

**Sgt. Robert Lyle Cunningham, Darby's Rangers, US Army World War II
30 July 1922 - 1 September 1946**



By: Bruce Dale. White

This is a story about a man, a grand-uncle that I never knew, as he died in a tragic automobile accident eighteen years before I was born to the daughter of his sister, Lois Winnell Cunningham Price. Most of this research was done by my uncle, Frank Robert "Bob" Price and I have included the full text of his story and how he came to want to preserve and tell the story of Lyle in its entirety within this paper. I knew nothing of my Uncle Lyle Cunningham before Bob Price showed me the results of his work. As a veteran who has fought in war, it speaks a great deal to me.

Most people today would have no idea who Darby was and what it means for a person to be a Darby's Ranger. The Rangers were World War Two's equivalent of the modern day special forces, the Green Berets and Airborne Rangers. Sgt. Robert Lyle Cunningham was assigned to the 3rd ranger Battalion, Company F. Following is a brief history of the 3rd Battalion, from the Ranger Memorial Foundation.

**A brief introduction and history
of the exploits of the WW II Rangers**

At the time the U.S. became involved in WWII, most of Europe was engulfed and occupied by Nazi German troops. The First Ranger Battalion was formed at the onset of U.S. involvement in this conflict as an elite unit modeled after the British Commandos. They were highly and rigorously trained to attack in the dead of night from the least likely route.

The Rangers were trained in cliff climbing and speed marches enabling them to infiltrate deep behind enemy lines on foot. Their surprise night attacks often followed 30 mile treks deep into enemy territory. They were also trained in amphibious landings where they would infiltrate from the sea.

This highly trained soldier was strictly volunteer. Each was chosen not only on his merits of physical strength and endurance, but also for his intelligence and ability to think on his feet. The Ranger was expected to act independently and also survive on nothing more than his wits, while accomplishing operations miles behind enemy lines.

There were six Ranger Battalions during WWII. Each Battalion was comprised of approximately 500 men. Of the more than 15 million people who served in the armed forces in WWII, only 3000 were Rangers (estimated at 6000-7000 with replacements). Every Ranger sees himself as a part of one unit, the Band of Ranger Brothers.

These men are legends and heroes. If you are the relative of one of these extraordinary Rangers, you are one of the fortunate few. This is a glowing part of your heritage. Be proud!

The U.S. Army Ranger is alive and well in our contemporary military. Today's Rangers are known as the 75th Ranger Regiment and are the first line of defense for the U.S. These Rangers follow in the footsteps of their mentors and heroes, the WWII Rangers. Today's soldier carries the responsibility to uphold the tradition and integrity of their WWII counterparts. They do so with honor, pride, and privilege.

At the end of its small part in the Tunisian Campaign in late April 1943, the 1st Ranger Battalion entrained for Nemours, a tiny coastal port near the Western boundary of Algeria with French Morocco, and there, with volunteers from units then in North Africa, formed the Third, Fourth and reconstituted First Ranger Battalions under Colonel William Orlando Darby. The Third, cadred by A and B of the Old First, was led by Herman Dammer who had the legs and stamina of a Bactrian camel.

It opened Sicilian doors for Truscott's 3rd Division from Licata West to near Marsala. During this phase, the Battalion accounted for thrice its numbers in enemy casualties, at small cost to itself.

At one point, the Battalion topped a ridge to look down upon the left flank of a medium artillery battalion firing at elements of the Third Division. At once, the mortar squads set up and waited for orders to fire... and waited. And the more they waited, the more pissed off they became, having toted their abominable loads over endless mountains in Sicilian summer heat. Finally, one of the less-disciplined gunners let one "slip". Thereupon the other squads loosed ranging shots also, one of which hit the Italian artillery ammunition, detonating it with a horrendous roar, completely destroying the enemy unit (each gunner claimed it was "his" round that lit the dump). Shortly afterwards, as half the battalion advanced in extended order down a wide clear slope, an enemy convoy of trucks, cars, armored vehicles, and motorcycles came tearing along a metaled road which bisected the slope, and at that instant, had Rangers on either side of it. Most of the enemy column was brought to the ground.

Bypassing Agrigento, the Battalion continued in extended order all the way to Porto Empedocle, disposing of weak opposition here and there along the way. Here it met its first German opposition and took a hundred Germans, along with nearly a thousand Italian prisoners. Immediately after its occupation of the port, it came under the fire of "The Philly", the cruiser USS Philadelphia. Spelling out "USA" and "Yank" with barrels and bales on the docks, men of the Third coaxed Philly's spotter plane to the surface of the harbor, where it provided Colonel Dammer with a flight to the ship, and a longboat full of welcome Navy chow.

After nominal actions through Sciacia and Marsala, the Third joined the First and Fourth for rest and refit near the small town of Corleone which, although unknown to the Rangers then, subsequently became known to all as the nerve center of the Mafia.

