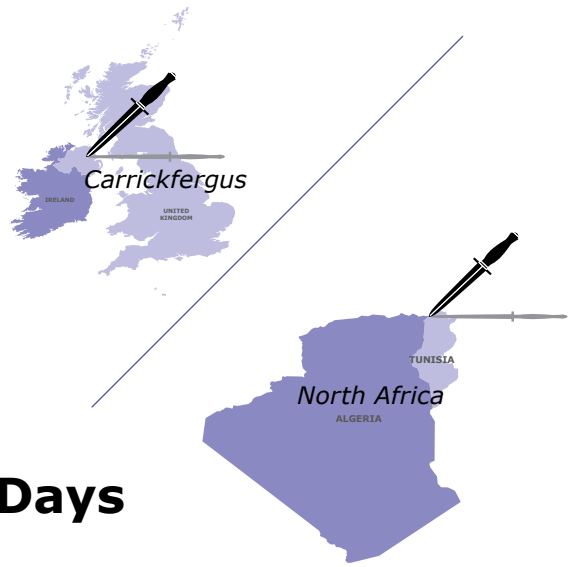




Rangers in World War II:

Part I—The Formation and Early Days

by Kenneth Finlayson and Robert W. Jones Jr.



THE 75th Ranger Regiment, consisting of three battalions and the regimental headquarters, evolved from the experiences of the U.S. Army in World War II. At the onset of the War, the Army had no units capable of performing specialized missions. By the end of the War, the Army fielded seven Ranger infantry battalions (the 1st through the 6th and the little known 29th) that conducted operations in North Africa, the Mediterranean, France, and the Pacific (the Philippines). The purpose of this article is to explain how the Rangers came to be in WWII, in particular those units formed in Europe and then committed to North Africa. Future issues of *Veritas* will include articles on Ranger operations in Sicily and Italy, France, and the Philippines (the 6th Ranger Battalion).

Darby and the 1st Rangers are Formed

The U.S. Army did not have special operations units in 1941. That quickly changed when America declared war on the Axis and entered WWII. Brigadier General Lucian K. Truscott Jr., the U.S. Army liaison with the British Combined Operations Headquarters, proposed to Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall on 26 May 1942 that “we undertake immediately the organization of an American unit along [British] Commando lines.”¹ A cable quickly followed from the War Department to Major General Russell P. Hartle, who was commanding the U.S. Army Forces in Northern Ireland, authorizing the activation of the 1st Ranger unit.²

The original idea was that the 1st Ranger Battalion would be a temporary organization to disseminate combat experience to new American troop units.³ The battalion would have detachments temporarily attached to British Commando units when they raided German-held countries in Europe. Then, the combat-tested, or “blooded,” soldiers would return to their units to share their experiences.⁴ Soldiers would be cycled through Commando training and return to the United States to train additional troops.⁵

Lieutenant General Truscott selected the title “Ranger” because the title “Commando” belonged to the British. He wanted a more fitting American moniker. “I selected ‘Rangers’ because few words have a more glamorous connotation in American military history. . . . It was therefore fitting that the organization destined to be the first of the American ground forces to battle Germans on the European continent in World War II should be called Rangers—in compliment to those in American history who exemplified such high standards of individual courage, initiative, determination and ruggedness, fighting ability, and achievement.”⁶ While Truscott was a student of military history in 1940, the movie “Northwest Passage,” starring Spencer Tracy and Robert Young, was popular and may have contributed to his choice of name. Based on the Kenneth Roberts’ novel, the film extolled the exploits of Roger’s Rangers in the French and Indian War with Spencer Tracy playing Major Robert Rogers.⁷

Once the decision was made to form a Ranger battalion, the next task was to select a commander. After some deliberation, Major General Hartle nominated his own aide-de-camp, Captain William Orlando Darby. An artillery officer, Darby had cavalry and infantry operational experience as well as amphibious training. Truscott was receptive, finding the young officer to be “outstanding in appearance, possessed of a most attractive personality, and he was keen, intelligent, and filled with enthusiasm.”⁸ His judgment of suitability proved accurate. The 31-year-old Darby, a 1933 graduate of West Point, demonstrated an exceptional ability to gain the confidence of his superiors and earn the deep devotion of his men.⁹

