to go into the German Army. He was a good skier so he ended up in their Mountain Division. He fought on the Russian front and got out of that. Then he was down

in the Caucasus Mountains, then in Yugoslavia and Albania, and he ended up in Casino in southern Italy. The first chance he had to surrender was on Riva Ridge. We dispatched their officers because they would shoot their own men if they were caught trying to give up. Hans said that on the Russian front some of the soldiers that didn't come back had been good men whose personalities seemed to change during the war. I am glad they were a bad shot that day because they could have had me out cold out.

Q: Tell us about your experience after Riva Ridge.

FS: We had a chance to go back to Montecatini, a rest camp, for 5 days and I got to see Florence and the Leaning Tower of Pisa. John Watkins, who had gotten me into the 10<sup>th</sup>, and I were bivouacked at King Victor Emmanuel's hunting grounds about four miles outside of Pisa. We tried to get to Pisa and back without a pass to get back in time. We weren't trying to desert; we just wanted to be tourists for an afternoon. We were going down the street in Pisa and we saw a couple of MP's in town who saw us coming. We didn't have passes so we just nonchalantly slowed down and turned around to head back. When we got around the corner, we ran, and then around the next corner was a wall so we helped each other over the wall. When we got inside we found out we were in a convent. We laid low for a couple of hours, (we didn't dare show ourselves) and then jumped back over the wall and got back to camp before we got caught.

After rest camp, we overtook Monte Grande d'Aiano and Sassamolare. The Germans had that zeroed in so we lost a lot of C-Company; every company had losses there. Colonel Hank got hit there and Bill Cruickshank, and I think Tunis – we lost a lot of men there. We got through that gap and there was a valley and we climbed Monte Grande d'Aiano, which we took about a week.

Q: Do you remember what year that was?

FS: It was March of 1945. We went over in December of 1944, we landed in Naples on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December and you could see Mt. Vesuvius still smoking from a previous eruption. We left to go up on line on Christmas day. I don't know why but the 1st Battalion which was A, B, C, and D Company went up by boxcars through Cassino. You could see what was left of the abbey up on the hill. The 2nd and 3rd Battalion went by LCI's and LCD's landing craft up the coast and landed in Laverno. It isn't fair really but the 1st Battalion was the only one out of the nine in the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division to get an extra battle star because we were in a certain place at a certain time and didn't do anything for it. Then the 85<sup>th</sup> and 87<sup>th</sup> arrived a week or two later. We went up on line right after Christmas Day. But we were in Lizzano, a little town, and Vidiciatico where you could see Riva Ridge to the left and Mount Belvedere to the right. We would run night patrols. That is where we studied the Ridge and where we figured out there were four or maybe five runs. The Ridge is about three to three and a half miles long. We went up M. Serrasiccia, which proved to be the longest run. They told

us that the Ridge was 1800 feet but when we went back in 1995, we were told that with varying heights it measured up to 2,200 feet.

Q: You said that one of the people you remember the most were Colonel Henry Hampton, the Battalion Commander. Why did he leave such a good impression on you?

FS: He was a fair person. After the war I met his wife and daughter in the Brown Palace Hotel in 1959 when they dedicated the monument to honor the 10th Mountain Division on Tennessee Pass and we struck up a friendship. In fact, when Mt. St. Helen's erupted, she sent me a package of the ash from the eruption. Colonel Hank was a tough old guy. I think he was a fireman in San Francisco. He was a sparring partner for a famous boxer and sergeant of the boxing team. One day C Company was going out to Resolution Creek and I was their aid man. One of the troops had just arrived at Camp Hale and he wasn't used to the altitude yet (it takes a few weeks to acclimate to it) and he was really having a tough time so I went at a slower rate with him. All of a sudden Old Colonel Hank came up behind us skiing double fast trying to catch up from one company to the other. "What's the matter you men?" he growled. "What's going on?" I explained that the soldier was out of breath and couldn't talk so Colonel Hank took the kids rucksack and carried it with his own until we got back. There were several other things that the Colonel did that made me think, "This guy is OK!"