Within a few days, a call came to Darby from the Third Division's General Truscott, for a battalion to secure his right flank as he fought up the North shore towards Messina. Offered the better rested First,

Truscott demurred and specified the Third. The battalion then, with the aid of newly issued mules, toiled over the mountainous terrain all the way to Messina and entered that city, among the first of the Allies to do so, beating Montgomery, who was coming up the East shore, by a couple of days.

Now, it was back to Corleone, to prep for Salerno, where the Third, as part of Ranger Force, followed the Fourth and First into the beach at Maiori, on the extreme left flank of the main Allied forces at Salerno. The First and Third went quickly through the town and 12K up the road to Chiunzi Pass. The leading elements of the First left the road two thirds of the way, to occupy the heights dominated by Monte St. Angelo (1200m). The Third occupied Chiunzi Pass and the ridges to either side overlooking the main road from Naples to Salerno. The Rangers were the only units of the invading force which attained their initial objectives. This was because the Germans had taken over the Italian defenses, and fiercely contested the landings, at Salerno and Vietri sul Mare, against the U.S. Corps under General Dawley, the British Corps under General McCreery, and Two Commandos at Vietri. Opposition was such that, Mark Clark, commanding General of the 5th Army, contemplated withdrawal after the fourth day. Arguably, such may have happened except for the highly successful Ranger operation, which interdicted enemy travel on the principal road from Naples to Salerno.

The first to arrive at the Pass stood on a graveled shelf, gasping equally from the ascent and from the startling sight of a fire pulsing high up and far away in the dark. At dawn, the fire dims, and through the mist, a great mountain rises from the plain. It's the massive bulk of il Vesuvio erupting fire, smoke and ash as he's done since long before Etruscans, Greeks, Romans, and Italians peopled his slopes, and whom he's oft entertained with spectacular pyrotechnics. From time to time, he's gassed, suffocated, incinerated, and buried them. On September 9, 1943, he again has the stage! Brilliant beacon for the Luftwaffe, Allied bombers, and aiming point for the guns of the great fleet of warships accompanying the transports and landing craft riding calm seas off Salerno, and about to deposit 140,000 men upon the Continent.

With the Rangers was a unit of 4.2 Chemical mortars and both field artillery and Naval artillery observers. With the Plain of Naples, the main road curving along the narrow valley, through Pagani, Nocera Inferiore, Nocera Superiore, Cava, and around the feet of Monte Chiunzi and St. Angelo, in plain view, the Rangers and their observers directed mortar and Naval fire upon the roads from the first day, aided in no small measure by the initiative of Corporal Fox. Willie, on his own initiative, descended into Nocera,

Sgt. Robert Lyle Cunningham

Darby's Rangers

contacted demoralized Italians and obtained maps showing significant targets for gunfire. For the daylight hours, that road was "Closed". The Herman Goering division, charged with that flank, tried time after time to breach the thin Ranger lines spread over miles of ridges, but were defeated by the stubborn defenders which included, after a time, Paratroops and a 36th Division combat team. When the main Allied breakout occurred, it came through the Ranger positions, contrary to and much later than called for in the invasion plan.

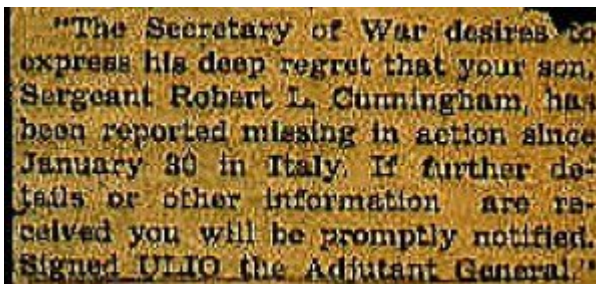
The pass included a two-story farmhouse built right into the West wall of the Pass, with two of its exterior walls being part of the mountain's solid limestone. It eventually proved impervious to direct hits and sheltered quite effectively the forward HQ of The Force, a principal OP, and the aid station attended by Doc Shuster. Late in this action, Sergeant-Major Scotty Munro answered the phone, "Fort Shuster!" It remains so to those of the Third Battalion to this day.

After rest and refit in Naples and elsewhere, the Third joined the others, already in action on the Volturno, and against prepared German positions in greatly advantageous defensive emplacements in the mountains. The Rangers suffered many casualties during these mountain advances, and in late

November, were sent back to Pozzuoli (near Naples) to refit and train for the landing at Anzio.

