

TWO CACTUSMEN'S DAUGHTERS SEARCH FOR FATHERS' BUDDIES

Two daughters of two Castusmen buddies are searching for any fellow Cactusmen who served with them in the 3rd platoon of Co G 411th Infantry Regiment. This very unusual situation began with two men from Chicago, who did not know each other, were assigned to G/411 at Camp Claiborne in 1943. They developed a close friendship, including double dates in Louisiana with future family and visits home on joint furloughs in Chicago. This friendship continued as foxhole buddies in combat until the attack on Climback December 15, 1944 when one of them became mortally wounded during an artillery barrage and died in the arms of the other. Sgt Dennis S. Zaboith, who was killed at Climback, had a wife and an infant daughter, whereas James Cunnally, his Chicago buddy, was devastated by the death of his friend, had no involvements, and believed a great injustice had been done in that he had not been killed instead of his married friend. Cunnally survived the war without personal injury; however, he did have to remain in Germany into 1946 where, after the war, he was assigned to assist in the return of prisoners of the Germans to their homeland. Jim Cunnally sent Lorraine Zaboith a letter describing the situation leading to her husband's death and advising that he would try to retrieve Zaboith's personal effects for return to the family.

Jim did visit Lorraine right after returning home and again at the final burial of Sgt Zaboith when his body was returned in 1948, which daughter, Diane remembers. In 1949, Jim married Lorraine and they had 3 children: a daughter, Patricia, and two sons, Dennis and Michael. In essence, James became an unofficial casualty of WW II through his depression and not outwardly showing any optimism in life's daily activities. Fast forward forty years to Lorraine succumbing to lymphoma in 1989, and James passing away eight months later of lung cancer and Parkinson's in early 1990. The family believes he gave up after losing the woman who sustained him for forty years even though she believed that somehow she was bad luck for the men she loved. Now the children of Dennis and James would like some closure for their family life by finding others who witnessed and experienced what their fathers had experienced.

Amazingly we have 40 veterans on our master living roster of Co G/411th Regt veterans and while I have canvassed a number of these, I have not been able to find any who were in the 3rd platoon of G Company, that knew Dennis or James or any related incidents involving either of the two Cactusmen: Sgt Dennis S. Zaboith and Pfc James Cunnally.

Fortunately, the two daughters, Diane (Zaboith) Helland (815-784-4865) and Patricia (Cunnally) Lofthouse (847-698-9731) attended our reunion in Covington, KY in July and their spirits were greatly buoyed up by the experience of meeting fellow veterans of their fathers and sharing their experiences. They are planning to attend our next reunion in Nashville to continue their quest for persons who may have known their dads.

Taped Interview

Cincinnati Reunion 2008

Title: Our Two Dads

James Joseph Cunnally, Co. G 411th (died 2/24/90) (Remembrance by James Joseph Cunnally's step-daughter, Diane Zaboith Helland and his daughter, Patricia Lofthouse).

Dennis Zaboith, Co G 411th (KIA 12/15/44) (Remembrance by daughter, Diane Zaboith Helland).

Diane: My parents were married in April of 1942, shortly before my dad was drafted. Our mother, Lorraine, mentioned visiting him, taking his mother and me down to Texas to boot camp at Camp Howze. He had become good friends with Jim Cunnally, another draftee from Chicago. They even double dated with my mom and Jim's girlfriend.

Patricia: Our Dad first went to Camp Claiborne, Louisiana. His remembrance of that time was that everything was wet from the humidity. Things never dried out -- sheets, towels, pillowcases.

Patricia: Diane's dad, Dennis Zaboith, was away at camp when she was born in May of 1943. There is a beautiful letter placed in her scrapbook from her father to our mother upon Diane's birth. We shared some of Dennis' letters to our mother with WFMT, a public radio station in Chicago, and they broadcast them in 2001 for their segment called "War Letters." **Diane**: I have some letters that my dad sent. I wish he would have put my mom's letters back in the envelope with his letters home. Other GIs did that because any letter to a veteran had to be destroyed after they read it. They marked out with black any parts that were censored.

In October of '44 they were sent overseas to France. They were marching toward a town in France called Climbach preceding the Battle of the Bulge. The German artillery was on higher ground than the American Army. There was a battle that occurred on December 15th. Jim fell to one side and my dad fell to the other side. My dad was hit by gunfire and had shrapnel in his leg. **Patricia**: My Dad came over to check on him. He radioed to the medics to get a blood transfusion ready because he was the radio man of Company G, but Diane's dad literally died in his arms. **Diane**: If you were the radio operator it is my understanding you were the right-hand man to the Lieutenant. Our dad always

talked about how heavy that radio equipment was besides all his gear and backpack. Then he also had to carry the heavy rifle, the Browning Automatic.