When we were on Riva Ridge, he was with the soldiers, really leading the men, not pushing them. He was wounded at Sassamolare. He and Bill Cruckshank (?) were to the left of us when I went over to treat him. There was blood all over his face but it was a superficial wound. A piece of shrapnel nicked the bridge of his nose. He also sustained a shrapnel leg injury and was in the hospital when I got back after three days of rest in Livorno (Leghorn). I stopped to see him in the 64<sup>th</sup> General Hospital where he had to stay for a few weeks until the leg wound healed.

Q: You mentioned that Rupert Von Trapp had left an impression on you. How did you meet him?

FS: There were two brothers, Rupert and Werner. Werner, the younger brother was in the 85<sup>th</sup> Regiment. Rupert was a sergeant in the aid station of the 86<sup>th</sup>, a very high caliber person. Now in *The Sound of Music*, they had different names but Rupert and Werner were their right names. If the Italians or the Germans needed anything, Rupert did what he could to help them. When I first joined the medics, I lived with the other medics for a couple of months, but went with C Company during the day for maneuvers. Before we went to Texas, I lived with C Company and only went to the aid station for supplies. While I was with the medics, Rupert and I had upper and lower bunks together so we got to be close friends. After the war, he took four or five of us to Salzburg to the family estate. Even the gazebo across the lake was all glassed in. Rupert was disappointed seeing it again because Himmler had built railroad tracks right onto the estate so he could have his own private railway car to get him to Berlin or wherever.

Rupert and his wife spent a couple of days with us about ten years ago. I had lost track of him though I had sent Christmas cards. Rupert had become a general practice doctor in Providence and Werner stayed with the Trapp Family Lodge in Vermont. (Werner's son is now the Comptroller there.) I hadn't heard from Rupert for a while but then I got a phone call saying he was on his way home from Ohio and wanted to stop in to see me. I reminded him that it was Owego, not Oswego and he laughed and said "I know, you drummed that into my head 20 years ago!" [Laughing] We had a great time together. I found out that the reason I hadn't heard from him for some years was because his first wife was so jealous of the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain that she threw out all of the mail from the 10<sup>th</sup>. But Rupert finally saw someone who knew my address. So, we reconnected and I met his new wife who was very pleasant. He died about 10 years ago.

Q: Where were you when the war ended?

FS: We were at Lake Garda, Riva del Garda, Nago, Torbole were all small towns clustered at the north end of the lake. There is an article in the National Geographic about four or five years ago about the icemen they had found there.

Q; When did you return home after the war?

FS: After we left northern Italy, they had trouble with Tito on the Yugoslav/Italy border. He wanted to take over Trieste in Italy so they sent a bunch of us to fight. One division went to Trieste but we were sent further north where Italy, Yugoslav and Austria all come together in a town named Mount Mangart, near the village of [unclear] with a dozen houses. I was lucky to have a chance to go to glacier school where Sandy Greg from C Company was teaching. We had a great time there for a while until we had orders to get to Leghorn (Livorno) as soon as we could.

Probably most people never heard of Shangri-La WAC but she was a girl who lived across the street from me on McMaster Street in Owego who joined the WACS. She was with a group who went for a sightseeing trip over New Guinea and the plane crashed and about a dozen people died. She and another girl survived but it took almost two months to get her out. The news got in the *Stars and Stripes* so everyone asked me if I knew her because they read she was from Owego. I said "Yeah, she lived across the street and I used to play with her younger sister!" So, I was a celebrity for a while.

On the way to Leghorn, we stayed in Florence and stayed in big pyramid tents for a couple of days. Then we went to Leghorn and shipped out. The second day out from Italy, before landing in Virginia, the first atomic bomb was dropped in Hiroshima.

Some of the troops in the 85<sup>th</sup> and 87<sup>th</sup> traveled back to their homes from Boston and New York. I left for home from Hampton Roads near Norfolk, Virginia.