Promoted to major based on his selection for battalion command, Darby immediately began organizing his new combat unit. Soon flyers calling for volunteers appeared on U.S. Army bulletin boards throughout Northern Ireland.¹⁰ Darby “spent the next dozen days [personally] interviewing the officer volunteers and, with their help, some two thousand volunteers from V Corps . . . in Northern Ireland—looking especially for athletic indi-



The V Corps, 1st Armored Division, and 34th Infantry Division provided the majority of volunteers for the 1st Ranger battalion in Northern Ireland. About 2,000 soldiers volunteered, but only 575 were selected to begin training.

viduals in good physical condition.”¹¹ The recruits, ranging in age from seventeen to thirty-five, came from every part of the United States. Most of the Ranger recruits joined because they wanted to be part of an elite force. Some units did try to unload misfits and troublemakers, but they were usually rejected and sent back.¹²

The 1st Ranger Battalion was formed with volunteers from the following units: 281 from the 34th Infantry Division, 104 from the 1st Armored Division, 43 from the Antiaircraft Artillery units, 48 from the V Corps Special Troops, and 44 from the Northern Ireland base troops.¹³ After a strenuous selection program to weed out unfit soldiers, Truscott activated the 1st Ranger Battalion on 19 June 1942, at Carrickfergus, Northern Ireland, a town twenty miles north of Belfast.¹⁴

With considerable foresight, Darby was allowed a 10 percent overstrength for rejections and injuries in the tough training program to come. Five hundred seventy-five recruits began training at Carrickfergus. Darby could only retain 473 (26 officers and 447 men). These became the original members of the 1st Ranger Battalion.¹⁵

The Rangers were organized almost exactly like the British Commandos. The term “commando” connoted a battalion-sized unit of specially trained soldiers and, at the same time, the individual soldiers were called “com-

mandos.” Each company had a headquarters of three (company commander, first sergeant, and runner) and two infantry platoons of thirty men each. The battalion consisted of a headquarters company with six line companies of sixty-three to sixty-seven men. The Ranger battalions sacrificed administrative self-sufficiency for foot and amphibious mobility.¹⁶ Once the recruitment, organization, and assignments had been completed, the Rangers headed for Scotland for phase one of their training.

In July 1942, Darby and the 1st Ranger Battalion started three months of training at the famed Commando Training Center in Scotland. After getting off the train in the town of Fort William, the recruits began an exhausting seven-mile forced march to their camp in the shadow of Achnacarry Castle. The road march set the tone for the next three months of rigorous training. British Lieutenant Colonel Charles Vaughan, MBE, commanded a cadre of battle-hardened Commando instructors, who taught Commando warfare to the Rangers. Under the watchful eye of the Commando cadre, the Ranger recruits underwent a strenuous physical fitness program that included obstacle courses and more speed marches through the rugged Scottish countryside. They received weapons training with individual and crew-served weapons, hand-to-hand combat, street fighting, and patrolling. They also conducted night operations and drilled in small-boat handling. Realism was stressed, including

1st Lieutenant Alfred Nelson leads B Company, 1st Ranger Battalion on a training road march near Achnacarry, Scotland, July 1942. Road marches were a staple of Ranger training. Note the World War I-style helmets and “combat” overalls which were meant to be the field uniform for infantrymen in WWII.

1st Ranger Battalion organization chart. About half the size of a standard infantry battalion the Rangers traded mass for agility and firepower. The six other Ranger Battalions were organized in the same manner.

