

The man behind the naming of Camp Darby

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Camp Darby is a military complex between Pisa and Livorno; formally dedicated on November 15, 1952 and was named Camp Darby in memory of Brigadier General William O. Darby, Assistant Division Commander of the 10th Mountain Division, who was killed by enemy artillery on April 30, 1945 on the shore of Lake Garda, Italy.”

Sounds simple enough, right? It turns out there is more to the naming of Camp Darby than that.

Upon learning April 30 is the anniversary of Brigadier General William O. Darby, Camp Darby’s namesake, death, I went to the library to see what else I could learn about the man. Fortunately, one of the Italian employees there had a short biography written by Capt. Herman and Spec. 4 Hurlbut in 1973.

*Brigadier General William O. Darby
A short biography*

*By Captain Herman and SP4 Hurlbut
Excerpt from “Marconi’s Monthly” Vol I No 5, July 31, 1973.*



William Orlando Darby was born at Fort Smith, Arkansas on Feb. 8, 1911. He graduated from the United States Military Academy with a Bachelor of Science Degree and was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Field Artillery on June 13, 1933.

His first assignment was as assistant executive and supply officer with the 82nd Field Artillery at Ft. Bliss, Texas. In July 1934, he moved to Cloudcroft, New Mexico where he commanded the 1st Cavalry Division Detachment. He received intensive artillery training from September 1937 to June 1938 while attending Field Artillery School at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma. On September 9, 1940, he was promoted to the grade of Captain and subsequently served with the 80th Division at Camp Jackson, South Carolina; Ft. Benning, Georgia; Camp Beauregard, Louisiana and Ft. Des Moines, Iowa.

World War II was largely responsible for Captain Darby’s rapid promotion to the grade of Lieutenant Colonel. He was with the first U.S. troops sent to Northern Ireland at the outbreak of the war, and during his stay there, he became interested in the British Commando groups.

His interest was such that, when the U.S. Army decided to establish its Ranger units, he was put in charge of the organization and training of its original units.

“Darby’s Rangers” trained with their British Counterparts in Scotland and in

1943, the 1st Ranger Battalion made its first assault at Arzew, North Africa. As a result, Lt. Col. Darby was awarded the Distinguish Service Cross.

The following is from the citation presented:

“Lt. Col. Darby struck with his force with complete surprise at dawn in the rear of a strongly fortified enemy position. Always conspicuously at the head of his troops, he personally led assaults against the enemy line in the face of heavy machine gun and artillery fire, establishing the fury of the Ranger attack by his skillful employment of hand grenades in close quarter fighting. On March 22, Lt. Col. Darby directed his battalion in advance on Bon Hamean, capturing prisoners and destroying a battery of self propelled artillery.”

The 1st Ranger Battalion saw further action in the battles to occupy Italy. An Oak Leaf Cluster to the Distinguished Services Cross was conferred upon Lt. Col. Darby in 1943 for his gallantry in Sicily:

“Lt. Col. Darby, with the use of one 37mm gun, which he personally manned, managed not only to repulse an enemy attack, but succeeded with this weapon in destroying one tank, while two others were accounted for by well directed hand grenade fire.”

Also in 1943, he received the Silver Star for his action”

“Without regard for his personal safety, the day previous to a raid, he reconnoitered enemy positions and planned the attack which he led the following morning. The thorough organization and successful attack led by Col. Darby reveled his initiative, courage, and devotion to duty which is a credit to the Armed Forces of the United States.”

In April 1944, having been promoted to Colonel, he returned to Washington, D.C. for duty with the Army Ground Forces and later with the War Department General Staff. In March 1945, he returned to Italy for an observation tour with General Arnold.

On April 23, 1945, Brigadier General Robinson E. Duff, Assistant Division Commander of the 10th Infantry Mountain Division, was wounded and, voluntarily, Col. Darby took charge of the unit.

“Task Force Darby” spearheaded the breakout of the Fifth Army from the Po River Valley bridgehead and reached Tarbole at the head of Lake Garda. While Col. Darby was issuing orders for the attack on Trento to cut off a German retreat, an 88mm shell burst in the middle of the assembled officers and NCOs. Killing Col. Darby and a Sergeant and wounding several others.

Relying on the inspiration of their late commander, “Task Force Darby” continued on with their mission. Two days later, the entire German Field Command surrendered.

Col. Darby was 34 at the time of his death; and papers for his promotion had already been sent to Washington. On the date of his death, he was posthumously promoted to Brigadier General.

In addition to the awards conferred upon him by the U.S. Army, he received the following foreign awards: French Croix de Guerre with Silver Star, Russian order of Kutuzov (3rd degree) and the British Distinguished Service Order.

The library also had “Onward We Charge- the Heroic Story of Darby’s Rangers in World War II” by H. Paul Jeffers, a copy of a local newspaper from 1952 that showed

Darby's parents visiting the dedication ceremony and an original photo of Darby. Plus, it turns out that a flag flown over Darby's house has hanging in the conference room and along with a painting from 1958 by local Livorno artist A. Defaveri.

Brig. Gen. Darby may be most well known for his Rangers and heroic actions; but, at Camp Darby his is an enduring inspiration for its community members.