



History: 97th Engineer Battalion (Construction)

Documents from the extensive personal files of LT Brian Heverin,
who served in Germany and at Fort Riley, Kansas

Tragedy at Fort Tavannes: The Death of Gerald H. Dunnigan

Search and Rescue Operations,
21-26 April 1956

For an overview of Fort Tavannes, visit this or other search engine links:

<http://pierreswesternfront.punt.nl/content/2010/01/tunnel-de-tavannes-fort-de-tavannes>

Only from this newspaper account do we have the name of this unfortunate soldier.

<p>Thursday, April 26, 1956</p>	<p>Danville Bee, Danville, Va.</p>	
<p>U. S. Soldier Falls To Death On Old Fortress</p> <p>VERDUN, France (P)—American G-I Gerald H. Dunnigan was apparently killed instantly when he fell down an ancient shaft of the Verdun fortress, Army authorities said today.</p> <p>Dunnigan's body was found early this morning after a round-the-clock search since he disappeared Saturday. He had been</p>	<p>sightseeing with his wife who last saw him enter one of the entrances to Fort Tavannes.</p> <p>Dunnigan was exploring the maze of tunnels used by the French in the famed World War I battle of Verdun. The fortress dates back to 1745, however, and the underground network is still largely unmapped.</p> <p>Dunnigan fell down an 80 foot shaft, bounced off a collapsed tunnel roof and fell another 14 feet. Tons of dislodged dirt and timber covered his body.</p> <p>The body of the 22-year-old soldier will be sent to the home</p>	<p>of his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Edward M. Dunnigan of Wicomico, Va. His wife and two young daughters will fly home in a few days.</p> <p>TAX DEADLINE MAY 5</p> <p>RICHMOND, Va. (P)—Poll taxes must be paid on or before Saturday, May 5, by Virginians who plan to vote in this fall's general elections.</p> <p>State law requires any poll taxes due to be paid up six months before election day. The deadline falls on Sunday, May 6, this year. It has been ruled that May 5 is the last day for payment.</p>

HEADQUARTERS
97TH ENGINEER BATTALION (CONSTRUCTION)
APO 122 US ARMY

27 APRIL 1956

SUBJECT: PERSONNEL PARTICIPATING IN RESCUE AND SEARCH OPERATIONS

TO: COMMANDING OFFICER
32D ENGR GP (CONS)
APO 122, US ARMY

1. IN COMPLIANCE WITH VERBAL INSTRUCTIONS YOUR OFFICE ON 26 APRIL 1956, THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION RELATIVE TO PERSONNEL OF THIS ORGANIZATION WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE SEARCH OPERATIONS AT FORT TAVANNES DURING THE PERIOD 21-26 APRIL IS SUBMITTED.

2. THE ORIGINAL TUNNEL RECONNAISSANCE PARTY CONSISTED OF SP3 WILLIAM J LIBBY JR, US 55 490 946, PVT2 RUSSELL FURLONG, RA 16 508 304, AND PVT2 RICHARD C YOUNG, RA 19531 376, ALL OF H&S COMPANY. THIS PARTY CHARTED THE UNDERGROUND ROUTE FROM THE MAIN ENTRANCE OF THE FORT TO THE AIR SHAFT. THEY ALSO SEARCHED ALL UNDERGROUND TUNNELS AND GALLERIES WITH NEGATIVE RESULTS.

3. THE FIRST SOLDIER TO ENTER AND WORK IN THE AIR SHAFT, AFTER HASTY SHORING OPERATIONS WERE COMPLETED, WAS SP3 ORVILLE MORTIMORE, ER 55 189 437, H&S COMPANY. THE COMPLETE RECONNAISSANCE OF THE LOWER GALLERIES OF THE AIR SHAFT WAS MADE BY PVT2 RICHARD C YOUNG, AND PVT2 RUSSELL FURLONG. THESE TWO SOLDIERS ALSO MOVED THE BULK OF THE ROCK AND DIRT FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE AIR SHAFT DURING THE TIME WHEN ONLY TEMPORARY SHORING WAS IN PLACE.

4. IT IS RECOMMENDED THAT THE SOLDIERS REFERRED TO IN PARAGRAPHS 2 AND 3 ABOVE, WITH THE EXCEPTION OF SP3 MORTIMORE, BE CONSIDERED FOR AWARD OF THE SOLDIER'S MEDAL FOR THEIR ACTIONS.

5. ATTACHED HERETO AS INCLOSURE #1 IS A ROSTER OF PERSONNEL OF H&S COMPANY WHO PARTICIPATED IN THIS OPERATION. THOSE NAMES PRECEDED BY AN ASTERISK WORKED IN THE AIR SHAFT OR IN THE LATERAL TUNNEL.

