

# **MAJ John William “Jack” Dobson**

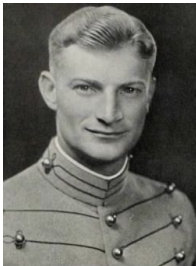
**1913 – 1998**

Please Note: Although few first-person accounts contributed by Jack Dobson appear in this biography, credible, well documented sources are included with the belief that he would approve.

Sources include excerpts from *HEROES CRY TOO - A WWII RANGER TELLS HIS STORY OF LOVE AND WAR* by Marcia Moen and Margo Heinen and *ROADS TO LIBERATION FROM OFLAG 64* by Clarence R. Meltesen. These passages offer portraits of Colonel Orlando Darby, LT Warren “Bing” Evans, and Major Jack Dobson alongside the names and missions of other Darby Rangers.

## **BACKGROUND**

John Dobson, known as Jack throughout his life, was born in Richmond, Virginia, on 4 October 1913, to parents Frank and Florence Dobson. Known by family members as an early achiever, he graduated from the Culver Military Academy in Culver, Indiana, at the age of 18 and proceeded then to the University of Richmond for a Bachelor’s of Science Degree.



## **MILITARY SCHOOLING AND COMMISSIONING**

Continuing his educational opportunities and possible career choices in the military, Dobson attended the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, graduated in the class of 1939 with a second BS, and was commissioned as a cavalry officer.

## **THE DARBY RANGER CHALLENGE**

Challenges were second nature to Jack, so when reading a posting requesting volunteers for a new British Commando-type-unit—U.S. Rangers—he applied and was accepted among the 500 initially chosen.

Having boarded a vessel bound for Ireland in January of 1942, Dobson and his mates were soon to learn the purposes and personnel specialists required for a Commando Organization.

Ranger training was classified and very intense, as demonstrated by the 20-ton boulder with bronze plaque which marked their birthplace at Carrickfergus, Ireland. Candidates’ next stop was Achnacarry, a castle in

Central Scotland and home of Clan Cameron, a training base for British Commandos.

Speed marches, stamina tests, cliff climbing, rappelling, amphibious landings, obstacles courses, live ammunition drills, and reckoning cross-points of rivers in unconventional ways with full packs filled the Rangers' days and nights. Experienced British Commandos conducted the training along with Lt. Col Darby. He was their leader and their mentor; every man chosen hoped to live up to his expectations.

As the endurance requirements increased in difficulty, competition grew among the cadres of Americans and Brits. They were professionals and had experienced the war longer, whereas Americans were civilians first, but the two groups learned to respect one another. (Moen and Heinen, pp. 82 – 95)

Fully trained now as an intrepid force, they set sail for North Africa on October 26.

*Previously North Africa had been controlled by the Germans and General Rommel, the Desert Fox, was probably the most outstanding general on either side. He led German troops—the Afrika Corps—in the fight against the British in Egypt. He probably would have succeeded if it had not been for the Americans and Allied Forces landing when they did. Most British were fighting Rommel on the other front with Montgomery. (Moen and Heinen, p. 117)*

*Evans comments: After the Tunisian campaign, the Army top brass realized they couldn't do without us Rangers. We had proven ourselves to be very necessary. Our type of operation was not easily handled by the regular infantry soldier. They weren't trained for it. I imagine it would be difficult to get men in the regular infantry to go through the training that we did. They also were not trained to fight at night. Of course this was the days before night vision goggles. (Moen and Heinen, p. 124)*

It was here that the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was broken up into three battalions, thus allowing Darby to assume the rank of full Colonel and Jack Dobson to take Darby's place as 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Commander. (Moen and Heinen, pp. 124, 125)

History has recorded that Ranger Companies demonstrated successful results in the North Africa Campaign, the Sened Station Raid and Sicily. New decisions made beyond their control, however, would challenge their fate in this next engagement.

## **ANZIO AND CAPTURE OF THE RANGERS AT CISTERNA**

The following accounts are attributed to LT Warren "Bing" Evans.

*January 22, 1944. The night was black—pitch black, the way we like it. We set anchor in the harbor just outside Anzio, Italy. We could hear the Mediterranean waters lapping against the ship's sides as our LCAs, Landing Craft Assault boats—American-made and metal—were lowered silently into the water. We had completed this exercise a hundred times before and the whole business becoming routine. This was the fourth invasion for my outfit—the United States Army Infantry Rangers. We had orders to spearhead and land on beaches between Anzio and Nettuno. I was 24 years old, a lieutenant and a company commander.*

