Ordeal on the Ice

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On Saturday, February 8, 1936, Boatswain’s Mate Earl Cunningham interrupted his day off to come to the aid of fishermen Claude Beardsley and Beardsley’s son-in-law, Clayton Brown, after the ice they were fishing from broke loose and moved out into a Lake Michigan blizzard. Little did Cunningham know that he would lose his life in the rescue. Cunningham’s death was the only loss of personnel from the Charlevoix, Michigan station in over 100 years.

Earl Cunningham was born December 16, 1895, in Kinde, Huron County, Michigan. He was one of five children born to George and Annie Cunningham. He spent his childhood on the family farm in Afton, Michigan.

When war in Europe erupted, Cunningham enlisted on June 24, 1918 as a private in the American Expeditionary Forces of the United States Army, seeing action in France and Germany. He was mustered out of the service as a corporal in August 1919 and returned to Afton to work at the Campbell Stone Company, eventually learning to operate the Vulcan locomotive and the steam shovel for the company. After marrying his sweetheart, Miss Helen Teatro, in 1921, Cunningham settled into married life. The couple’s family began in 1925 with their first son, Richard, followed by two more boys, Hubert and Wayne, born in 1929 and 1930 respectively.

While he enjoyed his work in the quarry, Cunningham worried about the dangers involved in working with steam and stone. In addition, he had a wife and a young son to think about and needed to find a “safer”
profession. So the 5'11", 165-pound war veteran joined the United States Coast Guard in July 1928 as a surfman, earning about $60 per month. His first of two assignments was at the Hammond Bay station, near Ocqueoc, Michigan, on Lake Huron. There the children attended the Coast Guard School in the Presque Isle County school system and Helen kept house. The remote community was made up entirely of Coast Guard families. Cunningham continued his education, earning certificates along the way, the last one only a day before his death.

In September 1935 Cunningham was assigned to the United States Coast Guard Station at Charlevoix, Michigan, located about 79 miles away from Hammond Bay on Lake Michigan. He arrived on September 22nd to find a house and get acquainted with his new surroundings. After learning that a Charlevoix station member was being assigned to Hammond Bay, he quickly switched houses with the man and solved the housing problem for both of them. While he described Charlevoix as "different" in a letter to Helen and the boys, he promised them they would enjoy the vast differences in community life, if only for a short time.

Saturday, February 8, 1936 began with a strong easterly wind and temperatures in the teens for fishing partners Cleo LaPeer and son Lloyd, Eugene Bearss, Claude Beardsley and his son-in-law, Clayton Brown,
as they made their way onto the ice near South Point. By early afternoon the weather had turned deadly as the ice they stood on broke loose when a southerly wind came up. Soon United States Coast Guard Surfman William Woods spotted their predicament from the Charlevoix station's lookout tower and the push was on to rescue the stranded anglers.

Acting Captain George Kelderhouse assembled his men and rushed with a small skiff to South Point. Once there, Surfman Quinton Duhn started out onto the ice with the rescue craft and into the water. Soon he was able to reach the flow and secure Bearss and LaPeer and his son, leaving Beardsley and Brown behind for the next attempt. Boatswain's Mate Earl Cunningham volunteered to make his way to the remaining two men, even though he was off duty at the time. Unfortunately, blinding snowfall and rising waves forced Cunningham, Beardsley and Brown to forfeit to the wind, letting their oars rest in the boat as they awaited rescue.

This photograph, showing Helen and Earl Cunningham with sons Wayne, Richard and Hubert, was taken several years before the tragic events of February 8, 1936. The boys ranged from four to ten years old when their father died. Photo courtesy of the Joint Archives of Holland, Michigan.
While the men drifted, Captain Kelderhouse and the other members of his crew rushed back to the station to retrieve a small, 150-pound motorized dinghy. Soon they were rushing back to South Point with the new rescue craft on a horse-drawn sleigh, towing it across rough ice to open water. As they proceeded the first sled broke and another had to be located. With a new sled, they once again attempted to reach open water, but crashed through the weak ice up to their waists. Finally they reached open water and launched the small open boat and searched throughout the night, but to no avail as the missing men had steadily drifted to the north in the subzero temperatures and blinding snow.

When the searchers returned at 5:30 A.M. on Sunday, their clothing was frozen. They found that the channel was still blocked and getting worse with the northwesterly wind blowing at force 5. While Kelderhouse purchased dynamite to clear the channel and attempt a launch of the eight-ton motor lifeboat Big Bertha, the crew returned the ice-coated dinghy to the station by sleigh. Surfman Woods was taken to the hospital with frozen feet.