Patricia: He wasn't very tall, about 5'9", but he was as strong as an ox.

After the war Jim stayed for awhile and helped out with the Occupation in Germany. He wrote a letter to our mom saying that he would like to visit her when he came back and tell her more of the details so that she would know exactly what happened. ***Patricia:*** Also that when Dennis died that night, he threw up and cried every night for the next six weeks.

Diane: When he came back they ended up getting married when I was about five years old. I have my sister Patricia, who is with me today, and we had two brothers, Michael and Dennis. Dennis was named after my dad. I have been attending these ceremonies, the WWII Memorial Dedication in memory and honor of my two dads. I refer to Jim as my dad because he was the only dad I knew. I was only eighteen months old when mine was killed.

Patricia: Our father became a sergeant. He always said he never had the heart to be a killer but he ended up being one. He stayed for almost two years in Germany in Mannheim helping the prisoners of war with relocation, so he did not come back the States until March 31, 1946. That is when he looked up our mother and brought Dennis' personal effects.

He never quite adjusted to coming back. He felt complete guilt for surviving. Today they call it survivors' guilt but I don't think in those days they even had a psychological term for it. He always questioned why he lived and Dennis died because Dennis had a wife and child and he had no one at home except his mother, my Norwegian grandmother Myrtle Cunnally. Every December 15, which was the day of Dennis' death, our father would go into a deep depression. But he was always depressed. He drank. He was an alcoholic. He gambled. He lived life on the edge. He found work on the edge. He was a Chicago policeman and an Algonquin, Illinois policeman. For him life could be summed up with the French phrase, "C'est la guerre." It's the war" or "It can't be helped.")

Our life growing up was very difficult. Our mother was a saint. She lived a life of complete uncertainty; never knowing if he was coming home, if he was drunk, if he had spent every penny which he did a lot. She went to work when we were quite babies to support us. Our Italian grandmother, Gaetana DeMichael, took care of us while she worked, then Diane took over.

Our mother was our father's support his entire life; she never let go. We knew he had horrendous experiences in the war but he never really talked about them. He had the opportunity to gather with other Army buddies, but he did not want to think or talk about the war. Occasionally, if he had been drinking his Jim Beam, sitting at the bar in the kitchen, listening to Frank Sinatra records in the middle of the night with the lights dim while smoking his Pall Malls, then you would catch him and little snippets of the war experience would come out. For example, he told me about some of the nicer remembrances: the French girls and how happy they were to see him. I think he was quite the ladies' man over there. He told how they simply so wanted the American Army blankets because they were so poor. They would take the blankets that were made of natural wool and tailor them into beautiful coats for their entire family. Then, of course, they also wanted the cigarettes and chocolate. *Diane*: He recounted to me one of his better memories was being lost for about three days with a couple of buddies down in a French wine cellar. For some reason they just couldn't find their way out of those wine cellars! It took them three days. *Patricia*: They drank cognac for three days. He could drink again but he could never eat Spam again. It reminded him too much of the rations he lived on for so many months, eating out of his helmet. And

he had absolutely no desire to visit Europe again because he said he had already crawled across it on his belly. He used to tap out the Morse Code on the bar or the table for my kids, Amy, Andrew and Alyson. And he told my son one time, and I think Andrew was probably only about seven years old, that when they reached Hitler's bunker in southern Germany, "They pissed on it". That was their message to Hitler. *Diane*: After the war he was involved with liberating Jewish people from prisoner of war camps and relocating them. He did the same for the Russian POWs. He also helped relocate the German POWS in Mannheim. One of them told our Dad that he should have killed all of the Russians – that America would be at war with them in ten years and he would regret it. What a prophecy that turned out to be.

He typed report after report trying to get these people back to where they belonged. Everything was chaos. As they approached the concentration camps the prisoners were afraid to come out because they did not know who was out there. He had to say, "We are the Americans. We are here to help you." They were in their little huts and slowly a head would peak out and they would look. Gradually, you would see these skeletons walking out. He said it was the most unforgettable sight. My husband and I were on a WWII tour in Holland about two years ago. In

one of the museums they had pictures of exactly that: the huts they were in and some of the people standing in the doorways. I looked at it and I said, “Now I know what he experienced.”