In mid-January, the Rangers landed against opposition at Anzio. After some nine days fighting, increasing opposition on the forward line of the beachhead, they were assembled for an infiltration to Cisterna di Littorio. The First and Third went through the German lines in single files on either side of the stream in the Pontano ditch, a part of the drainage system of the Pontine marshes which stretch northerly from Anzio to the Alban hills. Shortly before they attained Cisterna, the First and Third met their end, the same aided by a strange fortune! The Pontano ditch was designated by Kesslerling, the German commander, as the dividing line between two divisions, which arrived at the front during the evening before the Ranger attempts on Cisterna. When the forces collided, the Rangers were mostly in two long files, dictated by the travel up the ditch, and had difficulty in assembling effectively. Major Alvah Miller, the Third commander was killed with the first shot, and the commander of the First disabled soon after. It gradually became clear that they were surrounded by vastly superior forces, and after a fight lasting late in the day, were finally cut in pieces, all attempts at aid (from the Fourth Battalion and the Third Division) failing.

Sgt. Robert Lyle Cunningham was captured by German forces during this last operation north of Anzio. US Army officials had no idea if he was dead, wounded or captured, as he was missing in action. As per Army policy, a message was forwarded to his parents that he was "missing in action" and this is all they knew for several months. Eventually he was transferred to Stalag IIB.



"The Secretary of War desires to express his deep regret that your son, Sergeant Robert L. Cunningham, has been reported missing in action since January 30 in Italy. If further details or other information are received you will be promptly notified. Signed ULIO the Adjutant General."

MIA Notification



Granite People Fear Son Lost when Commando Battalions Wiped Out

A radio broadcast Wednesday morning stating that the first and third battalions of American commandos in Italy had been almost completely wiped out brought fear and grief to Mr. and Mrs. R. B. Cunningham of Granite.

The Granite people knew that their son, Lyle Cunningham, was attached to the third battalion, and their fear is that he was numbered among the lost.

Lyle was graduated from the Granite high school with the class of 1941. He has been in the service about two years. The parents still cling to the hope that their son might have been one among the few members of the two battalions that escaped.

Newspaper Article

U.S. Spearhead Trapped by Foe

Tanks Lead German Charge Below Rome

NAPLES, March 8.—(AP)—A grim secret kept locked in the hearts of allied troops in Italy for over a month now has been placed in the record of heroic but hopeless "last stands."

This new chapter concerned two lost battalions of Rangers who set out on what for them was a routine assignment to "raise hell" in Cisterna di Littoria at 1 a. m. January 30 and by noon of that day had been swallowed into oblivion.

Even now all that is known of their fate is the fragmentary picture framed by the few who returned and a German announcement at the time that some 950 had been taken prisoner. The Nazis said about 100 were killed and many more wounded.

Nazis Also Advance

The two battalions of Rangers were the spearhead of an attack on Cisterna at a time when the allied troops on the beachhead still were pushing forward with little opposition. They were to infiltrate behind the German lines in the dark of night and cause a ruction in Cisterna at dawn when forces of infantry on each side would move in the town and join them.

The infantry never arrived, however. The Germans, too, had been on the move during the night. Reinforcements had been brought up in front of Cisterna. The Rangers were trapped.

Two of the little handful who escaped, Cpl. Ben W. Mosier of Ashtabula, Ohio, and Sgt. Thomas B. Fergen of Parkston, S. D., later told of the fierce, futile battle that followed.

Tanks "Hurt" Most

"When it go light," said Mosier, "we saw one big building ahead and trees all around it. Behind us there was a tank and when we saw it we cheered. We thought it was supporting us. Then it opened up against us and we knew what it was."

