Ordeal on the Ice

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U.S. Coast Guardsmen and other Charlevoix-area residents perform the grisly task of retrieving the bodies of Guardsman Earl Cunningham and ice fisher Claude Beardsley. For his action, Cunningham was awarded posthumously this Gold Lifesaving Medal.
On February 8, 1936, Boatswain’s Mate Earl Cunningham interrupted his day off to come to the aid of two fishermen stranded on an ice floe that starting moving out into a Lake Michigan blizzard. The rescue ended tragically, leaving Cunningham the only U.S. Coast Guard service person from the Charlevoix station ever to perish in the line of duty.
After writing an article for the Charlevoix Courier in February 2000 about this incident, I became curious about what had happened to Cunningham’s wife, Helen, and their three boys, who were four, six, and ten at the time of the tragedy. I knew from the newspapers that she moved to Afton with the boys, but nothing more. I discovered that all three boys had passed away, the last in 2000. So I turned to Earl’s grandsons. I sent letters to men with first names that matched the boys’ names and explained my interest in their grandfather. After many weeks of waiting, I received a phone call from Penny Helmer of Hudsonville, the daughter of Cunningham’s middle son, Hubert.

Penny visited me in Holland and brought with her a box containing a family scrapbook and her grandfather’s personal mementoes. The box held the coveted Gold Lifesaving Medal awarded posthumously to Cunningham, along with a letter from the U.S. Treasury Department to Helen Cunningham stating that the medal was awarded “in recognition of the heroic daring displayed by him in attempting to rescue two men from drowning on February 8, 1936.” I also discovered that Cunningham had been nominated for a Carnegie Hero Fund Commission medal, but had been turned down because only civilians were eligible to receive the award.

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

Cunningham enlisted as a private in the U.S. Army on June 24, 1918, and saw action in France and Germany. When mustered out in August 1919 with the rank of corporal, Cunningham returned to Afton to work at the Campbell Stone Company. He learned to operate the company’s Vulcan locomotive and the steam shovel. The former veteran also wed his sweetheart, Helen Teatro, in 1921. The couple welcomed a son, Richard, into their lives in 1925. Two more sons, Hubert and Wayne, were born in 1929 and 1930.

While he enjoyed his work in the quarry, Cunningham worried about the dangers of working with steam and stone. The 5-foot, 11-inch, 165-pound Cunningham looked for another job and finally joined the U.S. Coast Guard in July 1928. He became a surfman, earning about sixty dollars per month. The

Born in Huron County, twenty-two-year-old Earl Cunningham (seated) joined the U.S. Army in June 1918. He saw action in Europe, returning home and mustering out of federal service in August 1919 with the rank of corporal.
first of his two assignments was at the Hammond Bay station, near Ocqueoc, on Lake Huron. As the Cunningham children grew they were enrolled in the Coast Guard School of the Presque Isle County Schools system. Helen became a homemaker in the remote community made up of Coast Guard families. Earl continued his education, earning certificates along the way.

In September 1935, Earl was reassigned to the Coast Guard Station at Charlevoix, about seventy-nine miles from Hammond Bay on Lake Michigan. He arrived on September 22 to find a house and get acquainted with his new surroundings. After learning that a Charlevoix station member was being assigned to Hammond Bay, Earl switched houses with him, solving the housing problem for both men. 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. The family arrived just in time for winter.

Saturday, February 8, 1936, began with a strong easterly wind and temperatures in the teens for fishing comrades Cleo LaPeer and son Lloyd, Eugene Bearss, Claude Beardsley and his son-in-law, Clayton Brown, as they made their way out onto the ice near South Point. By early afternoon the outing turned into a life-threatening situation when a southerly wind broke loose the ice platform they stood on. Surfman William Woods spotted their predicament from the station lookout tower and the push was on to rescue the stranded anglers.