There is a Chicago author, Studs Terkel, who wrote the book, The Good War. My sister Pat wrote to him and he came to visit my parents in their apartment. They are a chapter in the book. They are called Joe and Rosemary Hanley, and Dennis is named Kevin, because Studs always gives pseudonyms to the people he interviews. After reading what they told him we both learned so much more about our dad’s feelings, emotions, and his outlook on life: like if you do not know if you are going to be living one day or the next what does it matter? Why was Dennis taken and he was saved? When Studs was there he pointed to a wall with pictures, Studs said, “Well, look. You have a wife, children, grandchildren and a heritage now.” Dad would just shrug and say, “Well I guess you are right.” But he didn’t internalize it and really grasp what it all meant.

Patricia: Our mother too suffered from guilt. She felt that somehow she had harmed the men she had loved in her life. Then our brothers, Michael and Dennis, unfortunately were growing up in that atmosphere of suicidal thoughts, depression,

gambling, alcohol and unemployment. They seemed to have absorbed many of those same traits with the same feeling that life is questionable and you have to push it to the edge; whether you will survive to the next day, who knows? I think what I have learned through the years is that we count the casualties in war but that is not the real number. The casualties of war are tenfold because it is every family member, including the unborn children who experience the effects of war. We are hoping to learn more about it so that we understand it and hopefully we can come to terms in our own lives. It has affected our lives and the way we relate to our husbands and children too. Plus, we don't want our grandchildren to forget what their grandfathers' sacrificed, or their grandmother's.

Diane: He was a gentle man, there was never any abuse. It was just his attitude toward life. He was goodhearted. But when he would get his paycheck and look at the money and say, "If I could double this, look what we could have." And when he did win occasionally, he was generous. But he would never look at the money and say, "Now we have to pay the rent and buy the food." ***Patricia:*** He was never able to really sleep or sleep in a bed. He would lay on the sofa or on a cot on the back porch, napping in twenty to thirty minute intervals. Then he would wake with a start. He would keep the television on. It seemed like he needed noise. We

had a couple of experiences as children. Because he was a policeman he had a gun and he napped with the gun under his pillow. There had been a couple of break-ins and robberies in our neighborhood. I remember going out on the porch in the middle of a hot summer night in Chicago to get some air, not even knowing he was out there. I startled him and he pulled the gun from under his pillow. Another time my little brother, Dennis, was sleeping up in the top bunk in our back bedroom. Our father must have been sleeping up there and my mother walked in and Denny was waving the gun. We have found out since that these sleep disorders are a product of war. But we did not know that at the time. It is a form of watching or hyper vigilance. And that is what he did in the war. He had to keep watch over the prisoners. He had to keep on watch with the radio. I would say for the rest of his life he never had one night of full sleep.

Our mother was everything. She was the glue. She too was a gentle soul inside. She had strength of character that as we got older we began to understand. She held the family together and lived with the guilt that with my dad being a policeman, he might not come home. And with the gun in the house there was always that fear that he would use it on himself. He mentions in Studs' book that he had many thoughts of suicide. Patricia: He had a war buddy, Willie Kramer, and they stayed friends in Chicago. Our Dad was on the phone with him when Kramer shot himself in the head.

Our mother today would be labeled co-dependent in all the substance abuse literature. She did endure and enable him, meaning that she kept a roof over his head and food on the table. We see it as supreme love. Diane: It was supreme love and supreme gratefulness for saving her because she was a widow with a child. She says too, in the book, it was like my dad coming back and life was going on. And she had more children whom she adored and grandchildren she adored.

Our mom developed cancer very young, lymphoma. She had surgery and chemotherapy and survived fifteen years. Around the fifteenth year mark our dad was diagnosed with lung cancer and beginning Parkinson's. And he did not want to continue treatment. He tried it for one cycle but would not do it again. Maybe since he had all the thoughts of suicide, now he found his way out. We are guessing though. We will never know. And it was she who had been struggling to survive, taking all the treatments that were available. Her cancer returned. She died in June of 1989. He died in February of 1990 just a couple of months later. He was 68 years old. We had almost forty years with him. He adored his grandchildren. We feel that they gave him a lot of joy and peace. He did mellow toward the end of his life and his grandchildren loved him. Diane: My son, Mark, was the first grandchild born and he could not say "Grandpa". It came out

“Gumpy”. My father liked that and the name stuck. Mark taught all the other grandchildren to say “Gumpy” including my daughters, Lisa and Melissa, our brother Denny’s son Tim, and Pat’s kids. So he was “Gump” or “Gumpy” until the day he died.

Patricia: We feel that maybe our Mom’s body gave up fighting because she knew that she could not protect him any longer. It would have been too much for her to lose another man she loved.



103rd. Division
Co. G, 411th
2nd Battalion
Dennis Stanley Zaboth
kia 12/15/44 Left
James Joseph Cunnally, Jr.
died 2/24/90 Right