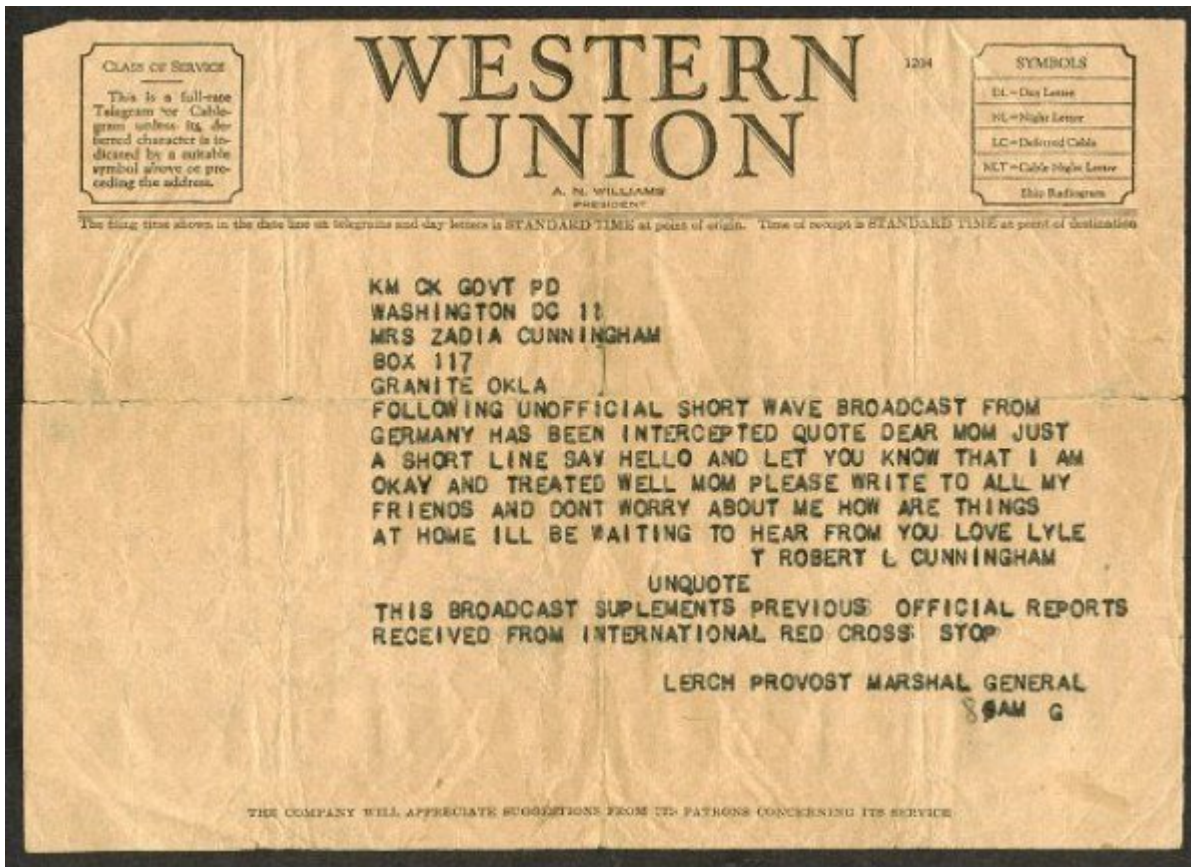
Soon after, artillery also began firing on the Rangers and German infantry closed in, but "the tanks hurt us the most," said Fergen. "They caught us in a field and seven moved in firing with everything they had."

At 8 o'clock both battalions reported by radio that they were surrounded. The commander of one had been killed, the commander of the other wounded.

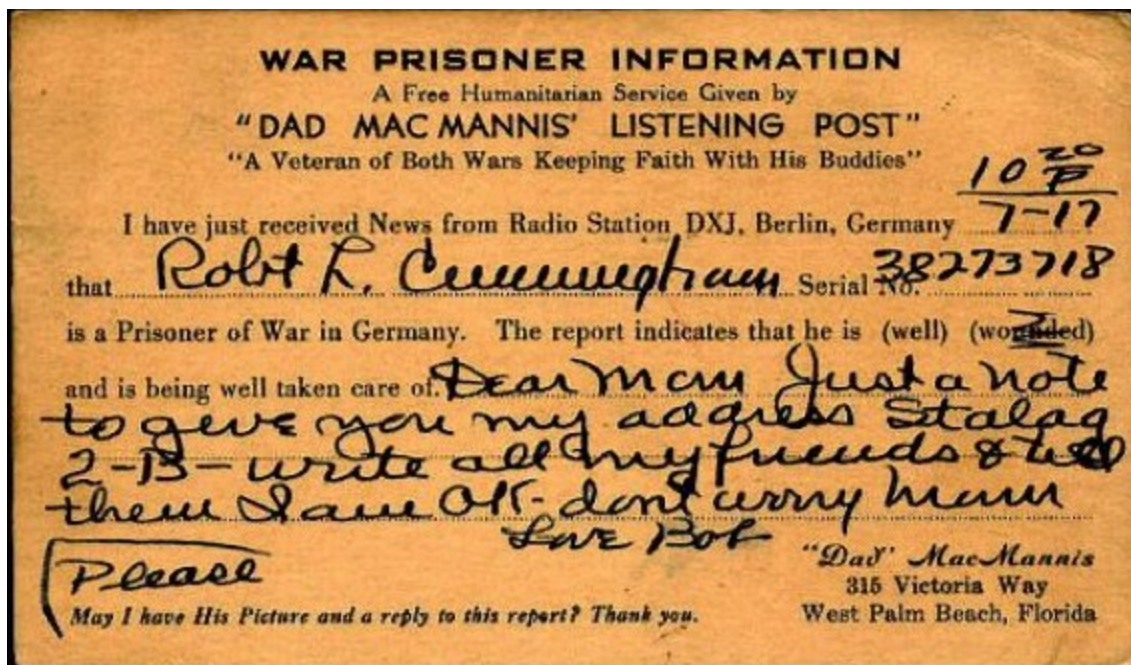
It was a fight to the end against overwhelming odds. The Rangers became scattered and one by one guns and ammunition gave out. At noon the radio of one battalion, the first, went dead. A few minutes later the sergeant major of the other battalion, the third, called that he was destroying his radio because the command post no longer could defend itself.

