



1st Lt. Lester Lew Henry
1917-1973

The Lost **RANGER**

Excerpt from letter Lt. L. Lew Henry sent to his parents

April 9, 1944
Anzio Beachhead

. . . War cannot be described; only those who have experienced combat can have any conception of the term; many soldiers who are overseas, many of whom are in jobs in such cities as Algiers, Oran, Naples, or others, do not know what it is; they are only in jobs that have taken them away from home and entail none of conflict's unpleasantness. To the combat soldier who lives in holes like animals, whose existence is characterized only by the barest minimum of the necessities of life, and who has for almost a year and a half suffered day after day from heat or cold, in desert or in icy, muddy mountains, going without sleep, or bathing, or changing clothes for days, weeks and months, life has been crystallized into the expression of one desire - to return home!

A Daughter's Quest on behalf of a Lost Ranger

In 1973, a fire in St. Louis destroyed military records of many World War II veterans. The records of my father, 1st Lt. Lester Lew Henry, were among those, although not all of his records were destroyed. After his death in 1973, then Sen. Bob Dole — who served with Dad in the Kansas Legislature during the early-1950s — arranged to have those remaining, but incomplete, records of Dad's service sent to Wichita, Kansas so I could peruse them.

I hope to find someone who remembers my late father. His name is not included in Altieri's book and he was not listed in post-World War II Ranger rosters.

Fortunately, I possess documents which prove his service. In this booklet are scans of a few photos and documents of the many I have, as well as excerpts of letters written by him that may reflect the common experiences and feelings of many World War II combat veterans.

US Army records show he was with the 1st Ranger Battalion in North Africa from April 1943 through August 1943. Letters sent to him during that time place him in Company F, 1st Ranger Battalion. He then served with the 4th Ranger Battalion in Company A. He was awarded a CIB for action in North African and European Theatres of operation by order of Lt. Col. Roy Murray, showing Walter F. Nye as Executive Officer and signed by Capt. James J. Lavin, Adjutant, affixed with an official 4th Ranger Battalion stamp.

A letter sent to my mother in August 1944 by Cpl. James C. Roberts (who *is* listed on the 4th Ranger Battalion roster) said he joined the Rangers with Dad in North Africa and served in his battalion for 17 months (that confirms the Army's record showing Dad joined in April 1943).

I am a professional writer accustomed to painstaking research, but this quest has been particularly frustrating, mainly because the

Army records show him being with the 6648 Casual Battalion (Provisional) during part of the time Cpl. Roberts says he served with Dad in the Rangers. Army researchers at Leavenworth CARL say the operations of the 6648 Casual Battalion are still classified.

I am told by Col. J.P. McEvoy, a retired officer who served with my father in the 83rd Chemical Mortar Battalion, that Dad was under the command of Gen. Frederick, FSSF, on the southernmost flank of Anzio Beachhead. He was badly wounded late in that operation and by the time he was again fit for combat, the Ranger unit with which he served had been disbanded. Dad served with the 83rd from October 1944 until the war ended. He always said he chose to join the 83rd because they fought alongside the Rangers. While with the 83rd, he was an officer in D Company, the group that trained with gliders, and later with A Company.

Among his medals are the Silver Star, Croix de Guerre and Purple Hearts. The injuries that won him Purple Hearts almost killed him and each resulted in hospitalization. The neurosurgeon who operated on Dad's benign brain tumor (a tumor documented to be caused by trauma) went on written record that the head injury* he received late in the war — which rendered him unconscious for three days and blind for an additional three — was likely the tumor's genesis. Dad died on October 18, 1973 at the age of 56.

After the war, he became a lawyer, served Lawrence as city councilman and commissioner and represented Douglas County in the Kansas House of Representatives. I should greatly appreciate hearing from anyone who remembers Dad. I also appreciate your service to our country and the sacrifices you made to keep America free. Tom Brokaw got it right: You truly are "The Greatest Generation."

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*He was sleeping in the Chateau de Moussey, recently vacated by Nazis, which exploded while he and other 83rd CMB soldiers were sleeping. The search for booby traps missed the time bomb buried in the coal cellar.