*I felt a foreboding but remained focused. Our objective here was to cut the enemy's supply by overcoming the German's beach defenses and clearing the town. Ranger Force for this landing included the 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> Battalions. We were not at full strength with only 1200 men. Following us in would be the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, the 46<sup>th</sup> Tank Regiment and two Commando battalions. The odds were against us but we went in anyway. The whole beach was alive with Navy bombardment. Engineers cleared mines and barbed wire and set up lights to guide the wave of men coming behind us.*

*Little to no resistance. Using signals or head nods we moved further inward. Radio call from Colonel Darby sent me into the hills and two days later we were in the Alban Hills and could see Rome. Headquarters sent us back to the beach where we had little cover—a mistake which would cost many lives.*

*The Germans (reenforced by troops from northern Italy, France, Yugoslavia and Germany) counter-attacked with German planes and artillery. Our backs were to the sea.*

*On 30 January, the plan was for us to move out that night, with the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Ranger Battalions infiltrating behind enemy lines under cover of darkness to reach Cisterna around noon the next day, take the town and hold until the Third Texas Division could relieve us—the 4<sup>th</sup> Ranger Battalion was to hold the road for supplies. Both Les Kness and I told the Colonel [Darby] that more Germans were present—ready to attack us but his reply was, "Lieutenant, those are my orders and those are your orders." I answered, "Yes, Sir." As Les and I walked out I said to him, "Les this is bad. We are in for it tonight." Both of us had been through enough that we were becoming fatalistic. On the night of January 29<sup>th</sup>, as we advanced towards Cisterna, Les Kness and I knew that we were on a suicide mission. Sure enough, just a couple of hours later, we ran into a buzz saw. By noon of the next day, we were wiped out! (Moen and Heinen, pp. 17 – 27)*

Evans called on the battle memories of Ranger Gustave Schunemann, 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion from his book, *Memoirs of a Ranger*, to describe the battle, ending in these paragraphs:

*The battle raged on until around noon when we noticed a group of Rangers walking up the dirt road toward our position. At first, we thought they were reinforcements that had somehow broken through. As they drew closer, however, we could see that their hands were in the air and they were being escorted by Germans. The Germans were demanding our surrender or the hostages would be killed.*

*At this point Major Dobson had no choice but to order us to throw down our weapons and come out. Not only were we nearly out of ammunition, but we had already lost half of two Ranger Battalions, killed or wounded. The carnage was tremendous on both sides. I just knew that my life had come to an end. Only through the grace of God did I survive without a scratch.*

*The Germans herded us onto the farm road and marched us, hands raised high, out of the area. We carried some of our wounded on piggy-back, and others just needed someone to hang onto...Much to our surprise and relief, the Germans called for all the wounded to come forward. Some hesitated at first but we convinced them to go for medical help because they had nothing to lose at that point. There was Leroy Kraft, standing there, in complete shock, with half his face blown away. He and maybe a hundred others were loaded onto trucks displaying red crosses and hauled away.*

*At dusk we were loaded onto trucks, packed like sardines so tightly that we could not sit or lie down. We were actually held up by each other. We rode that way all night long, arriving on the outskirts of Rome early in the morning. It was at the Colosseum area that we dismounted and marched through the streets of the city in one huge propaganda extravaganza. The Germans had cameras on every corner. (Schunemann, pp. 27 - 31)*

## **ANZIO-NETTUNO BEACHHEAD**

*The following accounts are attributed to Clarence R. Meltesen.*

*The allied landing at Anzio-Nettuno, Italy was unopposed but the German defenses stiffened as the resting units were put into the line and troop units from the French Riviera and Yugoslavia arrived. Each side built about 300,000 and on 30 January the three battalion Ranger forces and two regiments of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Inf*

*Division attacked in the direction of Cisterna to start the allied attack. German defenses had stiffened and allied advances were minimized.*

*Hitler's priority was to drive the allies into the sea. A massive counteroffensive in February failed in this mission to be followed by trench warfare and a battle of attrition. In the end the allied casualties were on the order of 30,000 proportioned to US 6 Corps and British 1<sup>st</sup> Division.*

US	KIA 2800	WIA 11000	POW 2400
British	KIA 1600	WIA 7000	POW 4400
GERMAN	KIA 5500	WIA 17500	POW 4500

*The 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Ranger Battalions night-marched 29/30 January 1944 to reach Cisterna. At dawn they were in the middle of German troop units just arrived from Cassino. The 4<sup>th</sup> battalion began a strong linkup attack at the fortified farmhouse of Isola Bella to which the Germans had sent more troops after midnight. F company of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bn, F/3, led the attack and eight Rangers may have held the Cisterna railroad station for a while. The 26 Panzer tanks popping out from behind haystacks and barns on all sides. Major Dobson, commanding the 1<sup>st</sup> Rangers was severely wounded, and by that time could count 15 German tanks disabled or destroyed by using sticky grenades and bazooka rounds in close fighting.*

