

2LT Donald Sherman Frederick

(4th Ranger Battalion—*Darby's Rangers*)

1923-2010

EARLY LIFE AND ENLISTMENT

Donald S. Frederick was born on a special day of the year, January 1, 1923 in Alberta Lea, Minnesota, a U.S. state which occupies a distinct position between Canada and Lake Superior. As with many American families, his ancestors had arrived from northern European countries to make their new homes in this section of the country. Frederick remembered that Danish was spoken at home when he was young, but he never acquired the language.

The Depression Era of 1929-1939 was a common denominator among Americans. His family, which consisted of multiple generations, lost jobs during these lean years but managed to keep “food on the table” through everyone’s efforts. Don contributed to family funds by mowing lawns, cleaning windows, etc. but also managed to enjoy leisure time with friends while swimming, fishing and participating in Scouting activities.



CPL Frederick With Ted Rensink.

For reasons concerning his father’s employment, the family moved to Minneapolis where Frederick attended both Marshall and Central High Schools and joined the boxing team. This physical conditioning combined with his outdoor activities were to be extremely beneficial when Frederick made one of the most important decisions of his life—joining the Minnesota National Guard on 5 August 1939 at the age of sixteen. As a member of F Battery 151st Field Artillery, 34th Infantry Division, he became a gunnery corporal and received additional training at Camp Ripley, a 53,000 acre, regional-training-center operated by the Guard. It was during 1939 and 1940 that Frederick learned the value of field training, firing exercises and weaponry.

Frederick had gained some experience about war through a book about WWI. Contents included maps, photos, and written descriptions which would prepare him for future military actions affecting his life and those of others.

Corporal Frederick’s unit was mobilized in January 1940 as the country became increasingly aware of events occurring across Europe. The armory in Minneapolis became a beehive of activity—inventorying and packing equipment—all which preceded a long cold march (in twenty-five-below-zero weather) to the Great Northern Depot where both equipment and men were loaded aboard trains to Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, on 10 February 1941. Expecting to see a well-established camp, Frederick’s first look at the surrounding area which contained only swamp grass and scattered trees caused him to remark, “Where’s the camp?” The next twelve grueling months were spent by soldiers of the 34th Division, establishing a fully operational camp, one of the best in the States.

December 7, 1941 truly was a day that changed people's lives. This included Don Frederick's plans as he had contemplated "getting out" soon, but when Pearl Harbor occurred, all enlistments were extended indefinitely. His division was reorganized and he was transferred to the new 175th Field Artillery Battalion. Next stop: Camp Dix in New Jersey. Rumors were abundant and soon convoys left the East Coast bound for Europe. Frederick remembered that U-Boats were active in the area which resulted in ships being blown up and disappearing quickly under the waves. Fortunately, theirs made it safely to Belfast, Northern Ireland. This deployment was significant because these troops were the first contingent of American soldiers sent overseas as active participants in the European Theatre.



Don Frederick and Jack Klepper enroute to Belfast.

While being trained on 25-pounder artillery by British instructors, Division Headquarters' orders were posted requesting volunteers for a new U.S. Army Unit. Officially called The First Ranger Battalion, it was patterned after a British counterpart, organized and led by LTC William Darby, and later referred to as Darby's Rangers, their motto, "Rangers Lead the Way". Of the 600 volunteers chosen, 480 were from the 34th "Red Bull" Division, including Don Frederick. Training began in Achnacarry, Scotland, in a commando-training station. All segments were strenuous, demanding, and conducted by elite, experienced British commandos who encouraged brotherhood and comradeship—the foundations of a fully-unified combat unit. Frederick remembered that the final results of this training resulted in six-line companies and a headquarters company with sixty-seven men and officers per company.

NORTH AFRICA

Darby's Rangers were next sent to Glasgow, Scotland, where they received their next set of orders. Several days out at sea, it was announced that they were headed for North Africa. A large, precisely defined overlay map with models of their landing beach at Arzew was laid out and studied in great detail. Frederick was assigned to F Company as a Sergeant in a rifle squad with ten or so Rangers under his direction. On 8 November 1942, Darby's Rangers assaulted the beach at Arzew, west of Oran, Algeria. Their main target was the guns at Fort Du Nord which were manned by the Vichy French and overlooked the Bay of Arzew. Rangers quickly achieved their main objectives by capturing prisoners and destroying a battery of self-propelled artillery. The fort secured and occupied, LTC Darby commandeered Arzew and rewarded his men with a few days of R&R in beach cottages while training continued with map exercises, marches, etc.