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 and then slid the rescue craft into the water. He reached the floe and secured Bearss and LaPeer and his son, leaving Beardsley and Brown behind for another attempt. Even though off duty, Boatswain’s Mate Earl Cunningham volunteered to take a boat and rescue the other two men. After reaching Beardsley and Brown, a blinding snowfall and rising waves forced the three men to forfeit to the wind and let their oars rest in the boat while waiting for rescue.

While the stranded men drifted, Captain Kelderhouse and his crew rushed back to the station to retrieve a small, 1,000-pound motorized dingy. They hurried back to South Point with the new rescue craft on a horse-drawn sleigh,
While living near Ocqueoc on Lake Huron in 1931, the Cunningham family gathered for this photograph. Helen holds Wayne, while Earl holds Hubert; Richard stands between his parents.

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. They finally reached open water and launched the small, open boat. It had been more than nine hours since Cunningham and the others had become stranded.

The Coast Guardsmen searched throughout the night, but to no avail; the missing men had steadily drifted to the north in the sub-zero temperatures and blinding snow. When the near-frozen searchers returned at 5:50 a.m. on Sunday, they found that the channel was still blocked and getting worse with the northwesterly wind blowing at force 5 (about eighteen knots). While Kelderhouse purchased dynamite to clear the channel and attempt a launch of the 8-ton motor lifeboat Big Bertha, the ice-coated dinghy was retrieved and returned to the station by sleigh. One of the surfmen 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. Again, there was no sign of life. What the rescuers did not know was that the missing men were moving farther up the lake, growing colder and more desperate. Additional assistance, a boat and plane from the Sault Ste. Marie Coast Guard Station, as well as a boat from The Detroit News, was headed toward Charlevoix to aid in the rescue.

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 ice-bound boat. At 10:00 P.M., after moving toward the shore with Brown, Beardsley fell waist deep into the lake. He was retrieved, but soon after that Beardsley lay down on the ice and died. Knowing that he would

In mid-February 1936, Congressman John Lesinski Sr. offered this “Tribute to Heroism” in honor of Earl Cunningham from the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives.

A man facing danger fights it; threatened by a blow, wards off the blow. Forced to fight, even a physical coward turns brave and often invincible.

Quite a natural reaction dictated by the instinct of self-preservation, which we call the supreme law of nature.

But when one man sees another exposed to what appears an inescapable tragic death and risks his life to save that of his fellow man, then his motives are different. His heroism stands above any other example of human courage. It is like a divine torch lighting the dark and arduous path of our civilization.

Because of the unusual severity of winter, news reaches us about inspiring examples of human courage; news that warms the heart and soul of every sober-thinking man, bewildered and lost amidst universal mental chaos and misery.

There a number of human beings are marooned on an island, besieged by an impassable, treacherous expanse of ice floes. Planes and dirigibles battle gales to drop them food and medical aid. Nurses risk their lives to reach the ailing. Elsewhere an intrepid flier crashes and suffers fatal injuries on his errand of mercy. In a gale and blizzard raging over Lake Michigan a brave Coast Guard man sacrifices his life attempting to rescue two humble fishermen. Thus passes Earl Cunningham to join the great legion of unsung heroes.
Several years after the loss of their husband and father, Earl Cunningham’s family gathered for this picture.

Also perish if he did not reach shore soon, Brown steadily, sometimes crawling, moved toward Good Hart, almost nine miles away. By Monday afternoon Native Americans on the shore had sighted Brown and went to rescue the delirious man. A few hours later, authorities and friends learned of Brown’s survival and rushed to Good Hart.

The task of recovering the bodies of Cunningham and Beardsley began immediately. After a search plane spotted the bodies and the skiff on Tuesday, the Charlevoix crew set out to retrieve them. Poor visibility forced the crew to abandon their efforts. The following day, fellow Coast Guardsmen and local Native Americans returned, pulling a boat nine miles out onto the ice. After eight hours on the ice, they returned with the two bodies.

Later that week, Cunningham was laid to rest at Silver Lake Cemetery in Wolverine, near Afton. Beardsley was buried at Charlevoix’s Brookside Cemetery. 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 frostbite and the bruises inflicted as he beat them with an ax handle to keep the blood flowing.