KU ROTC patch

Lester Lew Henry, married and the father of three small daughters, was attending The University of Kansas and serving in Army ROTC when he heard the news that Japanese warplanes had attacked Pearl Harbor. He and his wife, June, immediately began preparing for the call-up they knew would be forthcoming.

He was sent to Camp Wheeler, Georgia and left there for Africa, via New York, in January, 1943. In Africa, he joined the 1st Ranger Battalion. June, who had talked him out of joining the Army Air Corps because she thought the duty was too perilous, later reflected on his decision to join the Rangers, "Wouldn't you just know that he'd find an outfit to join that was more dangerous than the Air Corps?"

June received a letter dated 10/1/43 from Lew in which he mentioned meeting two of his Delta Upsilon fraternity brothers from KU who were in the 1st Division. He said he had a big party with them in Oran before the Sicily invasion. He added this postscript:

They thought I was in a suicide organization. Now they are dead and I am still alive.

His fraternity brothers were killed in Sicily; their names are inscribed on plaques in the KU campanile, a memorial to students, faculty and staff who lost their lives in World War II.

Lew was under the command of General Frederick, First Special Service Force, on the southernmost flank at Anzio Beachhead. He was seriously injured late in that operation. After he recovered, he joined the 83rd Chemical Mortar Battalion and served out the war with that unit.

On September 6, 1944 (about a month before he joined the 83rd Chemical Mortar Bn; he was then in the 539 Repl Co), Dad wrote:

Some of my friends have already returned from France, one of whom is Ace Andreson whose picture was taken

with mine by Brown Bolte. Ace was wounded and I drop in the hospital every day to see him. That is the toughest part of war, seeing your friends killed or wounded.

In one letter, written in a cold, wet foxhole in Italy, he mused:

After my family, it's the small things I miss most. I miss walking into a drug store for a coke; I miss eating a ham sandwich and drinking a glass of milk; I miss my friends and our hunting and fishing trips.

When Lew came home in late summer of 1945, June drove right by him as he waited, eager for the sight of her, by the side of the road at Leavenworth Army Base. "I hadn't seen him for two years and nine months. He left me a skinny dark-blonde and came back 35 pounds heavier and a brunette. How was I supposed to recognize him?" She once confessed that she used to look him over while he slept, checking for distinguishing marks, just to make sure he was the same man she had married. The youngest of their three daughters — a baby when he left — did not remember him and was not always pleased to have another adult around the house telling her what to do. "Why don't you go back where you came from?" she once asked him.

He related some of his experiences in a talk he gave on November 14, 1945 to a Rotary Club shortly after he returned home:

The decorations don't mean anything, anyway, you do what you do to save your own neck, or because you have to do what you know is right. You never try or want to be a hero. You just want to get back alive. Gray hair isn't caused by being scared, or I'd be completely gray. I was scared all the time. I guess I never did jump from an airplane, but I've been pushed out five or six times....



We prevented the Germans from finally putting their neighbors in bondage, but it looks to me like we may instead only have given other nations the opportunity to do what the Germans were trying to do. Everybody loved the Americans while they were fighting the war, but now they all want the Americans to get out so they can run things the way they wish.

That speech was one of the few times he spoke publicly about his wartime experiences. His family heard stories now and then. He spoke of his friend from Alabama, killed by machine gun fire in France, who had often expressed an aversion to “talking shells,” the kind, he explained that said, “yew-ain’t-goin’-back-to-Ala-**BAM!**” June learned more about his wartime experiences from his wartime comrades when she accompanied him to a reunion of the 83rd Chemical Mortar Battalion — also attended by some Rangers — at Rocky Mountain Arsenal in Colorado during the mid-’50s.