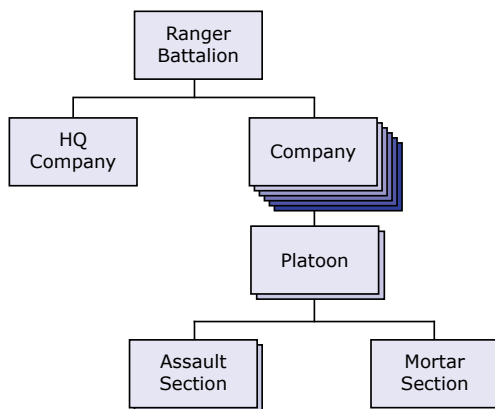


Photo courtesy of the National Archives



Photos courtesy of the National Archives



Officers of the 1st Ranger Battalion in Scotland. Captain Roy Murray, the first from the left in the front row, would later become the senior Ranger on the Dieppe Raid, F Company commander, and 4th Ranger Battalion commander.

Brigadier General Lucian Truscott Jr. (center with riding boots) and Major William O. Darby (pointing) inspect C Company, 1st Ranger Battalion on 2 September 1942 at Dundee, Scotland. The company commander, Captain William Martin is on the left.

the use of live ammunition—something unheard of in U.S. Army units at the time. Five hundred of the six hundred volunteers that accompanied Darby to Achnacarry completed the Commando training with flying colors. One Ranger was killed and several were wounded by live fire.¹⁷

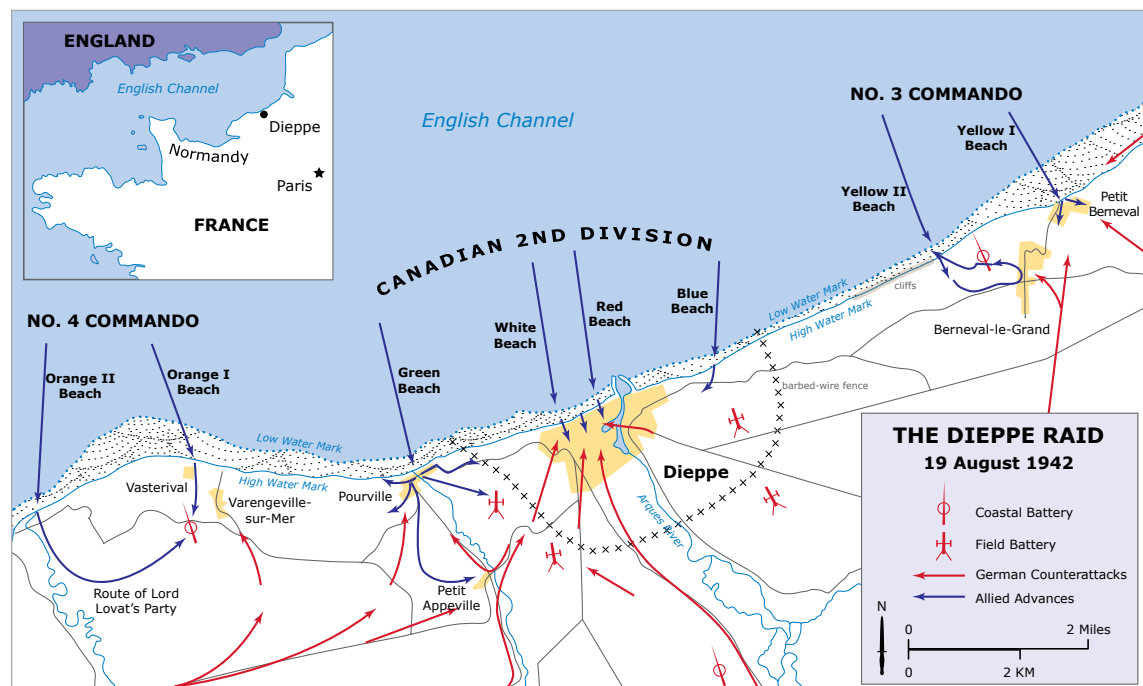
In August 1942, the 1st Ranger Battalion moved to Argyle, Scotland, for amphibious training operations with the British Royal Navy. The battalion next moved to Dundee where the Rangers were billeted in private homes. They practiced attacking the pillboxes and coastal defenses set up on the small islands off the Scottish coast to hone their skills in raiding and amphibious assaults.¹⁸ The first test of the Ranger readiness for combat would shortly occur.

