



# LIVING LEGACY



## DONALD CUNNINGHAM

Born: December 12, 1929  
WWII, Korean War, POW  
Army  
Served: 1946-1954



Don Cunningham was born December 12, 1929 in St. Mary's, WV, to parents Ralph and Sue Moore Cunningham. He had a younger brother, James, who also served as a member of occupational forces in Japan post-WWII. Don had two sisters: Delma and Cecile. Don nicknamed Cecile, Skootch, when she was a baby. When Don was about 15 years old, the family moved to Wellsville, OH where he attended Wellsville HS. Don quit school at the age of 17 and he worked at Crucible Steel in Middleton, PA as a ladle man for a short time. He enlisted into the U.S. Army on February 14, 1946 and was sent to Fort Knox, KY for his basic training. Don signed up to serve for 20 years – his desire was to enjoy a long military career!

The war in Europe was over but many troops were needed to serve as occupational duty amid the disorder of post-war Germany in 1945-46. There was still a need for highly mobile organizations to serve as a multi-capable security force in occupied areas. Standard infantry units lacked mobility, and military police units lacked the firepower to perform the many functions that would be required. A mobile and flexible force would allow fewer troops to control a larger area with minimum personnel, as the nation's demobilization policy demanded. Armor and cavalry organizations were noted for their mobility, so these units formed the basis of what would be called the U.S. Constabulary. Part of the U.S. Constabulary was a cavalry unit using horses to navigate the rough German terrain along its borders. Don was assigned to the U.S. Constabulary unit stationed in Berlin, Germany. His horse was named Tony. Don and Tony patrolled within Germany and near Czechoslovakia. Don enjoyed this

assignment very much and served three years, eight months and six days.

He entered the U.S. Army as a Corporal on Oct. 20, 1949, at Fort Bragg, NC. Later he would tell his son, Doug, that serving in war-torn occupied Germany was a dream – life was good – “then I got sent to Korea and it all went to sh-t!”

Don was now assigned to Co K, 21st Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division. It was 1950. On June 24, 1950, the North Korean People's Army invaded South Korea, beginning the Korean War. On June 30, President Harry Truman decided to defend South Korea with American ground forces. The Pentagon selected the 24th Division to deploy first, with the 21st Infantry Regiment being the first to go to South Korea. Due to a shortage of air transport, the regiment could only airlift a force comprising less than a battalion to Pusan. The remainder of the regiment and the rest of the division were to follow by sea transport.



Don in Germany

The first deployed troops airlifted into Pusan and then traveled by rail and truck to a position north of Osan, south of Seoul. They dug in and prepared to engage North Korean forces on July 4, 1950. On July 5, members of the 21st Infantry opened fire on a column of 33 North Korean T-34/85 tanks, supported by two regiments of North Korean infantry. Due to the lack of anti-tank weapons, our troops could only destroy four T-34/85s as the North Korean tank column continued south. North Korean infantry then attacked our troops both frontally and around its flanks. The 21st Infantry was able to hold off the North Koreans infantry for six hours, but was forced to withdraw, suffering heavy casualties. During the Battle of Osan, the 21st Infantry Regiment suffered casualties of 60 killed, 21 wounded and 80 captured, out of a total strength of 540 men.

The remainder of the 21st Infantry arrived at Chochiwon by July 7. Chochiwon was located along one of two roads to the Kum River and Taejon. 1st and 3rd Battalions repelled the North Korean advance until July 12. During the Battle of Chochiwon, the 21st Regiment suffered 531 killed, wounded or missing. On August 30, the 34th Infantry's 3rd Battalion became the 21st's 2nd Battalion as the loss of manpower required restructuring. The 21st regiment fought on the

Naktong River line until September 19, 1950. The 24th Division, including the 21st Infantry Regiment, was awarded a Presidential Unit Citation for its actions between July 2 and September 15, 1950.

After the Inchon landings on September 15, the North Korean forces besieging the Pusan Perimeter began to retreat. The 21st Regiment broke out of the perimeter on September 19. In a rapid advance northward, it took Waegwan, Kumchon and Taejon. The regiment crossed the 38th parallel north in mid-October. At the peak of its advance on November 2, 1950, the regiment was 17 miles south of the Chinese border.

On November 3, 1950, the Chinese People's Liberation Army entered the war. Chinese PLA attacks forced UN forces to retreat back across the Han River by January 3, 1951. The 21st Regiment fought in the First United Nations Counteroffensive.

