

## Courage Under Fire: The Selfless Decision of John Robert Fox

- **Compelling Question**
  - How can the selfless actions of John Robert Fox inspire us to act selflessly in our own lives?
- **Virtue:** Self-sacrifice
- **Definition** – Self-sacrifice is purposeful action exchanging personal loss for the good of others.
- **Lesson Overview**
  - In this lesson, students will learn about the actions of John Robert Fox during the Italian campaign during World War II. Through his example, students will understand how they can act more selflessly in their own lives.
- **Objectives**
  - Students will explore the actions of John Robert Fox
  - Students will understand how his selfless actions helped the allied cause and the soldiers he served with
  - Students will learn importance of being selfless in their own lives
- **Background**
  - Combat in the Second World War spanned the entire globe. From small islands in the Pacific to the jungles of Burma and the rolling fields of France. There were two major fronts in the conflict. The Pacific War was waged against the Empire of Japan. Allied soldiers in the Pacific fought through thick jungles and on black volcanic islands, inching ever closer to the Japanese home Islands. The other half of the war was fought across Europe and North Africa.

Several major fronts had been opened in Europe by 1944. On June 6, Operation Overlord had successfully landed hundreds of thousands of allied soldiers on the shores of Normandy, France. In August, another Allied landing in southern France, began to push north toward the German border. All the while, the Germans were being gradually pushed back from the east by the ceaseless attack of the Soviet Union.

Another, less well known campaign was also being waged on the Italian peninsula. Operations in Italy had begun with the invasion of Sicily in July of 1943. In September of 1943, Allied forces had moved onto the mainland and began to push north. By December of 1944, Allied forces had pushed well into Northern Italy. There, the exhausted forces had taken up a “defense-offensive” strategy, holding their positions, and preparing to attack when better weather arrived in the spring.

Though the Germans were being pushed back on several front, they were still a dangerous foe. On December 16, Nazi forces launched a massive counter-attack in the Ardennes forest in France. While this attack was being repelled, German forces were also active in Italy. One such incursion took place on Christmas Day, 1944. Thanks primarily to one brave soldier, the attack was stopped in its tracks. That man was John Robert Fox.

- **Vocabulary**
  - Ceaseless
  - Foe
  - Incursion
  - Self-sacrifice
  - Commission
  - Artillery
  - Formidable
  - Precariously
  - Emplacements
  - Barrages
  - Casualties
  - Untenable
  - Posthumously
  - Segregated
  - Irrespective

- **Introduce Text**
  - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
  - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    - What challenges are you facing?
    - What fears or concerns might you have?
    - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?
- **Observation Questions**
  - Who was John Robert Fox?
  - What did John Robert Fox do on the cold day in December of 1944?
  - How did the selfless actions of John Robert Fox help the allied effort against the Gothic Line in Italy in 1944?
- **Discussion Questions**
  - Discuss the following questions with your students.
    - What is the historical context of the narrative?
    - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
  - "Valor Awards for John Robert Fox." Valor Awards for John Robert Fox. <http://valor.militarytimes.com/recipient.php?recipientid=2001>.
  - "DEBT OF HONOR." U.S. News 5/6/96: 50 Years Late, the Medal of Honor for Seven Black Heroes. <http://www.wiz-worx.com/366th/usnews/medal.htm>.
  - "366th Infantry - Fox." 366th Infantry - Fox. <http://www.wiz-worx.com/366th/fox/>.

## Handout A: Courage Under Fire: The Selfless Decision of John Robert Fox

### Background

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Though the Germans were being pushed back on several front, they were still a dangerous foe. On December 16, Nazi forces launched a massive counter-attack in the Ardennes forest in France. While this attack was being repelled, German forces were also active in Italy. One such incursion took place on Christmas Day, 1944. Thanks primarily to one brave soldier, the attack was stopped in its tracks. That man was John Robert Fox.

### Narrative

John Robert Fox was born in Cincinnati, Ohio in May of 1915. Fox was from an ordinary family in an ordinary city leading an ordinary life, yet he would grow up to embody the virtues of self-sacrifice and courage. He attended Wilberforce University and graduated in the spring of 1940 with a commission as a second lieutenant.

On Christmas night of 1944, John Robert Fox found himself in the cold, rocky, and overcast northern expanse of Italy’s Tuscany region. He volunteered to serve as a forward artillery observer as he and his unit moved forward. He and his unit had been moved into a position behind the village of Sommocolonia, near the ancient medieval town of Barga. The town was on top of a rocky outcropping, which gave a commanding view of the surrounding countryside.

The village was a part of a massive defensive network that had been built by the Germans known as the Gothic line. Over 15,000 laborers had built an impressive 2,000 fortified positions and machine gun emplacements. This created a formidable obstacle that stretched the width of the northern Italy, cutting across the Apennines from the Liguria Sea to the Adriatic. It was the final major obstacle standing between the Allies and a push into the southern German frontier.

Fox’s battalion, about 1,000 men strong, had been ordered to hold the Germans along a 30 mile stretch of the front. This meant they were stretched precariously thin. Sensing an opportunity, the German commander in the area decided to launch a daring attack.

Fox had taken a position in a house with a good view of the surrounding countryside from which he could radio in coordinates for defensive artillery fire, should that become necessary. He went to sleep that Christmas night, cold, but confident in his position.

The next morning, John awoke to find the situation completely changed. During the evening, Germans dressed in civilian clothing had infiltrated and taken significant portions of the town. In the early morning hours, a German artillery barrage was launched, precipitating an assault by uniformed German soldiers.

Knowing the situation was untenable, allied forces began to pullout. Fox, however, knew that his position had a commanding view of the advancing Germans. He knew that if he stayed, he could call in defensive artillery fire that could possibly delay the Germans long enough for the allies to reorganize and defeat the attack. Fox would stay.

As the Germans advanced, he began to call down devastating and accurate barrages of artillery. As the Germans continued to push forward, Fox adjusted his fire, walking it closer and closer to his exposed position in the second story of a house. He knew the German attack was slowing. They had suffered heavy casualties and were growing tired. But still they came on.

Finally, with the Germans nearly on top of him, John Robert Fox called in a final artillery barrage. This barrage would come down right on top of his own position. When he called it in, the commander of the artillery battery hesitated, knowing that the call would mean John's almost certain death. John insisted, knowing that this one final barrage was the only way to defeat the advancing enemy. The guns fired, with deadly accuracy.

When Allied Forces retook the town, they found Fox's mutilated body amongst approximately 100 German soldiers. His sacrifice has done what he knew it would, halted the German advance cold. For his heroic and selfless actions, John Robert Fox was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

But his story does not end there. John was a member of the 366<sup>th</sup> Infantry regiment, a part of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry division. Also known as the buffalo soldiers, this was a segregated African American division that fought with great distinction throughout the Second World War. Due to continued racial tensions, the United States army remained segregated until after World War II had concluded.

John Robert Fox had sacrificed himself for the allied cause and to protect his men from an oncoming assault. He had done all this in the most heroic traditions of the United States military, and yet the nation's highest honor, the Medal of Honor had been denied to him. He had sacrificed himself for a country that, in many places, did not treat him as an equal. Despite this, John did not hesitate in calling in that strike, saving countless numbers of lives, irrespective of race, creed, or religion.

In 1997, the United States government reviewed many files of soldiers who had not been recognized as they should have been owing to their race. John Robert Fox was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions on January 13, 1997, with his widow accepting the Medal on his behalf. Finally, his bold and selfless actions had received the recognition that they deserved from a grateful nation. A grateful nation decorated one of its bravest sons.