Dieppe Raid

While the 1st Ranger Battalion was in training, fifty-one Rangers were chosen for a special mission—the Dieppe

Raid. Forty-one enlisted men and four officers were to be attached to two British Commandos (the British call their Commando battalions No. 1 Commando, No. 2 Commando, etc.), the rest went to various Canadian units. These Rangers would be the first American ground soldiers to see action against the Germans in occupied Europe. The Allied command hoped that the raid would ease the pressure on the Soviets. The real reason was to test the defenses of the port. The 2nd Canadian Division was to assault directly across the beach into the town of Dieppe. The Germans had emplaced coastal artillery batteries on both flanks of the city and built defensive positions within the town itself. Two British Commandos, Nos. 3 and 4, accompanied by fifty-one American Rangers were to seize and destroy the batteries.¹⁹ On the night of 19 August 1942, No. 4 Commando landed and successfully destroyed the battery west of Dieppe before withdrawing.²⁰ En route to their designated target, the landing flotilla carrying the No. 3 Commando was dispersed by German “E-boats” [fast torpedo boats similar

Map of Dieppe Raid. While the Commandos hit the artillery batteries on the flanks, the Canadians landed in the center assaulting directly into the town. The German garrison was awakened by some strafing runs five to ten minutes before the landing, thereby allowing them to man the defenses.



to an American patrol torpedo (PT) boat]. Only a fraction of the force made it ashore.²¹ A group of Commandos engaged the Germans, preventing the battery from firing on the Allied fleet. Meanwhile, the Canadian-led main assault turned into a disaster. Captain Roy Murray, the senior Ranger on the raid stated:

The problem was that in all of our activities we've always been used to night raids and surprise. There was no preparation before this attack on Dieppe. And the cliffs on either side of Dieppe had many German machine gun emplacements, and they had mortars in the center of town. And since we were supposedly going in quietly, we found at the last minute it had been decided that aircraft would go in with just using their machine guns five minutes before we attacked. The net result was that we awakened all the Germans and had them ready for us when we came in. The Canadians did a great job—very courageous. But they were enfiladed by the fire and by the mortars. And the only cover they had on this beach at low tide was the tanks that came in with them. The unfortunate part of having the tanks coming on that beach was that the exits from the beach were three stairways from the beach up about twenty feet to the esplanade at the top. The stairways were not really suitable for tank efforts. So the tanks stayed on the beach, and they got knocked out.²²

The Canadians suffered 3,400 casualties out of the 5,000 troops who landed including 600 dead, 1,900 prisoners of war, and 300 missing.²³ Three Rangers were killed and several were captured. However, all earned the respect of the Commandos.²⁴ The hard lessons learned at Dieppe proved invaluable to the success of Operation OVERLORD in Normandy two years later.²⁵ Following the raid, the 1st Ranger Battalion was alerted to prepare for the invasion of North Africa. Almost simultaneously, a second Ranger unit was formed in England.

The 29th Ranger Battalion (Provisional)

Most soldiers have never heard of the 29th Ranger Battalion (Provisional). The European Theater Headquarters wanted to retain a Ranger presence in England. The 29th Ranger Battalion was formed there on 20 December 1942, shortly after the 1st Rangers shipped out for the invasion of North Africa. Major Randolph Milholland formed the battalion with volunteers from the 29th Infantry Division, a National Guard division with elements from Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia.²⁶ Like Darby's Rangers, the 29th



29th Rangers tab worn with the 29th Infantry Division patch. The tab and patch were worn on both shoulders.