While Don and his unit were marching, they were trained to have one another's backs. But when they were attacked by the North Korean Army, the man behind Don got scared and took off and Don was knocked down and captured. It was February 6, 1951.

Don was held in captivity for the next 2.5 years. He survived a death march where he saw many of his friends killed. In all, 3,600 of his fellow soldiers were killed during these death marches. He was held in Soyu-ri, Korea by the North Koreans and the Chinese and severely tortured.

Don made a new friend, Richard Razvoza (Raz), who served with Don as a POW the entire time. Don's wife, Mary, recalls what Don had shared with her, "Don said they slept on dirt floors with bugs, maggots and filth. They were made to cut their own wood for heat and fed one small rice ball each day. Sometimes they had a turnip or rutabaga and once in a while they had dried fish with bugs. They were starving them! They beat Don with clubs and sticks each day when he would not give them any information about his unit's whereabouts, size, or weapons. Don and Raz tried to look out for one another."



Don and Bud



The tortures utilized against the POWs were barbaric. Heated, sharpened bamboo sticks were used to cut into the POW's flesh in multiple areas of the body. A can opener that one G.I. had on his dog tag chain was used to insert it into the soldier's wound, given a half twist and the Chinese captor said, "ptomaine poison!" If the soldier had an injury, the captors would hit him in the wounded area with the butt of their rifle. Some were made to run and then shot down like animals while the other POWs watched. Many were force marched without their boots and outer clothing in very frigid weather. If one of them became unable to march, he was killed and left on the side of the road for the others to march past. Sometimes they were paraded through towns to be ridiculed by the citizens of that town. One torture was for the captors to make superficial wounds on the POW's body and bayonet them gradually until they bled out.

A group of bronze statues of soldiers in World War I attire, including helmets and gas masks, standing in a grassy area with trees in the background. The statues are arranged in a line, facing different directions, and are surrounded by a low metal fence. The background shows a line of trees and a clear sky.



Right: Don Cunningham's photo appeared in the newspaper when he went missing

stars

prisoners at these camps were survivors of marches and were necessarily in poor physical condition. Don also walked in one of these death marches – and survived. Don stressed to Mary many times over the years that the Chinese were much more cruel and sadistic than the North Koreans. All the American POWs feared their Chinese captors the most.

The deliberate plan of savage and barbaric handling of these men was a continuation of the policy which existed on all the marches, and violated virtually every provision of the Geneva Convention of 1929. They were denied adequate nourishment, water, clothing, and shelter. Not only were they denied medical care but they were subjected to experimental monkey-gland operations. Note: a piece of monkey liver was sewn into an incision made on the POW's arm and closed. The Communists thought this would add vitality to the POWs but instead, often led to infection resulting in death.



Don in 1988

The prisoners were not permitted to practice their religion and on numerous occasions were beaten, humiliated, and punished. Political questioning and forced Communist indoctrination was constant, and the men were subjected to physical abuse and other punishment when they refused to be receptive to the Communist propaganda. The Communists utilized prisoners on numerous occasions for propaganda purposes and took posed pictures purporting to show the comfortable life being led by the prisoners, an obvious distortion of truth and fact. All manner of means were used to break the spirit and morale of the American POW. Don later told Mary he had also concealed some money and a prayer book in his groin which was never discovered. He said he and Raz escaped once, but were captured and placed in hot boxes in the sun for several days and severely beaten.

Officers were segregated from the enlisted men and could therefore not exercise any internal control, and were subjected to the same harsh treatment. Prisoners-of-war camps were not properly marked, resulting in bombing by United Nations aircraft. Letters of prisoners were not mailed by their captors, and Red Cross aid was in no way permitted. American prisoners died by the thousands at the rate of 15 to 20 per day. One survivor said that during a seven- to eight-month period 1,500 prisoners died of beriberi, dysentery, pellagra, and other diseases as a result of malnutrition at one POW Camp. Many men incurred an appalling loss of weight. Most lost

stars

40-45% of their initial weight from when they were captured. Don Cunningham weighed 169 pounds when he enlisted. When he came out of the North Korean POW Camp, he weighed a mere 90 pounds!

