

# Argraves, Keith LaMur (1914–1974)

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## SABRINA RILEY

Sabrina Riley was born in Auburn, New York and raised in Dowagiac, Michigan. She received a B.A. in history from Andrews University and an M.A. in information and libraries studies from the University of Michigan. Riley was a member of Andrews University's library staff from 1998 to 2003, library director and college archivist at Union College from 2003 to 2016, and is presently a freelance researcher, author, and information professional.

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Keith Argraves was an American Seventh-day Adventist who gained fame among Adventists church members during World War II as a medic in the United States Army's 509<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment and for surviving internment as a prisoner of war in Italy and Germany.

## Early Life and Education

Keith LaMur<sup>1</sup> Argraves was born September 7, 1914, in Compton, Illinois, where his great-grandfather had settled in the mid-1800s. His parents, John "Jack" Wesley Argraves (1889-1959)<sup>2</sup> and Elsie Post Argraves (1895-1980),<sup>3</sup> married in Oregon,<sup>4</sup> Elsie's home state. A plumber by trade, at the time of Keith's birth his father was a farmer in Illinois. The family later moved to Oregon, changing residences frequently. Their homes ranged from Klamath Falls to the Portland area. In his later years, Jack managed the Adventist camp at Gladstone, Oregon. The family included Keith's brother, Karel (1917-1928), and sister, Karmon Lavon (1919-2006).<sup>5</sup> Karmon became a church school teacher in the North Pacific Union. It is unknown when or how the Argraves family joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Keith attended high school in Talent, Oregon. According to his army enlistment record, he attended college for one year prior to his military service, most likely Southern Oregon College of Education, in Ashland, Oregon.<sup>6</sup>

## World War II

When Argraves registered as required with Selective Service on October 16, 1940, he was working for Klamath Timber Company in Klamath Falls, Oregon.<sup>8</sup> While not specifically stated in existing sources, circumstantial evidence supports his registration as 1-A-O, Selective Service classification recommended to all Adventist church members by the Seventh-day Adventist War Service Commission. Argraves enlisted on June 5, 1941,<sup>9</sup> and trained at Camp Grant, Illinois, the Army Medical Service individual training center at the time. While at Camp Grant, he became interested in also training as a paratrooper. He was assigned to the Fourth Division, Twenty-second Infantry, at Fort Benning (now Fort Moore), Georgia. The 503<sup>rd</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR) was also

trained at this post, which enabled Argraves to apply to the program.

Argraves was a faithful Seventh-day Adventist, and observance of the seventh-day Sabbath provided a serious obstacle to his training in the paratroopers. He would miss eight classes each week of the training program. Argraves persevered through the physically rigorous exercises that continued at Fort Bragg (now Fort Liberty), North Carolina. Throughout his service as a combat medic in the paratroopers, he refused to carry a weapon. It appears that his conscientious objector convictions were never seriously challenged, although fellow paratroopers may have questioned his sanity for being willing to jump into hostile zones without a weapon.

In 1942, Argraves' unit, the Second Battalion, 503<sup>rd</sup> PIR, was sent to Great Britain for special training with the British Army. During this time, Eleanor Roosevelt visited American troops in Britain, and Argraves was among the soldiers with whom she spoke.<sup>10</sup> On November 2, 1942, the unit was reorganized as the Second Battalion, 509<sup>th</sup> PIR.

As part of Operation Torch, the Second Battalion, 509<sup>th</sup> PIR departed Great Britain for North Africa on November 7, 1942, jumping into Algiers the next day. Argraves had been promoted to technician fifth grade (equivalent to a corporal) by this time. In late December 1942, he was one of two medics to volunteer to accompany the El Djem Bridge Mission (in Tunisia) intended to impede Germany's General Erwin Rommel's retreat by destroying railroad and communication lines, and a bridge. It was considered a suicide mission, and Argraves shared his perspective on faith and war in a letter home to his family before departing.