Photo courtesy of the National Archives

Major Randolph Milholland, commanding officer of the 29th Ranger Battalion (Provisional), with Major General Leonard Gerow, commanding general of the 29th Infantry Division, in June 1943. Unlike the other Rangers, the 29th Rangers wore the paratrooper "jump boots" even though they were not on airborne status.

Ranger Battalion trained at the British Commando Center at Achnacarry, Scotland. After completing five weeks of rigorous training, the battalion was attached to Lord Lovat's No. 4 Commando for additional unit training.²⁷

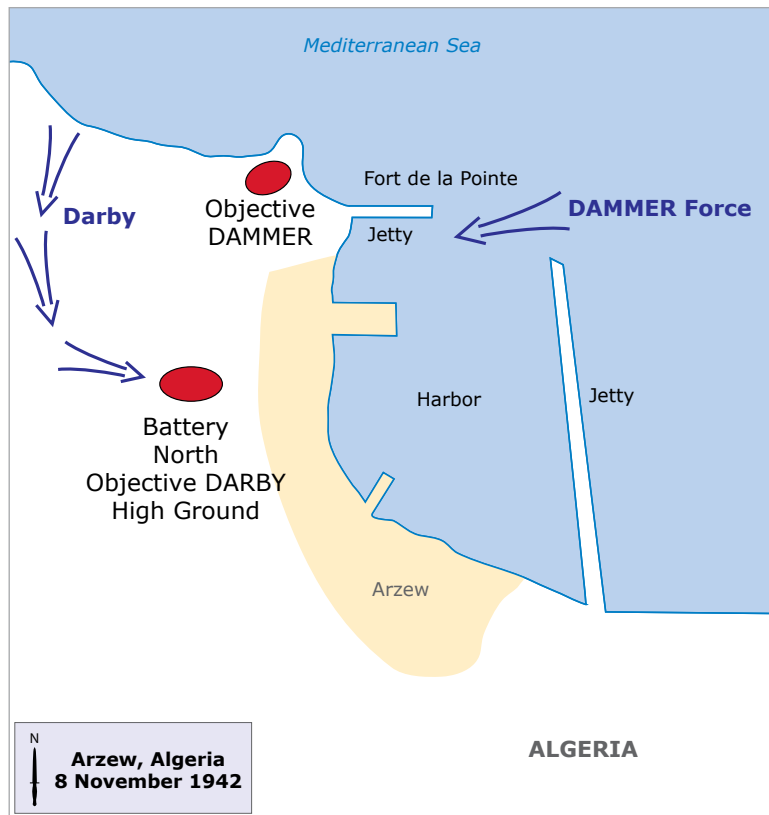
While attached to No. 4 Commando, several of the 29th Rangers participated in combat raids and reconnaissance missions into Norway. During a raid on a German radar station on the island of *Ile d'Ouessant* off the coast of France, the 29th Rangers acquitted themselves well.²⁸ On 20 September 1943, one Ranger company moved to Dover to participate in a 100-man raid in the *Pas de Calais* area of France. They were to destroy German coastal guns. Before they could go, however, the raid was canceled.²⁹ That disappointment was followed by a bigger bombshell: the 29th Infantry Division commander, Major General Charles H. Gerhardt, ordered the unit disbanded on 15 October 1943. The Rangers returned to their original units and fought with the 29th Infantry Division from D-Day until the end of the war.³⁰ In some respects, the 29th Rangers fulfilled the original intent for creating a Ranger battalion—to spread experience and training throughout the division. With the demise of the 29th Rangers, the first large-scale Ranger participation in combat would occur during the invasion of North Africa.