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*Note: Of the 7,190 soldiers who were captured (mostly in the first nine months of the war), over 3000 died in captivity, a mortality of 43%, largely of starvation. This compares with WW II rates: 4% of US prisoners in Germany (considered a normal rate, reflecting the Geneva convention), 34% in Japan (rightly condemned as barbarous), 45% of German POWs held by the Soviets, and 60% of Soviet POWs held by the Germans. Chinese Communist apologists sometimes claim the starvation of US POWs in Korea was caused by US bombing, preventing the delivery of food. In response, the US pointed out that while North Korean supply routes were heavily bombed, the POW camps were right on the border of China itself – and China had been exempted from bombing.*

W W W

Donald Cunningham was one of the American POWs who survived this cruel, abusive, inhumane treatment for 2.5 years. He was repatriated when an agreement was signed in 1953 to allow the exchange of POWs. Mary recalls Don's story, "Don was told he was going to be taken to the American line along with others in a large truck. As he and Raz tried to climb into the bed of the truck, the Chinese driver would quickly pull the truck several feet away as he laughed. He kept

doing this until he finally tired of torturing Don and the other men who so desperately wanted to get back to the American line. It was now, summer 1953. Don came home September 3, 1953."



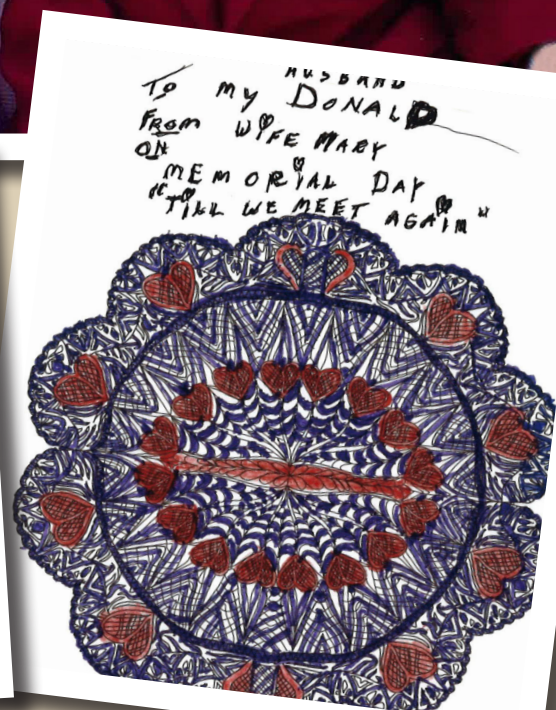
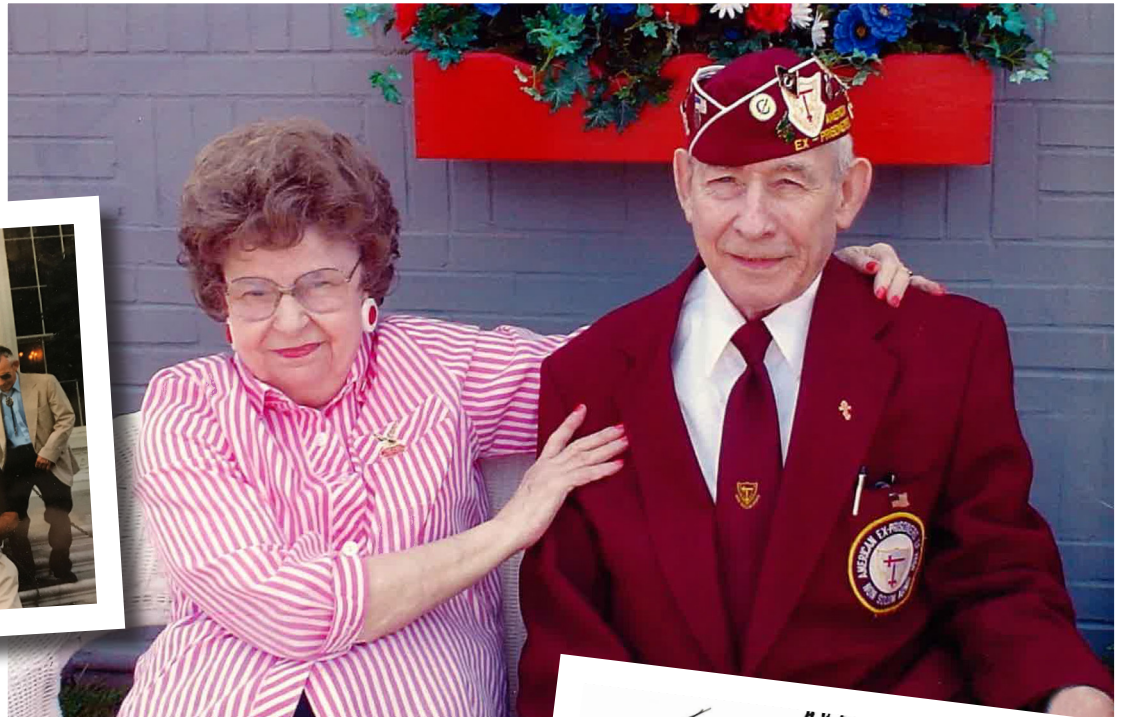
Mary continues, "Don came back to Wellsville to his family to recuperate. He was in bad shape and had to travel to the VA hospital in PA for treatment for over 18 months. He was honorably discharged July 31, 1954 as he was deemed permanently disabled. His injuries were such that he could not remain in the military. The Army medical personnel addressed his physical wounds, but back then no one acknowledged that there were emotional wounds and scars left upon these men."

