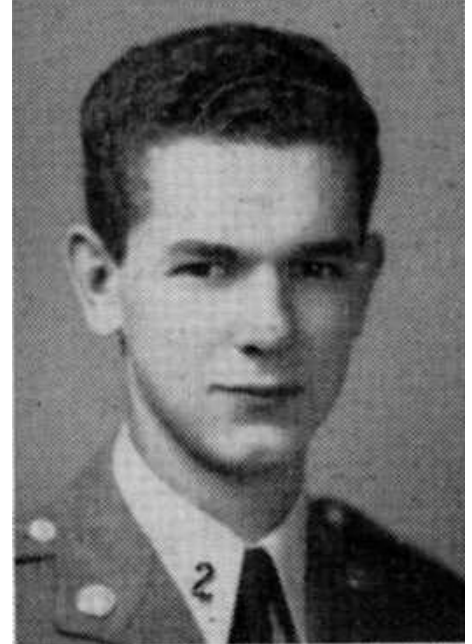


The Last Offensive

The collegiate careers of cadets in Clemson's Classes of 1944 and 1945 were cut short by the escalating manpower needs imposed by fighting a global war. At the end of the 1942-43 academic year, Clemson's underclassmen were ordered to Army basic training. These young men had far less opportunity to serve as officers than the cadets just one or two classes ahead of them. Some, like Gerald Hart Webber of Spartanburg, were offered a different path to service through the Army Specialist Training Program or ASTP.

Webber and his mates in the Class of 1945 were rising juniors when they were called to active duty in mid-1943. During his two years on campus, Webber, a mechanical engineering major, had served on the student council and had been an active member of the Baptist Student Union.



Upon reporting for active duty in June 1943, Webber was sent to Camp Hood, Texas for basic training. After scoring well on the Army General Classification Test, the young soldier was ordered to Eugene, Oregon to attend the Army Specialist Training Program at the University of Oregon. The ASTP had been created to take advantage of the faculty and expertise of American universities in order to teach soldiers technical skills—such as engineering, medicine, and foreign languages—that would be needed in combat zones. At any given time during the program's existence, up to 150,000 soldiers were enrolled at 227 American colleges (including Clemson).

ASTP participants were already trained soldiers, many having served as noncommissioned officers, or sergeants. When Army manpower planners realized they had underestimated the number of ground troops needed for the invasion of Europe, ASTP became an obvious pool for more infantrymen. In mid-February 1944, approximately 110,000 ASTP students were alerted of their pending reassignment to more pressing duties within the Army. For many, like Webber, this meant eventual duty with combat units.

Private First Class Webber shipped overseas in December 1944 and was assigned to the 274th Infantry Regiment of the 70th Infantry Division. The 274th landed at Marseille, France in mid-December and on the 28th moved into defensive positions along the west bank of the Rhine River. Three days later, the 274th was in position when the Germans launched Operation *Nordwind*, the last major German offensive on the Western Front. On January 5, Webber's platoon was part of a larger force attacking German positions in the vicinity of Phillipsbourg, France, about fifteen miles northwest of Hagenau. *Snow Ridges and Pillboxes*, a book about the 70th Infantry Division's exploits, describes the operation.

Webber's platoon advanced into the lower part of the town without encountering trouble. With low marshy ground and water to the left, a ditch running along the main road was the only cover available to the attackers. At this point, as German machine gun fire opened up, Webber and his comrades sought protection in the ditch. Ordered to advance, the men were reluctant. Tech

Sergeant Martin attempted to rally the men to move forward as he later described. “I went back and tried to get the men to come back. It was hard as they were scattered along the road and couldn’t hear well above the noise.” The men had to dash across the road under machine gun fire. Webber hesitated at first, then acquiesced to the orders of his squad leader. He crossed the road “and wasn’t there a second,” recalled Martin, “before an 88 shell came in alongside and the concussion killed him immediately.”

In fierce, winter fighting, American and French forces turned back the German offensive, but not without sacrifice. Allied casualties totaled more than 18,600, including Gerald Webber.

Private First Class Gerald Hart Webber was awarded the Purple Heart. He was survived by his parents, a sister, and a brother, then serving in the US Navy. Webber was buried in the Lorraine American Military Cemetery in St. Avold, France. He is also memorialized with a marker in the West Oakwood Cemetery in Spartanburg.



See also [*Snow Ridges and Pillboxes*](#), edited by Lt. Col. Wallace Cheves, 1980.