Operation TORCH: The Rangers in North Africa

The 1st Ranger Battalion spearheaded Operation TORCH, the Allied invasion of North Africa in November 1942. The battalion conducted a night landing with LCAs (landing craft–assault) at the Algerian port of Arzew on 8 November 1942. At about 0100 hours, the landing craft carrying two Ranger companies (A and B) under the battalion executive officer, Major Herman Dammer, stealthily entered the inner harbor. As the landing craft touched the dock, the Rangers jumped out and ran down the quay, directly into an attack of *Fort de la Pointe*. In about fifteen minutes, “Dammer Force” had captured the fort and had sixty surprised French prisoners, including the commandant in his pajamas.³¹ “Darby Force,” consisting of C, D, and E companies headed for the *Batterie du Nord*, whose four 105mm cannons overlooked the harbor approach. For the mission, Company D served as a mortar company using four 81mm mortars to support the attack.³² The Rangers suffered two dead and eight wounded in the attacks. The battery and the nearby fort were captured.³³ The successful Ranger missions helped to open the way for the 1st Infantry Division to capture Oran.³⁴

The Rangers remained in Arzew for the next two months. Major Darby was the town “mayor” and the 1st Rangers served as the military government and security force for the town.³⁵ Rather than rest and refit as an occupation force, Darby increased the operational tempo of the training with forced marches and marksmanship training. Darby stated that, “For the next two months I marched the men for long distances on short rations, so that the training in Scotland seemed easy in comparison.”³⁶ His Rangers agreed that the training at Arzew was more physically demanding than at the Commando

LCA transporting Rangers to Arzew.



The seizure of Arzew, Algeria, was the 1st Ranger Battalion’s first unit battle in WWII. Dammer Force came into the harbor and attacked the fort directly through the town. Darby Force assaulted the main battery.

Training Center.³⁷ A rumor that the unit would remain in North Africa to train inexperienced infantrymen caused a flurry of transfers.³⁸ The Rangers received five officers and one hundred enlisted to replace their losses on 26 January 1943, just in time for the next combat action.³⁹

On 1 February 1943, the battalion boarded thirty-two C-47 transports and was airlifted to Youk-Les-Bains Airfield (near Tebessa).⁴⁰ Attached to the II Corps, the Rangers were to plan a series of raids against the Italians and Germans in Tunisia. Their first objective was Sened Station. On the night of 12 February, Companies A, E, and F, marched across eight miles of difficult terrain, “. . . each Ranger carrying a C ration, a canteen of water, and a shelter half.”⁴¹ The Rangers then camouflaged themselves with shelter halves and brush during the day to blend into the terrain. The next night the Rangers moved another four miles to get behind the Italian battle position. Just before midnight, the Ranger companies attacked with fixed bayonets. The Rangers drove the 10th Bersaglieri Regiment off the position, capturing an antitank gun and five machineguns, killing seventy-five, and taking eleven prisoners.⁴² Ranger casualties for the operation were one killed and ten wounded.⁴³