Don was awarded the following medals: Combat Infantry Badge; Korean Service Medal with four Bronze Service Stars; United Nations Service Medal; and National Defense



Service Medal. He had served an additional four years, nine months and 11 days in the U.S. Army involved with the Korean War. Thus, his entire length of dedicated and honorable service combined to eight years, five months and 17 days!

"My name is Mary Katherine Mihalik. I was born in 1930 and had a brother, Joseph Mihalik, who was born blind. Joseph died last year (2016). I was working at a pottery in Wellsville and Don's cousin introduced us. Don had been briefly married before and had a son named Donald."



“Our first date was when he took me and five other girls from the pottery to lunch at a Wellsville restaurant. Don and I hit it off right away and began dating. We dated for a couple months and loved to dance the polka together. We decided to get married. We applied for our license at the Salem, OH Courthouse and were married in the Russian Orthodox Church in Steubenville, OH. Once married, Don announced that I would no longer work! We lived in Stratton, OH in a house my father had built in 1931, one year after my birth, and where I grew up. My father, William Mihalik, lived with us as my mother, Katherine Mihalik, was now deceased. Soon, our first son, Douglas Malcolm William Cunningham, was born. Our second son, Kenneth Michael Cunningham was born in 1956.”

“We had been married for only a few years, when Don suffered a stroke. He was taken to the VA Hospital in PA and treated. The doctors said the stroke was a result of brain injury incurred by the constant beatings Don had suffered as a POW. Don had now lost the use of his right arm and hand. His arm hung limp at his side. His right leg was left weakened and he suffered dysphasia. He understood all that was said to him and knew what he wanted to say back, but his speech was such that it was very difficult to understand what he said most of the time. He also had a heart problem. None of these afflictions ever went away and Don and I dealt with them for the remainder of his life. The doctor said Don would die within one year of having this stroke, but Don fooled them and lived another 54 years. After almost a year in the VA hospital, Don came home. He worked for the Village of Stratton and continued to do so for the next 20 years. Don drove a modified car as he wanted to remain independent at all times. In spite of his disabilities, Don and I were able to make a good, happy life for our family. Our love and commitment for one another was so very strong.”

“Don had frequent nightmares when he came home and would yell in his sleep or wake up crying. Sometimes I’d wake up and find him gone from our bed. I’d find him in the living room sitting in total darkness. When I’d approach him and ask what was wrong, he said only one word, ‘Korea.’” We did go to Wheeling to seek help from a counselor and that helped a little. Don had been protestant when we married, but he now belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church and practiced his religion faithfully. I truly feel that his faith is what helped Don to deal with the pain and horror



Mary Katherine Mihalik Cunningham



of what he had incurred in that POW Camp. He always yelled upstairs to our boys that it was, 'Time to go to church!' If there was ever a shortage of altar boys, Don would fill in. He was so proud of our son, Doug, who read the epistle in church. Don became a faithful church-goer and remained so the rest of his life."

"We loved to make cabbage rolls together. Don would boil the cabbage leaves stirring the pot with a spoon in his left hand while I made the filling. We'd make the cabbage rolls and enjoy eating them as a family. We liked to take trips back to the St. Mary's, WV area to visit Don's family and friends. We also took trips to Parkersburg and Morgantown, WV."

When asked what kind of man Don had been, Mary reflects, "He had a jovial laugh and a kind heart. He was very patriotic and belonged to the American Legion and VFW. We always attended the Village of Stratton Memorial Day and Veterans Day ceremonies. Don's faith was an integral part of his being. He loved children and was a happy person. He loved to polka! His love for the Village of Stratton knew no bounds. He was involved with village meetings and decisions about the village all his life."