SENEDE STATION RAID

In February of 1943, Darby's Rangers were called up for an unannounced mission. Gathered at the Oran airport, the whole battalion boarded C-47s and flew to an airfield in Tunisia. Trucked to Gasfa, their mission was explained. This one involved three companies of Darby's Rangers—D, E, and F. Destination: Senede Station guarded by both German and Italian troops. Frederick stated



4th Ranger Battalion

that after LTC Darby and the other officers were briefed, the Rangers left Gasfa about 5 PM, were trucked closer to the station, walked all night single file, and sought shelter throughout the day. The following night after the moon disappeared, Rangers crossed an open area with Frederick on the right flank of F Company. After fierce fighting and with 10 German prisoners secured (their mission's objective) and placed with the Ranger wounded, they walked back to the trucks and returned to Gasfa. The mission was a success and bravery became synonymous with the term Darby's Rangers.



1st SGT Frederick with captured Nazi flag.

The next Ranger move was to Tebessa—2nd Corps Headquarters. Because of the quick exit from Gasfa, it took a week for Darby's Rangers to reassemble. During this time frame, Frederick remembered seeing Patton (on his way to take command of 2nd Corps) riding in a standing position with sirens blaring.

The invasion of Sicily was pending and Frederick was prepped to leave onboard the ship. Fortunately, a Ranger Battalion Surgeon recognized that Frederick was ill, noted the symptoms and moved him to the Oran hospital for emergency surgery. Refusing to stay confined during recovery and listed as AWOL, he caught a boat ride with others and joined his unit in Palermo. Upon arrival, he reported to Captain Murray who was heard to say, "I knew you would come back," and then announced his promotion to First Sergeant.

ITALY INVASION

Training for the invasion of Italy in August, Darby's Rangers practiced disembarking from Higgins boats on shorelines in Sicily similar to those they would assault on this new mission. Finally boarding large British craft, they headed for Italy. Frederick recalled that he "made a dry landing at Maio and the beach was very small with a small fishing village." They encountered no firefights but discovered a cave which contained 1,500 land mines the Germans intended to place along that same beach the next day. This was a lucky break.

Moving through the town, their mission was to hold the high ground above Chiunzi Pass. The Germans attacked repeatedly but the Rangers held on. Frederick and his men were given a few days to rest in Maio, followed by trips to the beach where C rations and ammunition were dropped for Americans located in the area. Naples, Italy, was their next stop—the area Frederick remembered as the place where he contracted yellow jaundice. Called out one day from his hospital bed to the parade ground with the battalion present, Donald Frederick and three other Rangers were presented with their officer bars from Darby himself. Although Frederick felt good about his promotion, he enjoyed being First Sergeant, knew his men well and hoped that his new rank would not alter that connection.

Frederick convinced the doctor that he was well enough to endure the next mission and promised that he would return for medical assistance if his condition worsened. With this

assurance, he was elected as a platoon leader to cross the Volturno River on 3 November 1943. Their battalion mission was to ascend into the Monte Cesima area which overlooked the hairpin turns on Highway 6 to the right of San Pietro and act as a blocking force against German Infantry in this area. Three American Divisions were assigned to cross the Volturno River to relieve the Rangers on 5 November 1943. History records that reinforcements never arrived as the river crossings did not occur, so the Rangers were acting solo with no support.

CAPTURED



2LT Frederick with Art Posey and Jack Keppler.

Frederick was on a reconnaissance with one of the officers and during the next several days, with cross-firing between German infantry and Rangers occurring continually, each side sustaining casualties. Eventually, Frederick found himself in the hands of the Germans as a prisoner on 4 November 1943 and was taken to the Venafro area where he was greeted by a German officer who spoke American English. To his surprise he was not interrogated and was given personal items and some food. Taken next to Frosnone, their interrogation center, he was asked a few questions in English but no other pressure was applied. In hindsight, Frederick thought that little was known about Darby's Rangers as they were a new unit, so the Germans might have been naïve about their potential combat capabilities.

