

GLENN HAYWARD COSNER

PRIVATE FIRST CLASS
U.S. ARMY

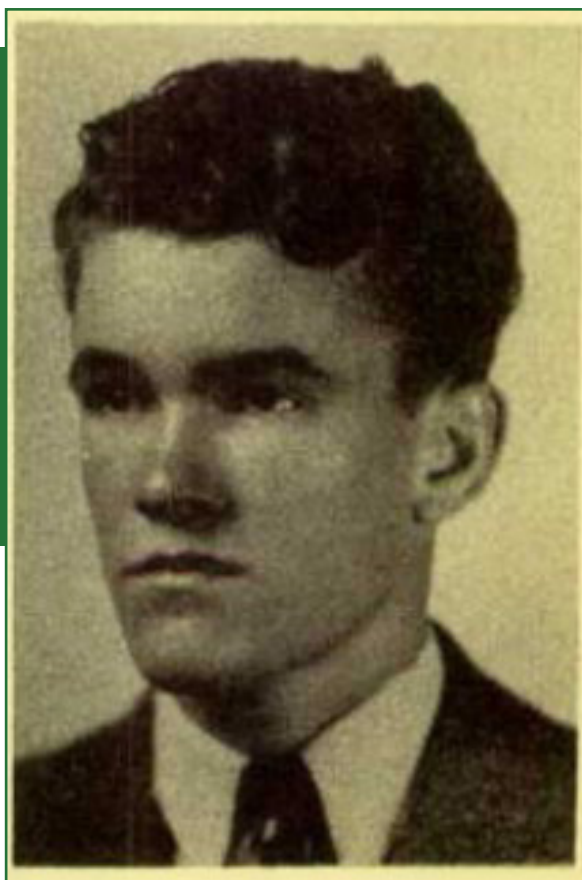
WORLD WAR II
1922 - 1945

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Glenn Cosner's senior portrait at Fairview High School, Marion County, 1941.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Cosner on the Fairview High basketball team only a year before being drafted, first row, third from left.



“Hitler made only one big mistake when he built his Atlantic Wall. He forgot to put a roof on it,” said the late historian Stephen E. Ambrose in his famous account of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, *Band of Brothers*. Though the book and subsequent HBO series have become canonical works of World War II history and popular memory, its narrative focuses only on the actions of Company E (“Easy”). The rest of the 506th is now often referenced as a backdrop for Easy’s exploits, but all the men of this gallant regiment faced danger—and death—as bravely as any Hollywood depiction. One such man was Glenn Cosner of West Virginia.

Glenn Hayward Cosner was born on October 22, 1922, in Barbour County, West Virginia, to Goldie Ethel (Marsh) Cosner and Leslie Ray Cosner. Many official documents spell his first name with a single “n,” but Glenn seems to have preferred two. He and his younger brother Keith were the middle of six siblings. Glenn’s father Leslie was a schoolteacher in his early professional life. But after the first Cosner child was born, Leslie sought work in the coal industry, likely for better pay. He held various technical and leadership positions for the rest of his working life.

The Great Depression probably motivated the Cosner family’s move to Marion County in the vicinity of Paw Paw and Grant Town. With the move, Leslie was able to find work as a foreman in the coal mines. While employed at Koppers Coal Company, Leslie worked his way up to section boss. Although the Cosner family lived in company housing, they managed to purchase and own a radio—a link to the rapidly changing and globalizing world around them.

Glenn attended Fairview High School from 1937 to 1941, pursuing a smorgasbord of extracurricular activities: basketball, baseball, varsity club, glee club, and his school’s annual play. Most of the clubs he was involved in required fees, which his family was able to provide. His brother Keith was also athletic, sometimes playing on the same sports team as the older Glenn.

Only a few months after Glenn graduated from high school, the United States was pulled into the vortex of World War II by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Preparations for the coming conflict ramped up to a fever pitch. While plenty of young men volunteered for service, others took work in factories expanding their job offerings in war-related manufacturing work.

Glenn took work as a laborer with the United States Aluminum Company in Fairfield, Connecticut. He must have seen this as temporary work, since his permanent address was still listed as Marion County. He filled out his draft card in Connecticut on June 30, 1942, an odd delay for someone who had turned 18 in 1940—the same year the draft became mandatory. Perhaps Glenn’s temporary relocation to Connecticut required registering with the new draft board, even though one’s home address was the determining factor for when and where an individual was selected.