From the time we landed it took a day or so to go to Camp Dix in New Jersey and another day to get out of there. I got lucky and got home right on V-J day so that made that 30 day furlough a lot better and it stretched it out a lot further. I bummed part of the way home and got a bus part of the way. My father was a telegrapher at the Erie Railroad Station in Binghamton. He was working nights at the time so I stopped in about two or three in the morning and he almost fell over when he saw me. He didn't know where we were because I had stopped writing. I figured I would get there before the letters. So we had our thirty days at home and then we had to go back to Camp Carson, Colorado. We got another thirty days so I went back home, then we went back. When I got another fifteen days, I took a train and bummed to San Diego to see my aunt and uncle with whom I had spent the summers of 1930, '33, '35' and '38. Because my dad worked on the railroad, he had steady work during the depression and I was a lucky kid to get free passes on the train to California. There was a girl I knew there when I was sixteen or seventeen and she was still there living on the peninsula of Coronado. There was no bridge to Coronado from San Diego so I took the ferry there. We spent the night going back and forth on the ferry eating peanuts.

When I came back from California, Tim Sweeney and I and two others from A Company were sent to Leavenworth to watch prisoners. After we arrived, there were so many soldiers waiting to be discharged that we weren't really needed. We wasted a couple of weeks. I was supposed to be home for Christmas because of my two bronze stars but I never got out until the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January. That was the end of a not so brilliant military career.

Q: Did you ever take advantage of the GI Bill?

FS: Yes, I enrolled in Ithaca College for a couple of years and took [unclear] but I decided I didn't want to continue in the school system. Whether that was a smart move or not, I don't know. I got a job working for the Post Office carrying a bag around for about three years. By the end of the route each day I had a line of dogs following me. One of the dogs was old and at the end of the day I would have to drive her home from the post office because she was too tuckered out to walk home. She belonged to an Episcopal minister. I really enjoyed the dogs in the army, and there weren't a lot of jobs for retired machine gunners so I decided to open a kennel. I guess that was the career I learned in the army [laughing]. We called it The Canine Country Club. We boarded a lot of dogs, trained in obedience, and worked with hunting dogs. I had a handler's license but I only went to a few trials because you had to get all dressed up and it took your weekend. When the Kennel was full, we had 120 dogs. You could only train three or four at a time and the rest were boarders on holidays like Easter and Christmas. Usually we had between twenty and forty dogs. For fifteen or twenty years of the thirty-four years I had the kennel, I was also dog warden for the county. If the loose dogs were good dogs, I would try to find them a home. If they were biters or car chasers, I didn't try so hard. I had a sign on the main road

that said “Free Puppies, 100% Dog.” [Laughing] An old friend named Matt saw the sign and came to the kennel. They were visiting a “Pumpkin Town” (?) at a florist down the road and he saw the sign and came over with his family. I had lost track of him after the war because he went to Cortland and I went to Ithaca College. He came around the corner of the house and we looked at each other and we both knew who we were.

Q: I know you were part of the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Unit. Do you belong to any other military organizations?

FS: VFW and the Legion. I was president of the New York Chapter for a dozen years and now I’m with the Washington chapter. They were a good bunch of guys and we had something special.

Q: How do you think your time in the service changed or affected you?

LS: You learn to not sweat the small stuff. You meet a lot of nice people, made a lot of friends. The 10<sup>th</sup> is really the closest outside of family and old, old friends.

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\*\* Transcriber’s comment: To understand Mr. Shuler’s interview better:

“The Last Ridge, The Uphill Battles of the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division”

[www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

“Soldiers on Skis: 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division”

[www.YouTube.com](http://www.YouTube.com)

[www.10thMountainDivisioninfo.com](http://www.10thMountainDivisioninfo.com)

[www.10thmtndivassoc.org](http://www.10thmtndivassoc.org) Lt. Colonel Hampton’s firsthand account