"We loved to make preparations for Christmas and Easter holidays for our boys. We raised 2 pigs each year and butchered them in November so we'd have hams for Christmas and the winter and into spring. On Christmas Eve, we put the boys to bed early in the back of the house. The Christmas tree was already up and the train was set up on its track. We needed to get the gifts for under the tree. Because our boys were very inquisitive (aren't all children?), we had placed the wrapped gifts at a neighbor's house for safe keeping. The neighbor's teenage son would rap on the basement door late Christmas Eve. I'd go to the door and say, 'Freddie is that you?' To which Freddie would reply, 'No, Ho, Ho, Ho - it's Santa Claus.' In case one of the boys would awaken, Freddie was dressed in a very realistic Santa Claus suit, borrowed from the Village of Stratton. He would come in and help us set up the toys and presents for the boys' Christmas. Several years later, my son, Kenny, returned the favor for Freddie and did the same thing on Christmas Eve for Freddie's children. He also wore the Village of Stratton Santa Claus suit. Who was Freddie? He is our very own Fred Abdalla, Sheriff of Jefferson County! Freddie always called Don, 'Sarge.'"



Don at the Korean War Memorial

“Easter was a special celebration. Each family had one special large, beautiful Easter basket that we kept for years. The basket represented the Praise and Glory of God. On Easter, the basket was filled with ham, kielbasa, bacon, ceroc (a ball of specially made cheese), and one large candle nestled in the middle. The basket was also filled with colored eggs – mostly red – to represent the blood of Christ. We went to church from 11:30 p.m. until midnight as this was the time Jesus went to the grave. The steps to the church were lined with baskets that had lit candles in each one. It was quite beautiful and moving. We went back to church from 2:00 a.m. until 3:00 a.m. as this is the time Jesus arose from the grave. Then we went home and slept in on Easter morning. Separate small baskets of candy and maybe a small toy were prepared for each child and hidden for them to find when they woke up on Easter morning.”

Mary suffered a brain tumor when her sons were teenagers around 1970. The tumor was near the pituitary gland and its removal resulted in Mary developing severe scoliosis. She explains, “Many people might have given up. But Don and I were a team, and we used our faith in God and love for each other to continue to live a wonderful and rewarding life.”

When asked what Don would say to a young person considering joining the military, Mary doesn't hesitate one bit, "Join! Don would say for the young person to join and serve their country. Don loved being in the military. If he hadn't suffered his disabilities resulting from the beatings he incurred at the North Korean POW Camp, he would have made the military his career."



The Korean War Veterans Memorial is located near the Lincoln Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. It was dedicated on July 27, 1995. Soon after that dedication, Don's daughter-in-law, Christine, took Don and Mary to visit the Memorial. Mary recalls, "The war scenes depicted on the Mural Wall made Don cry. There were signs everywhere saying not to touch the 19 stainless steel statues. But I told Don, 'If you want to touch these statues, you go right ahead because you've earned the right to do so.' And Don stopped and touched each and every statue with his left hand - reading the inscriptions and crying at each one.

Don took a handful of coins and threw them into the Pool of Remembrance, a shallow pool 30 feet in diameter lined with black granite. Inscriptions listed the numbers killed in Korea, wounded, missing in action, and held as prisoners of war, and a nearby plaque stated: "Our nation honors her sons and daughters who answered the call to defend a country they never knew and a people they never met."

"I feel it did Don a lot of good to see the Korean War Veterans Memorial to realize that America was honoring his sacrifice and the sacrifice of all the others. That our country had erected a memorial so that their efforts would never be forgotten. They call the Korean War 'The Forgotten War.' But we can never forget what those men went through in Korea for their country in an attempt to stop communism."

Don suffered a major stroke in 2007. Mary recalls, "He was taken from one hospital to another by ambulance, but nothing could be done. We were taken to a side room and I overheard a nurse say to my son, 'What does she know?' I knew from that statement that Don was going to die. He died a short time later. He was 78 years old. We buried him at Highland Hills Cemetery as he was given a free burial plot in this newly developed cemetery since he was a Veteran. Don was buried with full military honors. I will be buried beside him someday."

Don and Mary have a legacy of two boys, two grandchildren and currently, four great grandchildren. Mary explains, "Doug and his wife, Christine, live in Stratton in the same house my father built so many years ago. Doug is retired from the W. H. Sammis Power Plant where he worked as a Planner. His wife, Christine, works part time at Lowes. They have a daughter, Jaime Cunningham



Memorial Day Celebration in Stratton, Ohio.