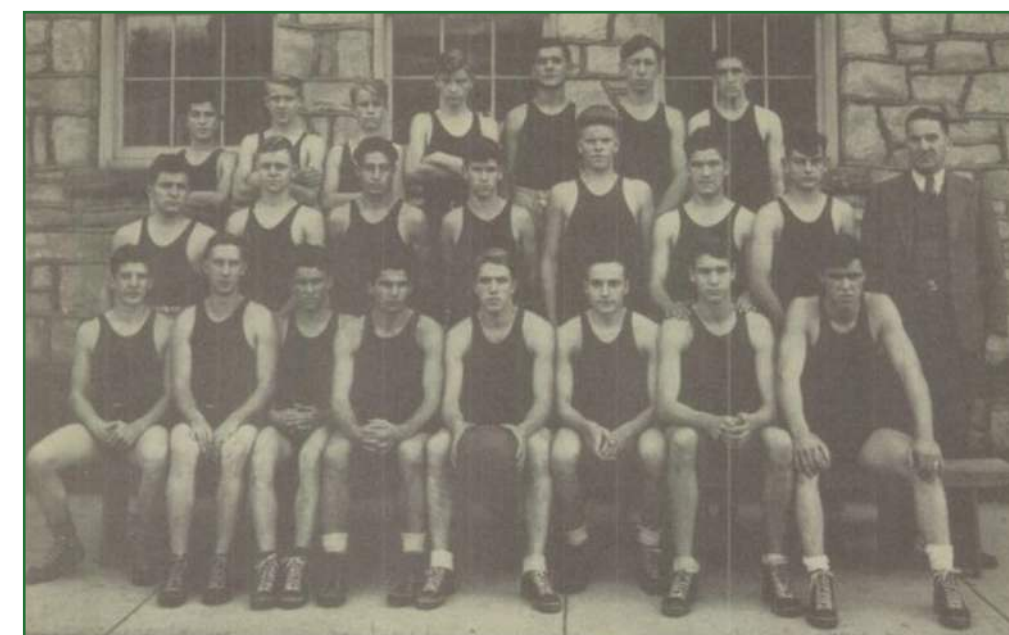
President Franklin Roosevelt mandated that no more volunteers would be accepted into military service after December 5, 1942. Thousands of local Selective Service boards across the country determined who was called into service and when. This helped standardize military induction procedures, facilitated a more dependable flow of manpower, and stabilized American workplaces that needed to have reliable employee turnout to lubricate the machinery of war manufacturing. It also resulted in the selection of Glenn Cosner three weeks later on December 28, 1942.

After basic Army training Glenn volunteered to join as a paratrooper, a more elite cadre of infantry servicemen. Many paratroopers may have started out as draftees, just like Cosner, but the only way to join the airborne was to volunteer and qualify. Some did it for the extra pay. Most did it because of the challenge and the sense of brotherhood and solidarity that emerged from more rigorous training and operations.

Glenn was sent to Camp Toccoa in Georgia, known for its strenuous regimen. The training there was basic conditioning and toughening—they would learn to jump later. Toccoa was meant to weed out the weaker recruits, and one mechanism used was nearby “Currahee.” A mountain whose name was derived from a Cherokee word meaning “stands alone,” the slopes of Currahee were employed for brutal training runs. The meaning was clear for new recruits: they might fight as a unit, but every paratrooper jumps from his plane and lands alone.

Following completion of his training, Glenn was assigned to Company I (“Item Company”) of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR). In November 1943, the 506th PIR was ordered to Fort Benning (now Fort Moore) in Georgia. Ft. Benning had been the site of specific paratrooper test training since July 1940, and by 1941 the staff had created the Provisional Parachute Group to guide curriculum, instruction, and development of airborne procedures. These teaching structures were developed extremely rapidly, as the idea of jumping out of planes and into combat had only been tested within the previous two years. No American troops made an actual combat jump until 1942.

Despite the relative novelty, the PIR’s commanding officers all had experience with the job, providing skilled guidance for the vital role paratroopers would play in the war. At Fort Benning, paratroopers learned to pack their chutes, jump, and just as importantly, how to survive each jump—even when bullets were flying.



GLENN HAYWARD COSNER

When they finished their training, the soldiers of the 506th PIR moved to Camp Mackall in North Carolina. In retrospect, this may have been the most beneficial part of Glenn's training since it focused on night jumps—a skill that he and his comrades would later use during the D-Day invasion. Night drops were considered the safest way to deploy paratroopers, shielding them from enemy fire before the advent of night vision and other detection systems. After the extensive training at Camp Mackall, the 506th PIR moved 40 miles to Fort Bragg (now Fort Liberty) to drill their accumulated skills for two more months. Finally, Glenn and his comrades were staged at Camp Shanks in New York before shipping to Liverpool, England.

Planning for a multi-nation Allied invasion tagged “Operation Overlord” along the German-occupied coast of France began in November 1943. Paratrooper units were expected to provide support to more than 150,000 troops from 12 Allied nations scheduled to land on five separate beaches in June 1944. When heavy cloud cover prevented a June 5 assault, Supreme Allied Commander Dwight Eisenhower launched the attack during a break in the weather the following day.

Led by their commander, Col. Robert F. Sink, the “Currahees” first official drop would not begin until June 6, 1944, during the initial events of D-Day. Sink himself had been a product of Fort Benning jump training and had his troops well-prepped for Operation Overlord, where they committed to securing exits from Utah Beach. The 506th would drop behind German shore defenses, sowing confusion to prevent German counterattacks from throwing the Allied amphibious landings back into the sea.