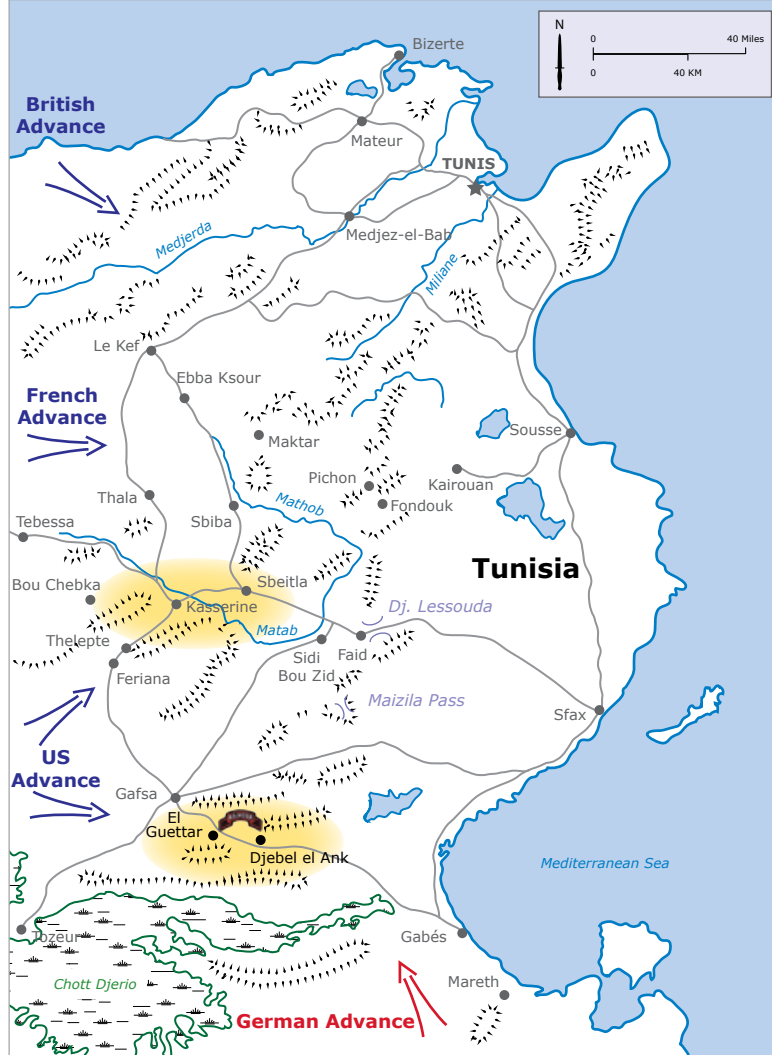
Their second mission was to seize the Djebel el Ank pass, key high ground near El Guettar. Darby stated that “with El Guettar in hand, General Allen [the 1st Infantry Division commander] could develop his plan of attack against the heights to the east and southeast. The pass at Djebel el Ank had to be taken first in order to anchor the division’s left flank.”⁴⁴ On 20 March 1943, the 1st Ranger Battalion, with mortars and engineers attached,



Major Darby in Arzew, Algeria. As the town "mayor," he used a motorcycle to attend meetings.

force-marched for ten miles at night across mountainous terrain to get into position. Just before dawn, the Rangers swarmed down into the enemy positions surprising the Italians from the rear. The assault cleared the El Guettar Pass and captured over one thousand prisoners.⁴⁵ The capture of Djebel el Ank Pass and El Guettar enabled Lieutenant General George S. Patton's II Corps to launch its attack on Tunisia. For this action, the 1st Ranger Battalion received its first Presidential Unit Citation and Lieutenant Colonel Darby was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.⁴⁶

Based on the successes of the 1st Ranger Battalion in North Africa, Darby was directed to form two additional Ranger battalions. With cadre from the 1st Battalion, the 3rd and 4th Ranger Battalions were activated and trained at Nemours, Algeria, in April 1943. The 1st Battalion was reconstituted with the original A and B Companies, the core of the 3rd Battalion came from C and D Companies, and the core of the 4th Battalion came from E and F Companies.⁴⁷ Darby, his officers, and his non-commissioned officers received hundreds of combat-tested soldiers from the Seventh Army units. Major Herman Dammer assumed command of the 3rd Battalion, Major Roy Murray the 4th Battalion, and Darby remained as the commander of the 1st Battalion. Darby was, in effect, in command of what became known as the "Darby Ranger Force." Because the Army still considered the Ranger



The Rangers seized the key passes of Djebel el Ank Pass and El Guettar, Tunisia. Seizure of the strategic terrain allowed General Patton's II Corps to attack, eventually seizing Tunisia.

battalions as provisional temporary units, manpower was not allocated for a force headquarters.⁴⁸ The three Ranger battalions then began an arduous three-week training program to prepare the newly formed units for Operation HUSKY, the Allied invasion of Sicily.⁴⁹

The intent of this and future articles is not to provide an all-encompassing history of the Ranger battalions. Some excellent books have already been written. The reason for this article is two-fold: first, to inform soldiers about Ranger history and heritage; and second, to stimulate interest and oral history contributions from Ranger veterans. The next article of this series will cover the three Ranger battalions' role in Sicily and Italy, through the battle of Cisterna. ♣



II Corps shoulder patch.

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