After that there was silence.

Newspaper Article



P.O.W. Notification #1



P.O.W. Notification #2

Following is the card received here by Mr. and Mrs. Cunningham dated April 3, 1944:

"Dear Mom: Just a line to say hello and let you know I am O. K. I am in a prison camp in Germany getting treated O. K. Moms don't worry about me I will be O. K. Tell everyone hello for me. How is everyone making it? Love, Lyle."

The card received here and dated February 17th is as follows:

"I am a prisoner — in German captivity, but in perfect health. From here I shall be transported during the next few days to another camp, the address of which I shall give you later. Only there I can get your letters and can reply to them. Kindest regards, Robert L. Cunningham, Sgt. Rangers."

This was a printed card and also bore a German post mark and was signed by the local boy.

Mr. and Mrs. Cunningham are also in receipt of a letter dated April 24 which was received at Granite Tuesday in which he said he was still doing O. K. and was receiving good treatment.

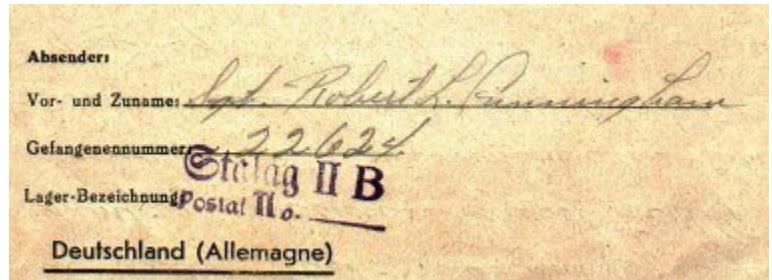
Newspaper Article from Cheyenne, OK



German stamp used on envelope like at right



P.O.W. Envelope front



P.O.W. Envelope back

LYLE CUNNINGHAM IS GERMAN PRISONER

Lyle Cunningham, son of Mr and Mrs. Bob Cunningham of Granite Oklahoma, is a German prisoner, according to information received by his parents this week. Lyle had been reported as "missing in action" by the War Department, in the Anzio beachhead engagement.

Lyle spent most of his life in Cheyenne.

Newspaper Article from Cheyenne, OK

Granite Boy, Prisoner Of Germans Liberated; En Route Home

RECEIVE TELEGRAM FROM
GEN. ULIO EARLY MONDAY
MORNING

Mr. and Mrs. R. B. Cunningham were another Granite couple made extremely happy by the receipt of a telegram. The message came from Adj. General Ulio of the U. S. war department and informed them that their son, Sergeant Lyle Cunningham, who had been a prisoner of war of the German government had been liberated and was en route home.

Sgt. Cunningham entered the service November 14th, 1942 and went overseas in April, 1943. He saw service in Africa, but saw his first action in Sicily. He was in the battles at Salerno and Anzio, and was captured by the Germans, when the third and four U. S. ranger battalions were cut to pieces and many of them captured at Cisterna. He was a member of the third Ranger battalion.

He was reported missing in action in January, 1944, and was first heard from in June of 1945, when the parents received a prisoner of war message from their son.

Since that time Mr. and Mrs. Cunningham have received numerous communications from their son, but said here Monday the message from Gen. Ulio was the greatest piece of news they had heard since the war began.

Sergeant Cunningham was first sent to Stalag 2 in northeastern Germany, but when the Russian armies invaded that section of Germany he was transferred to District 10 in northwestern Germany. Mr. and Mrs. Cunningham believe their son was liberated by the British or Canadian armies under General Montgomery.

Newspaper Article

SEPARATION POINT
1861st Service Command Unit
Camp Joseph T. Robinson, Arkansas

23 November 1945

Mr. Robert L. Cunningham
Box 117
Granite, Oklahoma

Dear Mr. Cunningham:

This office is in receipt of letter from the War Department authorizing the Combat Infantry Badge for your service with the 3rd Ranger Battalion while overseas.

Inclosed you will find the Badge and with regard to recovery of additional money due from 1 January 1945 to 12 October 1945, you are instructed to write the Army Service Forces, Office of the Fiscal Director, Central Field Fiscal Office, Army Central Adjustment Office, 4300 Goodfellow, St Louis, Missouri.

Yours very truly,

DONALD B. WALKER
1st Lt Inf
Personnel Officer

Award of CIB

By: Frank Robert "Bob" Price

This research project of mine began so many years ago; that I would miss its date by any stretch of the imagination. Let it suffice to say that this idea has been on the back burners of my mind since I can remember. I will give it a date of 1962; but, I can tell you there were thoughts and ideas as early as I can remember; and that would be into the 1950's.