Continued poor weather and enemy antiaircraft fire forced complications and improvisations on the paratroopers' plans. Only nine out of the 81 planes successfully dropped men above the designated landing zones. Scattered throughout the confusing French countryside in the dark, Glenn and the other troopers that successfully dropped had to regroup and find their officers. They fought in smaller groups throughout D-Day, slowly collecting together in greater numbers and moving to their objectives when found. Their courage and determination paid off, and the D-Day landings successfully put Allied troops ashore in France for the first time since its fall to Nazi Germany in 1940.

The men of the 506th continued fighting long after D-Day. On July 10, 1944, the 506th PIR was finally relieved for recuperation in England. This rest and relaxation did not last long thanks to Operation Market Garden, an offensive conceived to shortcut the bloody push into Germany via the Lower Rhine (Nederrijn) River. Emboldened by the airborne successes of D-Day, Allied planners envisioned a huge airborne drop seizing bridgeheads in key Rhine towns until Allied ground armies could advance and link up.

On September 17, 1944, the American 101st Airborne Division and English 1st Airborne Division dropped into the Netherlands in broad daylight. The



An American halftrack (right) passes a disabled German tank on the outskirts near Foy on January 11, 1945, two days before Cosner was killed in the area. *Army Signal Corps photo, National Archives*

506th was to seize roads and bridges at Eindhoven, cutting German lines of communication. This allowed the Allies to secure 15 miles of Highway 69 (later called Hell's Highway) to prepare a route into Germany itself. Operation Market Garden was a military fiasco, resulting in over one quarter of the British and American paratroopers dropped to be killed, wounded, or captured. Luckily, the 506th at Eindhoven escaped the worst of it, though an attack by German bombers killed over 1,000 civilians in the town. Glenn and his comrades helped rescue civilians throughout the night of September 19.

The men of the 506th fought from town to town in Belgium and the Netherlands from September to November 1944, a grinding campaign that required constant vigilance and fortitude. Glenn and his own “band of brothers” must have wondered how much more they could take. The fighting quieted down in December, but the Allies would soon learn this was merely the calm before another storm. The 506th would plant its flag in the snow alongside the rest of the 101st Airborne Division at a place soon to be famous in military history: Bastogne.

In the early morning of December 16, 1944, while soldiers of the 506th were moving into Belgium, Germany launched a huge offensive that caught Allied commanders completely off guard. The front line crumbled near the Ardennes Forest, through which Germans had launched their concealed attack. American generals quickly recognized that the small village of Bastogne was crucial to holding the Germans back, as it was a key road juncture that would facilitate a German breakout from the Ardennes. In bitter cold and deep snow, the 101st Airborne dug in and defended Bastogne—completely cut off from supplies and reinforcements. Before the Germans tightened the noose,

the 506th quick-marched from the nearby village of Champs to reinforce the northern perimeter of Bastogne.

Item Company and the rest of 506th PIR's second battalion (2/506th) first went into reserve in the nearby town of Luzery on December 19. The next day, they moved into a holding position between Bastogne and Noville, the area which the 101st was using to block German advances. Heavy fighting raged around Noville. On December 21, the enemy attacked 2/506th in earnest, though they held their positions doggedly. The soldiers made their stand in freezing temperatures until New Year's as the rest of the 101st pulled back to a smaller defensive perimeter, leaving the northern villages of Noville and Foy to the enemy.

By early January, however, Allied lines had stabilized, and the German offensive had been held at bay. It was time for the 101st “Screaming Eagles” to retake Noville and Foy. For three days, Glenn and the 506th made a diversionary attack on the western side of Foy in the thick, snowy forest. On the morning of January 13, Easy Company attacked the southern edge of Foy at 9:00 a.m. Item Company stepped in to reinforce at 10:15, moving to Easy's left flank to join dangerous house-to-house firefights. The two companies were well inside the town by 11:00 a.m., locked in battle with snipers and machine gun nests for the next five hours.

Easy and Item cleared the town by 4:30 p.m., taking 69 prisoners. They would repulse a German counterattack the next day, but that no longer concerned Glenn Cosner. Sometime during the close-range battle in Foy's rubble-strewn streets, Glenn had been hit by enemy gunfire and killed in action.

Glenn Cosner was buried in a European cemetery until 1948. After the war ended, his remains were repatriated and interred in Grafton National Cemetery in Taylor County, West Virginia. A memorial in Foy bears his name, as one of the fallen Screaming Eagles who liberated the small Belgian town from Nazi oppression.



SOURCES FULL BIBLIOGRAPHY TO BE INCLUDED IN FINAL VERSION

SOURCES

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Full bibliographies will be included in the final draft of each biography, available later in the summer of 2024.

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Grant Program of the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. All biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's first National Cemeteries—founded shortly after the Civil War—the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. Since the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, Grafton High School, and University High School.

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