According to a newspaper account, the members of Charlevoix’s U.S. Lifesaving Service received commendations for their “highest type of courage,” including Cunningham. After looking through Penny’s box and discovering the Gold Lifesaving Medal, I alerted the U.S. Coast Guard historian’s office of my find and the omission of Earl from the official list of medal awardees posted on their website. They quickly acknowledged the omission and have since added his name to this honored list of heroes.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds is director at the Joint Archives of Holland. Earl Cunningham’s story appeared in Coast Guard to the Rescue (1937), by Carl Boarslag and Danger (1970), by Ben East. A plaque in tribute to all who have perished in the history of the United States Coast Guard was dedicated in Grand Haven, Michigan, in August 1940. Copies of Earl’s archival documents and photographs of his medals have been placed at the Joint Archives of Holland at Hope College for preservation and public research.
In July 1898, Charlevoix had been given word that it would receive a United States Lifesaving Station. By October 2, 1900, a beautiful new station, which cost ten thousand dollars, was ready for service on the Pine River between Lake Michigan and Round Lake. Its first commander was Captain Frank Fountain. He had left the South Pier Lifesaving station at the entrance of Chicago harbor because, as he stated in the July 5, 1900, Charlevoix Sentinel newspaper, "I have three young children and they have got to be in a place where I can bring them up properly and send them to school. I figured it out that there was more grass, sand and fresh air at Charlevoix." The first rescue took place on August 29 with the rescue of a swimmer at the nearby beach.

By the next spring Captain Fountain had directed his men, between mandatory lifesaving drills, to landscape the grounds surrounding the station and adorn them with plants from the station to the beach. Fountain later tapped into a nearby city-owned steam line and built a greenhouse over it for growing plants for summer planting.

Before the tragic death of Earl Cunningham, the Charlevoix station was most remembered for the August 29, 1906, rescue of passengers aboard the Northern Michigan Transit Company steamer Illinois after it ran aground south of the channel during a race with a schooner. During the twelve-hour overnight rescue, more than five hundred passengers were brought ashore by breeches buoy and lifeboat in the face of high winds and waves. In February 1926 five fishermen narrowly escaped being stranded on an ice floe much like the 1936 incident.

In April 1918 the station commander received official orders to ship its big lifeboat to Atlantic City, New Jersey, to receive a gasoline engine. It was returned in October.

In 1915 the Lifesaving Service and the Revenue Cutter Service were combined to form the U.S. Coast Guard. In 1939 the United States Lighthouse division also was merged with the Coast Guard. That same year the Charlevoix crew welcomed a new building at the Pine River location as a new 30 by 52-foot building west of the boathouse was constructed to house boats, trucks and trailers. No further construction occurred until 1962. In 1948 the station received a new 38-foot motorized lifeboat to replace the one that had served well for many years and a new 40-foot utility boat in 1952. In November 1958 the station's crew was involved in the recovery operations of the two survivors and another thirty-three men lost on the limestone carrier Carl D. Bradley after it foundered during a killer storm.

In 1962 a new $300,000 lifeboat station and dock for the 180-foot Coast Guard Cutter Sundew was built farther east on the northern bank of the upper channel between Round Lake and Lake Charlevoix. This had been the site of the revenue cutters service depot since 1899. At that time the station housed thirty personnel responsible for law enforcement, boarding duty, aids to navigation maintenance, and primary search and rescue duties. Their rescue equipment then consisted of two 40-foot patrol boats, two 36-foot motor lifeboats and one 30-foot utility boat.

After the relocation of equipment and men in 1962, the original station was left to the elements until demolished. After the government officially abandoned the site the city regained ownership of the land as detailed in an 1899 agreement with the government. They only thing left to remind visitors of this station's existence today is the 1939-built garage-barracks building.

—Geoffrey D. Reynolds

100 YEARS of saving lives

Coast Guardsmen at Charlevoix practice an ice drill in 2001.