

## Life of Promise Ends in Sacrifice

How do we honor a life of promise cut short by sacrifice?

Ernest Cottingham graduated from Dillon High School in 1937 and enrolled in Clemson College, where he studied agricultural engineering. An active student, Ernest served as a cadet lieutenant, was a member of Alpha Zeta, ASAE, the Wesley Foundation and the YMCA Council. Despite his extracurricular involvement, Ernest made academics his priority and following his 1941 graduation was awarded a fellowship at Iowa State University. But the world and the United States were facing a crisis and Ernest, like so many of the young men of his generation, put his personal plans on hold. When Ernest entered military service, the president of Iowa State University wrote to express his regret, stating that the fellowship would be open to him as soon as he was released from the Army. It was an offer that would go unredeemed.



The same disciplines that made Ernest Cottingham an accomplished student helped earn him the respect of the men in his platoon. Ernest was one of twenty-six South Carolina reserve officers assigned to the 32<sup>nd</sup> 'Red Arrow' Infantry Division. The 32<sup>nd</sup> was historically composed of Michigan and Wisconsin National Guard units according to Dr. Joe Camp. In the face of the deteriorating international situation, the 32<sup>nd</sup> was called to federal service in late 1940 and sent to Camp Livingston, Louisiana. Camp explains that Livingston fell under the same area command that had administrative oversight of college and university ROTC programs in the South. After Pearl Harbor, the rush to strengthen and deploy the 32<sup>nd</sup> meant that the division received priority assignments for reserve officer call-ups. "Inevitably," writes Camp, "all four South Carolina cadet programs—Clemson, Citadel, Wofford, and Presbyterian—were represented in the assignments that followed."

Although the division was initially earmarked for European deployment, the rapid advance of Japanese forces in the South Pacific altered War Department plans. Ernest and his comrades soon found themselves on Pacific waters, heading west to Australia.

General Douglas MacArthur had repeatedly requested additional troops with which to initiate an offensive campaign and had been pointedly told he would have to make do with the troops on hand. MacArthur believed the key to the defense of Australia was the control of New Guinea, which the Japanese had invaded and from which they planned to launch air strikes. In late September 1942, MacArthur ordered elements of the 32<sup>nd</sup> to Papua, New Guinea to support Australian troops already locked in bitter fighting along the Kokoda Trail. The 32<sup>nd</sup> had by this time been in Australia for four months, but its training had been focused on defending against a potential Japanese invasion, not attacking through the jungles. Even so, MacArthur committed the 32<sup>nd</sup>, judging it combat-ready. The 'Red Arrow' Division would become part of the opening ground offensive against Japanese troops in the Southwest Pacific Area.

Once deployed into the combat zone, the 32<sup>nd</sup> was confronted with the realities of jungle warfare—realities for which the division was ill-trained, ill-equipped and ill-prepared. Logistical challenges added to the division's difficulties. In particular, first battalion of the 126<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, to which Ernest Cottingham was assigned, endured a lengthy force march over swampy, uncharted terrain to join up with a sister regiment for an attack on Buna. The regiment arrived, writes Camp, "tired—in the midst of planning for the next day's attack—the first of the campaign—to which they were committed with little time for rest or recovery."



Coordination problems with the Army Air Corps plagued the November 21<sup>st</sup> attack with friendly fire casualties and caused a delay in the jump-off until late afternoon. Equipped only with small arms and grenades, Lieutenant Cottingham's platoon attacked against well-concealed, fortified enemy positions. Cottingham was killed, leading his platoon from the front.

Three months after his death at Buna, his comrade, Dennis Mahaffey, wrote in a letter to Ernest's family:

*"Pee Wee," we all knew him as that, was killed instantly by a sniper's bullet. He never knew what hit him. If he had to go I am so glad that he was spared the suffering and heartache that was the experience of some. After seeing this first hand no one can imagine the horrible suffering that some of my friends are going through. To me it is now such a relief to know that his death was instant and painless... All of his men and friends, they are many, outside this company feel the same toward him that I do. To some we can't mention his name without their breaking. To my way of thinking this is one of the greatest tributes that can be paid to him.*

Cottingham's battalion commander called the young lieutenant "a brave and courageous officer, well liked and admired both by the officers over him and also by the men who served under him, which to an officer means a great deal more."

John Ernest Cottingham, Jr. is buried at the Manila American Military Cemetery, Fort Bonifacio, Manila, Philippines. A monument was also placed in his family's plot at St. Paul's United Methodist Church Cemetery in Little Rock, SC. Cottingham was awarded the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart. More importantly, his actions helped, in Camp's words, 'defeat the heretofore "invincible" Japanese for the first time on land. The many lessons learned [at Buna] helped save the lives of others in the jungle campaigns yet to come.'

How do we honor a life cut short? Through grateful remembrance.