My mission; (if I have one at all); is to hopefully entertain, honor, and possibly inspire YOU my fellow citizen of the world to work on your own history; preserve history and find the peace of mind and the creativity I have enjoyed working on this subject for so many years.

This story and this site has very little to do with me or my service in the military...My time in the military was much like what 'Lonesome George Goebel' once said;

"...because of my service in the military," said Goebel, "the enemy never got past Tulsa."

This project instead is concerned with Family history; United States Military History and real Hero's; some historical perspective pages and especially; The Elite Ranger Battalions of WWII; Darby's Rangers!

One of those Darby Rangers happened to be my uncle Robert Lyle Cunningham; he was one of the men whom I am named for. And Lyle's story is much like that of his peers. His participation and membership in the Rangers is a compelling tale of American History, Self Sacrifice, Honor, Loyalty and Devotion to a cause greater than one's self.

These wholly American ideals are what separates us from a barbaric world; and advances the cause of Liberty, Justice and Freedom. Lyle believed in those ideals; and I have always been devoted to his memory, though I never knew him.

For those of us in the family who are veterans; we have a special understanding of the cost of Freedom, and Free Speech.

It is only right that each of us within the family step back; put our personal interests aside; and Honor Lyle Cunningham's life; and the people with whom he served.

A solitary soldier like Lyle is the point man for Freedom; they are our protectors and we should pay homage to all these Rangers of World War II. These are the men who placed their lives up-front so that those of the future could have a better life. This is what soldiers do. It is their job; their mission and their calling; and with leadership like Colonel William Orlando Darby they become highly skilled in their trade.

Darby prepared himself and his men in the art of warfare in the best traditions of his West Point background. He did not ask any man to do something he himself was not willing to do. He selected the most athletic and only held onto the most capable individuals.

No one was better prepared for combat than the Ranger Battalions under Darby's care.

Darby and men like him advanced the Rangers and the Special Forces to the point that the units became 'the' most formidable forces in the world. During World War II the mention of the name Darby Rangers brought awe and admiration from friend and foe alike.

Darby's Rangers were 'Americas' Team'; long before there ever was a Dallas Cowboy.

Americans were proud then and are still very proud of Special Forces units of all our military periods; the public kept up with the Rangers' progress and held high hopes...

America knew the war could be won. And they knew; where-ever the action was; the Rangers could and would 'Lead the Way'. Had the Ranger Units be utilized to their full effectiveness; the history of the war could have been changed.

But, for those who go first in the best traditions of the Rangers...there always is a risk...and usually a high-risk against overwhelming odds.

That risk caught up with the 1st & 3rd Ranger Battalions in Italy during World War II after they had won the Presidential Unit Citation following the Battle of Salerno and Chiunzi Pass; and after they had captured the Cassino Area and cleared the beachhead for the invasion of Anzio.

The 1st & 3rd Battalion were sent into an untenable situation; for weeks these elite forces had been used in line combat infantry situations; something they neither specialized in nor were trained for.

The Rangers prided themselves in accomplishing their mission with few friendly casualties and causing a great number amongst the enemy. But, in Italy they had suffered a serious reduction due to combat casualties in the last few weeks and months. Valuable lead and key men in Ranger operations were lost in Combat. Their primary use as a strike force was ignored on higher levels than Darby himself.

The value of the Rangers was their ability to strike swiftly and secretly and create the most damage by getting in and getting out. Their skills were highly specialized in explosive and demolition work and by killing by night behind enemy lines. They were never intended to be used as a 'frontal assault unit' or as combat line troops. Their specialized training did not allow their use as 'expendable/and acceptable casualties'. To be effective the units needed to stay in-tact.

When Darby learned that the Rangers were to be used in the questionable operations of taking the railhead at Cisterna; fellow Rangers recall that he went to his tent and wept; he is said to have commented; that '...Shouldn't it be better to stop the operation now; than to wait until it was too late..."

When the Rangers were surrounded at Cisterna and put up a heroic fight and were ultimately overwhelmed by superior numbers of tanks, artillery, self propelled guns, paratroopers and infantry; America held its breath. Darby's worst fears were realized and the Allied forces could not support the 1st & 3rd.

Darby and forces including the 4th Ranger Battalion made attempt after attempt to break-through the German lines to rescue the 1st & 3rd. They heroically faced an impossible situation.

Back home the matter was made worse when the Rangers just simply disappeared; and the military was not forthcoming about their fate for strategic reasons. And when information did filter out the matter was just as grave. Two Battalions of Rangers; the 1st and 3rd...were numbered among the 'Lost Battalions'...their members carried on the rolls as missing in action. Reports from survivors who managed to disentangle themselves were grim. Out of 767 men; only 6 managed to get back to friendly lines.