I can assure all our boys who are still in the States and those who are not in the armed forces yet, that the Lord is the One, and the only One, who can help them at a time like this. I know, because I have been saved many times. That verse in Psalm 91:7, "A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee," I have seen come true. When you lie by the hour while death rains out of the sky, then you look for help that is far greater than guns and men...It pays to be a true Christian...This war is a terrible experience and hard on the nerves. Only prayer and faith will bring any of us through what is to come. They, and they alone, have brought me this far. Pray for me. Some day, the Lord willing, I shall be home!<sup>11</sup>

Infiltrating seventy-five miles behind enemy lines on December 26, 1942, it was only after the paratroopers were on the ground that they realized they had been dropped eight miles from their target. Traveling on foot, they succeeded in destroying the railroad and communication lines, but German reinforcements arrived before they could destroy the bridge. Argraves was among the seventeen Americans captured.<sup>12</sup>

Argraves was first held in Italian custody, moved from camps in Sicily to the mainland. He suffered from exposure to cold weather, hunger, thirst, and abuse from the guards. Participating in a prison break in 1943, he was among the few prisoners who successfully evaded immediate recapture. Unable to get through the German lines to reach Allied-controlled territory, he and other Americans took refuge in the mountains with Italian resistance fighters for about four and a half months.

In early 1944 while staying with friendly Italian villagers, a resident German priest and Nazi spy reported the presence of American soldiers. All of the soldiers were captured. Argraves was returned to Italian prisons now controlled by the Nazis who used them as transit camps. In June 1944, Argraves survived a forced march from Camp No. 132 to Camp No. 82 in which seventy-five percent of the prisoners died.<sup>13</sup> As Argraves was transported deeper into Nazi-held territory, he escaped twice more, only to be recaptured within a few days each time. After his third capture, he was in such poor physical condition that he was admitted to the prison hospital for some weeks. Argraves was also placed in solitary confinement for periods of time as punishment for his escape attempts.

Throughout his twenty-six-month ordeal, Argraves not only suffered severe hardship, but witnessed some of the Nazis' worst atrocities. It is believed he spent time in approximately sixteen different prison camps. He was finally freed in February 1945 in a prisoner exchange of medical personnel.<sup>14</sup>

Argraves' honors include a Purple Heart and Presidential citation from the United States, two citations from Great Britain, and one from France. He also received three jump stars.<sup>15</sup> By early 1945, the ranks of the Second Battalion, 509<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment had been decimated. The few remaining paratroopers were reassigned to the United States 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division effective March 1, 1945. Argraves was officially discharged from the United States Army on May 27, 1945.<sup>16</sup> Because of this three-month overlap, Argraves is credited with service in the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division in some sources; however, those three months were spent in recovery from his imprisonment, not active duty.

## Later Life

Argraves returned to the United States in the spring of 1945.<sup>17</sup> He married Marie Elizabeth Gibson, (1916-1987), a nurse at the Portland Sanitarium, on June 17, 1945.<sup>18</sup> They had one son, Theron Keith (1954-2022). Argraves enrolled at Walla Walla College from which he graduated in 1952 with a Bachelor's degree in history.<sup>19</sup> He worked part time for a lumber company while in college. The Argraves family remained in College Place, Washington, for a few years before moving to Rogue River, Oregon, where Argraves appears to have continued working in the lumber industry. Argraves died on November 4, 1974, in Medford, Oregon. He was buried with military honors in Eagle Point National Cemetery, White City, Oregon.<sup>20</sup>

## Legacy

Throughout his wartime experiences, Argraves survived many harrowing events and experienced numerous dramatic answers to prayer.<sup>21</sup> In the postwar years, these details provided the basis for stories and presentations encouraging young adults to be faithful to God and upheld Argraves—along with Desmond Doss—as an example of an ideal Seventh-day Adventist conscientious objector. His story was published for young adults in George W. Chambers' book, *Keith Argraves, Paratrooper. Your Story Hour*<sup>22</sup> later dramatized his

story for children. In 1951 the Pacific Union Medical Cadet Corps summer camp held in Watsonville, California, was named Camp Keith Argraves.<sup>23</sup>

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"Gibson-Argraves wedding." *North Pacific Union Gleaner*, July 17, 1945.

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"Keith L. Argraves long obituary." *North Pacific Union Gleaner*, January 20, 1975.