His next trip, which took over a week, was made in a boxcar to Berlin, then on to Luckenwalde. Here he was thrown into a cell and interrogated many times by a German officer who introduced himself as Captain Williams. He had lived and worked in the States before returning to Germany when war was declared. Frederick refused to give Williams more than his name, rank and serial number. A month or so later, he remembered being moved by train to Berlin and transferred to a passenger train "in the company of four guards." Located in the Berlin staging area, Frederick looked out the window and saw what appeared to be hundreds of boxcars with people crammed inside, headed for the death camps and he knew they were Jews.

OFLAG 64

2LT Frederick arrived at Oflag 64 in Szubin, Poland on 16 December 1943 and was taken to the White House to meet COL Waters. When asked his name, Frederick said, "Bill Darby." Walters reply: "Well, Don, Bill Darby was my classmate at West Point." The mind games ended there as Frederick answered their questions truthfully. Several months later, he was moved to the third floor of the White House and assigned the task of constructing escape maps. Eventually he also learned about the existence of radios and compasses, but their locations were closely guarded secrets. Frederick, like all other Kriegies, looked forward to the BBC news, spread around twice a day and any information concerning escapes. This part of Poland was flat, with very few trees.



2LT Frederick is on the left.

Polish people had been relocated and replaced by Germans, so escapees had very little chance of succeeding.

Camp living conditions were composed of old wooden barracks with 50+ guys in a cubicle containing bunk beds. Straw mattresses and thin blankets were the norm with inadequate heating systems. Each morning, Frederick stood with all other POWs for “Appell” formation as a head count. Breakfast consisted of anything in your Red Cross parcel and ersatz coffee. Noon lunch was watery soup and black bread which was sometimes available.

Camp discipline was very good. COL Drake was in charge until COL Paul Goode arrived. Frederick remarked that these officers, along with COL Waters, provided strict but fair discipline.

HAMMELBURG MARCH

Kriegies were given less than a day’s warning that they were leaving camp as Russia’s Red Army grew ever closer. The date was 21 January 1945, in the dead of winter, the coldest one in 50 years. Camp numbers had increased including Rangers from Anzio. Frederick was really glad to see them. Others included survivors from the Battle of the Bulge. Present Kriegies were anxious to hear the news they brought—the war was slowly going our way. Frederick remembered that he had no gloves, overshoes, wool socks—no real winter gear—not even a good hat. The march began with more than 1,300 men; fewer than 500 survived. Some POWs escaped as the guards were ineffective, their thoughts centered on reaching Germany quickly. Frederick’s diary contained notes about events of the march including nights endured in barns where cover resembling hay was sought for warmth. Polish churches with pews were also used as bedding areas. The wind and snow were endless.

One night was spent at the submarine school at Swinemunde. Personnel there were young and treated the marchers well. Frederick noted in his diary that they probably knew the war was lost. Cigarettes were shared among those who smoked. One Ranger gave Frederick a Polish pipe, a souvenir he kept. His parents had sent him pipe tobacco which he used to barter for items like bread and eggs. Trading practices were used by all sides during the war; at times they were even more effective than other persuaders. For example, one day when Frederick was outdoors and gave a little girl a chocolate D bar, she replied, “Stay here.” The little one returned with a large loaf of real bread—no sawdust. He divided it with five others chums and they lived on it for a week.

The march seemed to take forever as they made their way to the Oflag XIII-B POW Camp near Hammelburg. The time frame was February. The barracks were fairly clean and a few American officers were present, but discipline was lacking and morale was poor. COLs Goode and Waters noted these conditions and took control immediately. Frederick wrote he was shocked by these American officers’ inactions. He also noted that 3,000 Serbians were located in another part of the camp and that food supplies for all were almost non-existent. If Red Cross parcels had not been available, some POWs would not have survived.