*Major Miller, CO 3<sup>rd</sup> Rangers was killed while starting to set up his radio link to Ranger Force Headquarters. At the end, the Germans captured a section of F/3, put them in front of a tank and German infantry, and marched, announcing to the next unit, "Surrender or your comrades will die."*

*By sundown, I and many others were on our way to the aid stations and hospitals in Rome. By marching and by truck the others were taken to "Norman Castle", Castel Romagna and so on. Officially 767 Rangers went into the attack and six returned. Everyone went to PG 82 Laterina, a starvation camp, with the men going to Stalag II B, Hammerstein after the officers were sent to Oflag 64, Schubin.*

*The captured Rangers were featured along with captures from Cassino and recaptured allied POWs from the September changes in camp command, in a propaganda parade through Rome on 1 February 1944. They formed at the Colosseum and marched along the Corso to Tritone and then turning to Via Vento and the Spanish Embassy. Pictures were taken by the Germans and by a British*

*agent working in the town. Some groups of Italians threw some rubbish and so on for the cameras, while others were signaling the “V” sign to the marching POWs. (Meltesen, pp. 40 – 43)*

## **THE HARD TREK NORTH**

The POWs were tightly packed into trucks and train cars through Rome and taken to containment camps through Italy into Germany, arriving at Oflag 64 in Poland, mere weeks before an action which would have an impactful effect on their lives as prisoners—D-Day at Normandy, June 6, 1944.

Marched through the streets of (Alzburgund) Schubin, POWs then entered the gates of the camp. Once processed, vested and assigned a barracks’ bunk, Major Dobson’s agile and Ranger-trained mind quickly surveyed the camp with its highly framed and positioned barbed wire fences with armed men in guard towers, strategically placed among other components which comprised its composition; these included a large, multi-story building known as the White House among other huts or buildings and the movement of POWs, some participating in activities, walking around the perimeter or chatting in small groups.

Survival until repatriated through war’s end or escape became Jack Dobson’s primary mission.

Having recovered from a wound received during the fighting, Dobson’s statement on camp activities under the SPORTS column, Page Three, is recorded in *The Oflag 64 Item*, November 1, 1944—The FIRST ANNIVERSARY EDITION.

### **Weather, Chow Shortage Combine To Fowl Up Oflag Sports Program**

“Kriegies Return to Sack for Winter”

Rugged Artic weather and the local food shortage combined last week to knock the camp sports program for a loop and retire kriegies to a sack.

Major Jack Dobson, recreation officer, announced the suspension of organized soccer, football and basketball and announced plans for ping-pong, bridge and chess tournaments beginning this month. A handball tournament and boxing classes will be held when renovation of Barracks 1 is completed.

Page Two of this issue also includes the following information about Dobson under “Kriegy Sketches”:

During that time [at West Point] he presented a triple threat in the field of sports, playing a fast end on the Academy football team, holding down first base for the Black-Gold-and-Gray, and hurling the javelin when the track season rolled around.

## **EVACUATION OF OFLAG 64**

Many versions of this day, January 21, 1945, have been journaled and described, but basically, by 1000 hours kriegies who were not hospitalized or numbered as escapees were marched out of the gates of the camp in freezing weather. Formal ranks of American marchers soon disappeared among refugees which included those on foot, wagons overloaded with belongings, women, children, and older family members all being pulled by teams of horses, guided by young and adult males. Eventually the trail of those fleeing the Russians and other rogue groups extended for several miles.

*The first day after 15 km, the march reached Exin. We passed through and were well received by the Polish people for we marched on to Wegheim/Siernicki, a dorf [a remote place], and stayed the night in the barns of the Baron von Rosen. There was no food distribution and billeting was catch-as-catch-can. We had no experiences in choosing hay barns or stock barns or tool sheds for a good night's sleep on a freezing cold night. We learned a lot that night. Meanwhile a small group escaped both planned and opportunistic were going into action:*

*Major Dobson had tried straggling and now teamed up with Capt Bond, Lt Gaich, and a Polish speaking officer. They buried themselves in a haybarn and in the morning walked on cross country. (Meltesen, p. 156)*

### The American Military Mission to Moscow

*Nearly 500 men from Oflag 64 had escaped and then evaded recaptured by the Germans in January - February [1945]. Next, they met the advances of the Soviet Forces and avoided being killed. In small groups during days of uncertainty they sought safe havens and improvement in living conditions. What followed was a hectic rail journey to Odessa as Russian action began in late February and ended at Odessa. Repatriation and a voyage home was a happy ending to the ordeal. Even this was marred when a platoon of enlisted men were marching by a bomb damaged wall that collapsed, sending some to the hospital and veterans of Kasserine Pass now gave the last full measure of a warrior in a foreign land.*