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## NOTES

1. Argraves' middle name is spelled LaMur or LaMar with equal frequency. In the absence of a birth certificate or family verification, the author has chosen to use the spelling used in military sources.
2. *Oregon, Death Records, 1864-1967*, "John Wesley Argraves," Oregon State Archives, Salem, Oregon, Ancestry.com, accessed August 15, 2023, <https://ancestry.com>.
3. "Elsie Argraves obituary," *North Pacific Union Gleaner*, December 15, 1980, 24.
4. *Oregon State Marriages, 1911-1945*, "John W. Argraves," Oregon Center for Health Statistics, Portland, Oregon, Ancestry.com, accessed August 15, 2023, <https://ancestry.com>.
5. "Karmon L. Argraves obituary," *North Pacific Union Gleaner*, July 2006, 53; "Keith LaMar Argraves short obituary," *North Pacific Union Gleaner*, January 6, 1975, 23. Karmon was divorced and had one daughter, Kimberlee. Kimberlee is sometimes listed as Keith's sister and Elsie's daughter. Although her father's name was Cooper Brown, she used the Argraves surname.
6. "Keith L. Argraves," U.S., *World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946* [database on-line], Ancestry.com, accessed August 22, 2023, <https://ancestry.com>; Jerry Entze, Walla Walla University registrar, email to author, August 17, 2023.
7. Unless otherwise noted, this section is summarized from George W. Chambers, *Keith Argraves, Paratrooper* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1946), accessed August 16, 2023, Amazon Kindle Books.
8. "Keith Lamur Argraves," U.S., *World War II Draft Cards Young Men, 1940-1947* [database on-line], Ancestry.com, 2011, accessed August 22, 2023, <https://ancestry.com>.
9. "Keith L. Argraves," U.S., *World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946* [database on-line], Ancestry.com, accessed August 22, 2023, <https://ancestry.com>.
10. E. W. Dunbar, "American Conscientious Objectors Honoured," *British Advent Messenger* May 7, 1943, 4; "Oregon News Notes," *North Pacific Union Gleaner*, March 16, 1943, 6.
11. Quoted by George W. Chambers, *Keith Argraves, Paratrooper* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1946), Chapter 5, accessed August 16, 2023, Amazon Kindle Books.
12. "El Djem Bridge Mission," accessed August 20, 2023, 509<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Association, 2006, <https://www.509thgeronimo.org/combatjumps/jump3.html>.

13. This march became the subject of a war crimes trial. See Janet Kinrade Dethick, "Camp PG 82 Laterina: War Crimes," October 2016, accessed August 22, 2023, <https://powcamp82laterina.weebly.com/war-crimes.html>.
14. "Keith Argraves," *U.S., World War II American and Allied Prisoners of War, 1941-1946* [database on-line], Ancestry.com, accessed August 22, 2023, <https://ancestry.com>.
15. "Keith L. Argraves long obituary," *North Pacific Union Gleaner*, January 20, 1975, 10; "Capacity Crowd Hears Argraves War Experience," *Medford Mail Tribune*, April 1, 1945, 9, accessed August 20, 2023, Newspapers.com.
16. "Keith Lamur Argraves," *U.S., Department of Veterans Affairs BIRLS Death File, 1850-2010* [database on-line], Ancestry.com, accessed August 2, 2023, <https://ancestry.com>.
17. "Keith Argraves to Return to the United States," *Herald and News* (Klamath Fall, Oregon), February 10, 1945, 10, accessed August 20, 2023, Newspapers.com.
18. "Gibson-Argraves wedding," *North Pacific Union Gleaner*, July 17, 1945, 3.
19. Jerry Entze, Walla Walla University registrar, email to author, August 17, 2023.
20. "Keith L. Argraves long obituary," *North Pacific Union Gleaner*, January 20, 1975, 10.
21. See for example: "Keith L. Argraves obituary," *North Pacific Union Gleaner*, January 20, 1975, 10.
22. See Your Story Hour, "Suicide Mission" and "Prisoners of War," *Patterns of Destiny*, Your Story Hour, 1998, accessed August 25, 2023, <https://www.yourstoryhour.org/story/patterns-of-destiny>.
23. "Adventist Camp at Watsonville Begins Training," *The Californian*, June 26, 1951, 8, accessed August 20, 2023, Newspapers.com.

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