For months families at home languished with no knowledge of their loved-ones fate. Letters were received from the government with pleadings for patience and perseverance. And Missing in Action was an equated name for 'some hope...any hope'. But, hope was soon replaced with fear and anguish by mothers and fathers dear.

The remaining Rangers who battled on at Cisterna languished as well that January 1944.

During the battle they ran out of ammunition, destroyed their radios and were rolled up by the German onslaught. The remnants of the 1st and 3rd were captured. Some of the men were summarily shot by the Germans. The men were subjected to being paraded before the fascist mobs of Rome; and were loaded onto trains and shipped to POW Camps to suffer at the hands of the Germans.

The Rangers did not give-out without putting up a terrible fire-fight that some have called a 'battle on the same scale and intensity as other historic Last Stands'...

The two American Battalions made the Germans pay dearly in casualties and destruction.

The Germans resorted to driving their American prisoners before them as they advanced on other Ranger positions; a violation of humanity and the rules of warfare. The Rangers battled heroically; but, to no avail as small pockets of Ranger resistance was overwhelmed.

Their heroic stand earned them a distinguished place in Ranger history.

Lyle was one these hero's and he belonged to my family. That made him doubly important to me. Unfortunately and tragically he died in a car wreck near home shortly after being released from German hands. All I had of Lyle were the stories relived over and over while the family gathered around the kitchen table of my Grandfathers house.

My historical interest came from some of these people, my family; and boy...could they could tell stories. This is a talent.

The ability to weave a tale is a western tradition.

In early times before radio; this was a cultural standard in all Southern families and because education was usually limited along the frontier states; this was (and continues today) to be the way most families get their history understandings and are indoctrinated into the family group. The stories are repeated over and over and added to and taken away from until there is a 'comfortable' version.

From a sociological standpoint the story itself is rather unimportant; and the building of pride in family and the interaction between the family group is the main purpose of the family reunions and the story telling. It is entertainment; as experienced around the boiling pots and campfires in the days of old. Verbal history is one of the most important ways that families bond.

The problem with verbal history from a historical standpoint is; verbal history alone is the most unreliable information; but is the most colorful.

In truth all stories written or spoken hold a little bit of color and a little bit of truth.

The most reliable history has more documentation than editorial content and that is why some people find history dull. Many of these people tend to be auditory learners and their interest leans more in the directions of entertainment and occupation with media which appeals to the senses; movies, TV, music and verbal history.

The problem comes to light because the senses are the only things which can be fooled, manipulated, and bent. This kind of History or Journalism never appealed to me.

My interest in research came from proving some of these family stories wrong... (sure to make you popular the next time you visit!). But, this is a fact. That is exactly what inspired my life-long passion in historical research.

But, as I have found...there usually is a basis for all stories...you just have to sort through the buffalo patties 'til you find some that will burn and not just smoke...if you get my drift.

In the case of Lyle I didn't have far to go to disprove the 'titled bard' when there was an insistence on my uncles participation in the Kassarine Pass actions in North Africa. He wasn't here to defend himself. And he wasn't at Kassarine, either. Just that fact alone was enough to tell me; if there was one inconsistency then there were more; and put end to end you might wind up with a documented article of fact. Any history is useless if it is based on flattery and half-truths.

I found Lyle was indeed sent to North Africa; but after the Kassarine Pass combat; and I later discovered the Pass was actually Chiunzi Pass during the battles around Salerno; where the Rangers fought bravely and received the Presidential Unit Citation; other family members verified Lyle's comments on the action; but, had accepted the traditional family story; when in-fact they were partially right and wrong at the same time.

That is why all verbal histories of any family are suspect. You have to look beyond the story...and find the grain of 'fact'. This is not a personal 'attack' on anyone...that is how historic works are written.

Good story tellers do not necessarily make good historians; and seldom do. But, they are precious in spreading the enthusiasm to read, write and research. Whopper-benders are forgiven for geographical mistakes; but never for intentional malice; and there are people out there in the world who want to re-shape history. You will find that in any area of historical research, family or otherwise.

Research takes on a different twist and has a life of its own once the story begins to get unraveled. And that is what I dedicated much of my life to doing. At one time this was my vocation and always it has been my hobby.

The Facts and Nothing but The Facts

It seems that I was the only one of my generation in my immediate family who was truly interested in unraveling the family carpets; emptying the skeletons from the closets and venturing into foul smelling basements. Basements were great places to play anyway.

Located in one of those basements was a pile of discarded clothes, some old detective novels, a heap of military uniforms...and papers...

I tossed the novels back; wrinkling my nose at FICTION, put on a Khaki Shirt which came from the common pile (a shirt I hardly parted with for the next few years)...I sat aside some World War II Navy Uniforms of my uncle Basil's (which I would later use in Sea Explorers; with his permission)...and positioned myself amid the dank odor to read the scatterings of discarded history by a bare bulb dangling menacingly above...I was 10 years old. Those items I thought were important I took upstairs and gave to my grandmother. She put up with me.