*The Military Mission under General Dean organized and sent contact teams to meet the needs of American ex-POWs at Odessa. Odessa used personnel from England, Poltava Air Base and the Mission.*

*They met the first arrivals on 27 February to begin the processing for embarkation, medical support, new clothing, PX candies and supplies. A partial pay of \$100 was authorized. Personnel waited*

*for the arrival of British shipping that was returning Russian repatriates from the ETO (generally Russians who had been serving in the German Army). The sea journey home went by way of the Suez Canal to Naples or Marseille and then to a major port in the United States, Boston, and further processing at Camp Myles Standish, Massachusetts. (Meltesen, p. 222)*

## **PROCESSING AT ODESSA**

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### **Repatriation Posters-Odesa Camp February – March 1945**

**Source: National Archives**

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#### FROM RUSSIAN TO ENGLISH

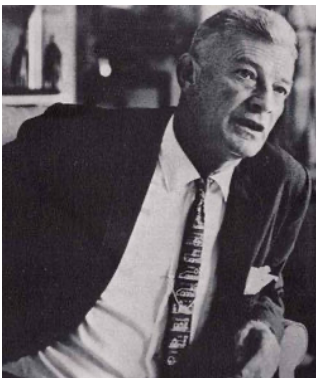
Officer Battalion of Lt.Col. Yardley American

Staff Officer company of Capt. Bonds

- |                              |          |      |
|------------------------------|----------|------|
| 1. Col. Frederick V. Drury   | American | 1900 |
| 7. Lt. Col. Doyle R. Yardley | American | 1913 |
| 8 Major John W. Dobson       | American | 1913 |
| 11. Capt. William R. Bond    | American | 1918 |
| 12. Capt. Floyd Burgeson, MC | American | 1908 |

Source: Meltesen, p. 223

## **KNOWLEDGE SHARED, OPPORTUNITIES ACCEPTED AND TAPS**



After returning to the land of the truly free, Major Dobson returned to West Point where he became a professor in the Social Science Department from 1946 – 1949, followed by a stint as a staff member of the United States Army War College in 1950. One of his military assignments was as the Senior United States Advisor to the NATO Commander in Denmark.

He retired from the United States Army in 1967 after 32 years of service as a Brigadier General. Prior to retirement, he was Deputy Director for Command Areas for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. From 1967 to 1970, he became the sixth Superintendent of Culver Military Academy—a memorable homecoming.



Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, became his next home of record where he engaged in thoroughbred breeding and racing, also serving at Sea Pines Academy in 1975 for five years as business manager, athletic director and golf coach.

John William Dobson died on 2 December 1998 at the age of 85 and is buried with military honors at the United States Military Academy Post Cemetery. His wife, Eloise Hendrix Dobson, whom he married in June 1941 preceded him in death on 30 September 1998 and is buried at his side with the words, *His Wife*, on her tombstone.



Their daughter, Lisa McNeil Dobson, died in 1976.

Source:

<http://findagrave.com/memorial/123819145/john-william-dobson>

## **MEDALS AND HONORS**

### **Silver Star**

*AWARDED FOR ACTIONS*

*During World War II*

*Service: Army*

*RANK: Major*

*GENERAL ORDERS:*

Headquarters, U.S. Army Forces, Mediterranean Theater of Operations  
General Orders No. 322 (1945)

CITATION: Major (Cavalry) John William Dobson (ASN: 0-21851), United States Army, was awarded the Silver Star for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in connection with military operations against the enemy as Commanding Officer, 1<sup>st</sup> Ranger Infantry Battalion, during World War II.

### **Prisoner of War Medal**

*AWARDED FOR ACTIONS*

*DURING World War II*

*Service: Army*

*RANK: Major*

*GENERAL ORDERS:*

CITATION:

Major (Cavalry) John William Dobson (ASN: 0-21851) was captured by the German forces on or about 30 January 1944 during fighting in Italy, and was held as a Prisoner of War until the end of hostilities in August 1945.

**Army Distinguished Service Medal**

AWARDED FOR ACTIONS

DURING Vietnam War

Service: Army

RANK: Brigadier General

Division: Joint Chiefs of Staff

GENERAL ORDERS:

Department of the Army, General Orders No. 36

(September 14, 1967)

CITATION:

The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress on July 9, 1918, takes pleasure in presenting the Army Distinguished Service Medal to Brigadier General John William Dobson (ASN: 0-21851), United States Army, for exceptional meritorious and distinguished services to the Government of the United States, in a duty of great responsibility as Deputy Director J3, Joint Chiefs of Staff, during the period from July 1965 to July 1967.

Source: <http://valor.militarytimes.com>

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers