

## First Student of the Institution

Walker William Gardiner was a high achiever. He started, like all freshmen, as a cadet private, but quickly achieved recognition for his academic and leadership performance. An agricultural economics major from Florence, Gardiner was selected for membership in Phi Eta Sigma, the national freshman honor society. He was named to the Freshman Platoon, composed of the best drilled cadets from his class. In a remarkable example of consistent excellence, Gardiner would subsequently be selected to the Sophomore, Junior, and Senior Platoons as well. As a sophomore, he was appointed to the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment Color Guard and was elected class president. Earning high honors in the classroom, Gardiner was selected to Phi Kappa Phi, the national honor society for collegiate scholarship. He continued to advance in the Cadet Brigade as well, being appointed brigade sergeant major as a junior.



In addition to serving as the vice president of both his junior and senior classes, Gardiner was selected for membership in Blue Key, the Tiger Brotherhood, and Scabbard and Blade, the military honor society. He was a



member of Alpha Zeta, the agriculture honor fraternity and served as a commencement marshal in 1942. He was a member of the YMCA Council and the Canterbury Club and marched with the Pershing Rifles. During his senior year, the last year of full enrollment before the war's manpower demands stripped the campus of most cadets, Colonel Gardiner was the commander of the Brigade, the highest-ranking cadet on campus.

Gardiner graduated with honor on May 24, 1943 and in June reported for active duty in the infantry. After completing his initial Army officer's training, Gardiner was assigned to the 358<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 90<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division.

The 90<sup>th</sup> sailed for England in late March 1944 and arrived in England on April 5. From then until it moved into its pre-invasion staging area, the division continued to train in preparation for D-Day.

In early June, Elements of the division boarded the transport USS *Susan B. Anthony* for the journey across the English Channel to the invasion beaches. On June 7, as the ship moved into position off Utah Beach, it struck a German mine. The ship's electrical power went out, leaving the troops

below in darkness. Rather than panic, officers began issuing instructions and the men, minus much of their equipment, moved to the ship's open deck and began loading into landing craft. Once ashore, the resourceful soldiers scrounged for the equipment lost when *Susan B. Anthony* sank—and continued the invasion.

The 90th attacked toward Saint Malo to the west, intending to cut off German forces in the key port city of Cherbourg. On July 7, with his regiment east of La Haye, Second Lieutenant Gardiner was wounded in action. He was awarded the Purple Heart.

Gardiner rejoined his regiment on December 29. By then, the Germans had launched the Battle of the Bulge, but had been halted by fierce resistance from American forces in Belgium. As 1944 gave way to a new—and final—year of the war, Gardiner's 90<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was pulled from its defensive positions in western Germany and sent to counterattack the German bulge in Belgium. By the end of January, the division had reached the lines vacated by the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division when it received the Germans' main thrust on December 16.

The 90<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division's after action report noted that February began with "patrols as the regiments felt out the enemy defense. Fighting again on home soil, the enemy used all their knowledge of the terrain and the support of the SIEGFRIED guns to delay and obstruct our advance." The report's entry for February 2, 1945 notes "Aside from vigorous patrolling and occasional clashes, the day was relatively inactive though still punctuated by enemy mortar and artillery fires." Second Lieutenant Gardiner was killed in action on this "relatively inactive" day.

Second Lieutenant Gardiner was survived by his parents, two sisters, and brother. He is buried in the American Military Cemetery in Luxembourg.

Walker William Gardiner was one of Clemson's most accomplished students. A newspaper obituary justly referred to him as "the first student of the institution." His death is a reminder of the potential contributions forever eclipsed by war.