Treasure has different meanings to different people. For those who love history this was treasure...

Even at 10 years old I knew I had come across a treasure-trove of memories of a missing loved one. These discoveries are always moving experiences; whether it is the discovery of a family members name after 34 years of searching or in finding documentation which can be used to pursue further historical evidence; it sometimes holds a mystical quality.

I set the documents aside in piles'...a spelling bee award, a diploma, a picture of a girl, a soldiers picture, a name tag, unit patches...next to that some military looking papers, and Western Union telegrams, a high school letterman's award with the letter 'G' never sown on a jacket or worn proudly for the effort spent to achieve it...and another pile with an old Army Green Red Cross Ditty Bag...full of more stuff and letters from Stalags; and V-Mail and things that had meant something to someone...

I read enough of the material to know that this was Lyle's memory. All the memory that the family had left of a son loved and cherished and lost too young.

I dashed up the plank stairs and found my Grandmother...

Grand Dad was dead by a year or more; and I knew that she was leaving this place; eventually...and I asked her for the papers and the uniforms and whatever else I found...

"Son, you can have whatever you want down there, those are Basil's uniforms and you need to ask him about that; but, anything that is left when I move is going to the dump," she said.

I gathered up my treasures and showed her what I wanted without objection.

Family members have reminded me that she didn't wind-up moving until many years later; so some of the material in this site must have been given to me by my mother at some point. All I remember is I have been lugging this stuff around since the 60's; and it was kept safely in my room or like now; in a safety deposit box.

The worst thing that could happen to any family records were for them to be destroyed thru neglect. My Grandmother entrusted these documents and I did not fail in my family obligation. And that is important to me.

I wore the army shirt in a play in grade-school where I stared at the clock in the back of the room and gave the worst rendition of "The Ballad of the Green Beret" you ever heard so I know I had some of the material before 1966 and I had been in possession of the shirt for many years at that point. And, I wore the Navy uniforms in 1967-68 in Sea Explorers.

What else was overlooked in that basement; we'll never know; much of the material had already been destroyed by children playing in the basement long before I ever saw it. The family photo album was destroyed thru neglect many years later. But, anything I saved is still with us...though most of it has traveled many, many miles. That basement was a vault of history.

Kids love basements. And they can be great destroyers of things they do not understand.

I heard a story from some of the other family members...a story about my Granddad going to the basement; sometimes for lengths at a time and that some of the family had all searched the walls wading thru scattered papers and dreams lying on the floor of this red dirt cellar looking for the treasure Granddad had supposedly buried down there; Sometimes people are blinded by greed....it was a mystery though...

I know now what I didn't know then...I had solved the family mystery without knowing it. (*at least to my satisfaction*). But, I was only ten...had never raised children of my own...and could not imagine the pain of a fathers burden.

But, I knew that there in my hands was the hidden wealth...these scattered and discarded papers...my Grandfathers treasure...worth more than gold or silver coin. An inheritance that can never be bought or sold.

The inheritance I carried were the memories of a loved child; and the treasure of an old and tired man...the tearful and weary memory of Our Robert Lyle who suffered too much in his short lifetime as a Prisoner of War and was taken away too soon.

Here was the memory hidden away from prying eyes in a dank and dark basement, bare bulb dangling overhead where a father could find sanctity of silence, a place to cry and grieve over the death of his first born son...

Sgt. Robert Lyle Cunningham

Darby's Rangers

Americas' son; and one of Darby's Rangers; Robert Lyle Cunningham, Sgt., 3rd Battalion, Company F...

Credits:

Within this site are those papers and those memories; gathered not for my own use; but saved for the generations of Cunningham/Price and the extended families to cherish and share; I know now their value...and only wish I had gathered up more material...but, I was only 10.

I do know that a great deal of information that I did not personally save was discarded or destroyed. My reputation as a pack-rat helped me as I have been used as a depository of all sorts of information on different subjects by many of the Cunningham family members; and much of this material was provided by my mother who also was entrusted with the care and preservation of the family records; and she passed that information to me in the 1960's.

It was my mothers' desire; and the wishes of my Grand-Mother Zadia Cunningham; that, I work on this history and eventually pass it along. I spent the first twenty years of my life exploring every avenue of research and taking advantage of every opportunity to visit with the older members of the family; travel to family re-unions, and spend the summers in Oklahoma with my mothers people; many of whom passed away before 1974 and before I went into the Army; my military time was spent in service of the Army Security Agency Southeast Asian Theatre of Operations and the Southern CONUS Command Ft. Huachuca Arizona.



F.R. Bob Price, nephew of Sgt Lyle Cunningham



Captain Bruce D. & Cheryl White, grand-nephew of Sgt. Lyle Cunningham