Author’s note: Sen. Bob Dole arranged for me to see my father’s few military records which hadn’t been destroyed in the fire. These are my notes:

Embarked Mar 1, 1943

Unit Comm 1st Ranger Bn — Combat — Apr 1943-Aug 1943
Detached-Special — Casual-Sp. Det. Comb. — Oct 1943-Jul 1944
Unit Comm 83rd Chem Mtr Bn — Combat — Sept 1944-Sept 1945

North Africa 4½ mo
Battles and Campaigns: North Apennines,
Sicily, Italy 14 mo
Tunisia, Sicily, Naples, Foggia, Rome,
France, Germany, Austria 11½ mo
Arno, Rhineland, Central Europe

Combat Inf Badge
4th Ranger action
N. African E. Theatres of Oper
by orders Lt. Col. Murray

6648 Casual Bn, secret orders (still classified)

My parents retained many letters written during World War II by themselves and others. I discovered an 8/22/44 letter sent to my mother by Cpl. James C. Roberts, 4th Ranger Battalion. Written in pencil on tablet paper, his words mean more to me than Dad's medals.

Axtel, KY
August 22, 1944

Dear Mrs. Henry,

I hardly know how to start writing this being a stranger, at least I am to you, but I know your husband very well. He and I joined the Rangers together in Africa and were together through Africa, Sicily and Italy and I must say that he is sure a swell guy. I been with him through quite a bit and got along fine. He is a very good friend and a swell officer.

He is not like a lot of army officers who think they are better than the men. He always is kind to his men under him and all of us like him fine. I am back in America now and sure am proud to be home. I am Cpl. James C. Roberts. I was in Lester's company for 17 months and he is the best I have had yet for a commander and I have 5 years in the army.

I've been home for 10 days and sure am glad to be here. I am married and have a little baby girl. She sure is sweet, is 14 months old. Was born while I was overseas. I saw her for the 1st time and she was walking and talking.

Lester is getting along fine and sure is looking good. He was in a rest camp when I left him in Italy and I promised him when I left I would write to you and let you know how he was and that I know him. He sure has been kind to me and has done lots for me and I shall never forget him. If there is anything you would like me to do for him or send him, please let me know about it for I will be very pleased to do so. I would like to return some of the favors he has done for me. Drop me a card or something to let me know whether you get this or not. Don't worry about Lester for he is getting along all right.

Best of luck and many good wishes.

Cpl. James C. Roberts
Axtel, KY

Author's note: I have a similar letter written by Sgt. "Long John" Guthrie, 83rd CMB, who said he and others would follow Dad to Hell and back.

Gallery



Murray, Dad and Andreson



Dad, 1942



The franc below meant something to Dad if he carried it from 1943



Dad in Austria, 1945



Mom, Dad and me



Dad wearing his crossed arrows insignia



Dad, Bolte?, Andreson



Dad looking pretty spiffy at right

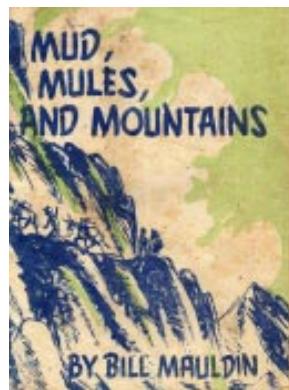


Dad captioned this photo
Making snowballs in June



Homeward bound!

Mom was furious that, when Dad was with the Rangers in Africa, the local draft board wanted evidence that he was in the armed forces.



"Oh, say Honey, are you afraid you are going to be drafted? Well, I received a letter from your draft board wanting supporting evidence that you were in the armed services - I sent them the following letter for you:-"



It's a Small World

From childhood, I have been told the story of a man with an unusual name who went to college with my mother at Oklahoma A&M (now Oklahoma State). Shortly after Dad went overseas, Mom received a letter from Dad that said he was serving with a man who had an unusual name and who had attended Oklahoma A&M at the time she did. He wrote that the man remembered her (not surprising since Mom's maiden name was Shellhammer). The man's name? Capt. Wooten W. Wooten (Mom says the middle W also stands for Wooten) who is listed in Altieri's book as then serving in the 1st Ranger Battalion.

This booklet is a work in progress. I am constantly updating it as I learn more about Dad's military service. — MHG



The brick at the entrance of the Dole Institute of Politics on the KU campus that honors Dad's service. Dad served in the Kansas House of Representatives with Bob Dole.