With the assistance of crew members and local citizens, the motor lifeboat and its crew made it to open water and spent the rest of the day looking for the lost trio, but again, they could find no sign of life. The missing men drifted farther up the lake, growing colder and less hopeful for rescue. While the local crew desperately searched for the lost trio, assistance from the Sault Sainte Marie Coast Guard Station steamed toward Charlevoix in the form of a cutter and two airplanes, one from the Detroit News and the other from the Coast Guard, but no one could find the missing men.

Around 6:00 P.M. on Sunday, Cunningham succumbed to the cold and died in Brown's arms. Conversation between Beardsley and Brown now turned to their families as they struggled to keep their blood flowing by pacing around the icebound boat. At 10:00 P.M., after moving toward the shore with Brown, Beardsley fell waist deep into the lake and was retrieved with Brown's pike pole. Soon after that Beardsley lay down on the ice and died. Knowing that he would also perish if he did not reach shore soon, Brown steadily, sometimes crawling, moved toward Good Hart, Michigan, almost nine miles away. By Monday afternoon Native Americans on the shore had sighted Brown and went to rescue the delirious and incoherent man. Authorities
A grisly scene greeted the rescuers when they found the bodies of fisherman Claude Beardsley and Boatswain's Mate Earl Cunningham on the ice of Lake Michigan on February 8, 1936. Cunningham, who volunteered to rescue the stranded fishing buddies, died of exposure in the icebound boat. Photo courtesy of the Joint Archives of Holland, Michigan.

and friends learned of his survival by telephone and rushed by ambulance to Good Hart. There they listened to his ordeal and learned of his companions' deaths.

Now the task of recovering the bodies of Cunningham and Beardsley began. After a Coast Guard chartered search plane spotted the bodies and the skiff on Tuesday, the Charlevoix crew set out to retrieve them, but poor visibility and a force 4 wind turned them back. The next day fellow Coast Guardsmen and local Native Americans returned to the ice, pulling a boat the nine miles out onto the ice. Later that day, after eight hours on the ice, they returned with the two bodies. "Two Dead, Third Survives Floe Ordeal" read the headline in the Charlevoix Courier, February 12, 1936, as United States Congressman John Lesinski read "A Tribute to Heroism" in honor of Earl Cunningham on the floor of the House of Representatives in Washington, D.C.

So marked the end of an event still unmatched in the people of Charlevoix's long and tenacious relationship with Lake Michigan. Later
that week, Cunningham was laid to rest at Silver Lake Cemetery in Wolverine, near Afton, and Beardsley at Charlevoix’s Brookside Cemetery, while Brown lay recovering from frostbitten feet. Both men left grieving families and a shocked community that marked this as the worst ice tragedy in the history of the village.

In late March, Brown lost both of his feet to gangrene, brought on by cold and the bruises from beating them with an ax handle to keep the blood flowing. According to the newspaper, members of the U.S. Coast Guard received commendations for their “highest type of courage,” a phrase that definitely described Cunningham’s actions that day. A chapter about this event, entitled “Greater Love Hath No Man,” was also published in a 1937 book by Karl Baarslag titled *Coast Guard to the Rescue*, and in August 1940 a plaque to all who had perished with him in the history of the United States Coast Guard was dedicated in Grand Haven, Michigan.

Postscript: After writing an article for the *Charlevoix Courier* in February 2000 about this incident, I became curious about what had happened to Helen and the three boys, then ages four, six, and ten. I knew from the newspapers that she had returned to Afton with the boys, but nothing more. After getting nowhere with the National Personnel Records Center, I turned to the internet for help in finding Cunningham’s three boys, and possibly more about their father. There I discovered that all three had passed away, the last in 2000.

So I turned to Earl’s grandsons. I wrote letters to men with matching first names of the boys, explaining my interest in their grandfather. After many weeks of waiting, I received a phone call from Penny Helmer of Hudsonville, Michigan, granddaughter of Earl Cunningham and daughter of Wayne, saying that her mother had received my letter and that she, Penny, wanted to visit me in Holland.

Upon her arrival she opened a box containing a family scrapbook and the medals received by Earl Cunningham during his service in the Coast Guard. It was there that I discovered that he had been nominated for a Carnegie Hero Fund Commission medal, but turned down because of his employment with the service at the time. I also discovered Coast Guardsman Cunningham’s coveted Gold Life Saving Medal and other service awards, including a letter from the U.S. Treasury Department
to Helen awarding her late husband the Gold Life Saving Medal “in recognition of the heroic daring displayed by him in attempting to rescue two men from drowning on February 8, 1936.”

Later that week I alerted the U.S. Coast Guard Historian’s Office of my find and the omission of Boatswain’s Mate Earl Cunningham from the official list of medal recipients posted on their website. They quickly acknowledged the omission and have since added his name to this honored list of heroes.