TASK FORCE BAUM

In 26 March 1945 on a Sunday afternoon, the POWs heard noises coming from outside the camp and learned that Captain Abraham Baum was coming with Task Force Baum of the 4th

Armored Division, 3rd Army, to rescue American POWs. They had courageously fought their way 40-50 miles behind enemy lines, destroying German military hardware and a German troop train on their route. Several tanks crashed through the front gate and after looking around at the underestimated numbers of POWs, Baum stated regretfully that not everyone could be evacuated. He had already lost a lot of men and vehicles and was low on gasoline and rations. As camp guards were taken out, Frederick grabbed one of their canteens and jumped on the second tank about 7 PM. Unfortunately, several days and nights later, roadblocks were in-place, making the escape mission even more perilous. A bazooka hit Frederick's tank and threw him and his friend, Jack, into a ditch. Frederick caught some shrapnel but Jack was severely wounded, so he was placed on a half-track and thankfully, survived. After combat actions from the Germans increased, Baum suggested that men pair off in twos or threes for safety's sake or possible escape, but all were recaptured.

FREEDOM AT LAST AND HOMEWARD BOUND

After returning to Hammelburg, the announcement was made that everyone was being transported to Stalag VII-A POW Camp at Moosburg, Bavaria. This camp was larger than Oflag 64 and was the last POW camp for Americans because freedom was on its way. It appeared in the form of American tanks of the 14th Armored Division which came blasting through the gates with General Patton standing up in his vehicle. "By God, I'll have you guys out of here in forty-eight hours" and he kept his word!

Gathering their belongings, they were then trucked to Landshut Airport, north of Camp Moosburg. C-47s were arriving and departing constantly, delivering ex-POWs to Reims, France and then to Camp Lucky Strike where everyone was out-processed. Thoughts of homecomings were only preceded by the luxuries of showers, clean clothes, medical care and good food—lots of great meals!

Frederick, Jack, and ten others traveled to The United States on a big American ship—large boat, small passenger list, a surprise to all. Boston welcomed them home after a two-week voyage, and after personal items were gathered and a short trip to Camp Miles Standish was completed, they were served meals (including steaks) by German POWs. How ironic.

Frederick phoned home with the news that his time as a POW was over and he would be there in a few days. Arriving by train at Fort Snelling, he visited with family then out-processed at Fort McCoy. Next, he was given a furlough and sent to Hot Springs, Arkansas, for a month's recuperation.

Later, he declined the request to stay in the Army and was put on the Reserve list for five years. Frederick's options then included leisure time doing the activities he loved—fishing and hunting. His parents' lives had changed as they had divorced, leaving his mother to rent rooms in her home. There, he met his future wife, Carolyn Elaine Johnson, married her in September 1946, and was sent to Iowa as a dealer service representative for a wholesale hardware company.

RECALLED AND DISCHARGED

In 1951, he was recalled for the Korean War and served two years as a platoon leader in the 47th Infantry Division Reconnaissance Company when the 47th Division was federalized. Upon

returning from this conflict, he was discharged in 1952. His job had been saved but he decided to purchase a hardware store north of Fort Dodge in Algona, Iowa. Eventually, he moved his family to Richfield, Minnesota, where he lived for the rest of his life until his death 10 September 2010.



1ST Lieutenant Donald Sherman Frederick was buried with full military honors at the Fort Snelling National Cemetery with an honor guard provided by the Rangers. Survivors included his wife, Carolyn, and their children Linda Roof, Jane Slavin, John Frederick and other family members.

Medals and Decorations included Bronze Star, Purple Heart, POW Medal, Good Conduct Medal, American Defense Medal, American Campaign Medal, WWII Victory Medal, Distinguished Unit Citation, European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Ribbon, Combat Infantry Badge, Ranger Badge, and Combat Badge.

FINAL THOUGHTS

When asked about his time in service, Frederick replied, “I’m glad I could serve in the service when I did for this country. I have no regrets. I’m glad it’s behind me. I enjoyed being in the service. It was good for me. I hope I served them well.”

Frederick attended many Ranger reunions and spoke these words to a fellow Ranger:

I wish you could have been there that night at the banquet at the 2002 New Orleans Reunion. We had Rangers from Fort Benning there—a platoon of them. I’m sure that they had to leave for Iraq or someplace. They’re probably still over there. They were a great bunch of guys.