6. ATTACHED HERETO AS INCLOSURE 2 IS A ROSTER OF PERSONNEL OF COMPANY "C" AND COMPANY "A" WHO PARTICIPATED IN THIS OPERATION. THOSE NAMES PRECEDED BY AN ASTERISK ARE COMPANY "A" PERSONNEL.

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7. A ROSTER OF OFFICERS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE OPERATION IS ATTACHED AS INCLOSURE 3.

8. INCLOSURES 4, 5 AND 6 ARE DA FORMS 1526, PERSONAL HISTORY FOR NEWS RELEASE FOR SP3 LIBBY, PVT FURLONG, AND PVT YOUNG.

6 INCL:
A/S

ROBERT A ATKINS SR
MAJOR, CE
COMMANDING

TP: VERDUN MIL 7398

HEADQUARTERS AND SERVICE COMPANY
 97TH ENGINEER BATTALION (CONSTRUCTION)
 APO 122 US ARMY

26 APRIL 1956

SUBJECT: MEN WHO WORKED WITH RESCUE PARTY

	ABBOTT, CHARLES E.	PVT 2	RA 17442011
	AISTAR, VIESTARTS	PVT 2	US 55520158
*	AMES, ROGER L	PVT 2	US 51350082
	BANKS, EUGENE L	SF3	RA 56221755
	BARD, RICHARD	PFC	RA 16489183
	BARR, WAYNE	PVT 2	RA 14549529
	BRANDON, CLYDE	PVT 2	RA 17408154
	BRIDGES, PETER S	PVT 2	RA 16514975
	BRILL, WALTER L	SFC	RA 34342140
	BRINKMAN, JAMES R	PVT 2	RA 15545012
*	BROWNING, JAMES A	SP1	RA 24441088
	BROWN, GEORGE W	SGT	RA 15470046
*	BUNN, GEORGE L	SP3	RA 14396105
	CALDWELL, ROBERT A	MSGT	RA 34390426
	CAMPBELL, WARREN D	PFC	US 55477614
	CEPUKAITIS, WALTER	SP3	RA 13408707
	CINQ-MARS, PAUL B	SFC	RA 11078557
	CIRIANO, JOSEPH	PFC	US 51326815
	COLEY, JODIE M	MSGT	RA 6260020
	COLE, CLAYTON C	PFC	RA 17428209
	CORREA, REDIGUES R	SP3	RA 30442261
*	CRYER, THOMAS A	SFC	RA 14217352
	DAVIS, WILLIAM	PFC	RA 15522658
	DAVIDSON, CHARLES T	PVT 2	US 53264970
•	DILLON, FRED H	SP2	RA 35998425
*	DOMENK, PAUL J JR	PFC	US 55520449
*	DUBNASKY, STEVE	SFC	RA 6390384
	DUNLEAVY, THOMAS J	PVT 2	RA 11291367
	ETENHOFFER, ANTHONY	SP2	RA 36508942
	FAIRLEY, RALPH J JR	PFC	RA 11929523
	FREY, HOMER	SP3	RA 17381853
*	FURLONG, RUSSELL	PVT 2	RA 16508304
	GILTNER, E L JR	PFC	RA 17359506
	GOINS, KENNETH K	PFC	RA 25891408
	GOLDSMITH, FRASIER	PFC	RA 16453054
	GONZALES, MANUAL R	SFC	RA 39591997
	GOOD, GEORGE F	SP3	RA 6667059
	GRANZELLA, RALPH J	PVT 2	RA 17432936
	GREEN, ROBERT E	PVT 2	US 51361450
	HIRSHBERG, LEONARD	PFC	RA 12246265
	HILL, WILLIAM H	SP3	RA 34824613
	HOFFMAN, JOHN G	SP3	RA 12445732
*	HOGG, WILLIS H	PVT 2	RA 14554589
*	HOLBROOK, ALLAN W	SP3	RA 23278156
*	HOLM, WILLIAM A	PVT 2	RA 12489340

	HUMPHREY, VERNON .	PFC	US 56139441
	HURT, JOHN W	SP2	RA 16015689
	JACKA, CARL G	SP3	RA 15505528
*	JACOBELLIS, ROBERT	PFC	RA 11293667
*	JONES, DALE A	PFC	RA 12489340
*	JACOB, MORTON D JR	PVT 2	RA 12489166
*	JAEGER, LAWRENCE F	PVT 2	RA 12489580
*	KELLY, GARY L	SP2	RA 13449943
	KID, THOMAS F	SP3	RA 12443938
	KNIGHT, GERALD A	SP3	RA 56129907
*	KOHLER, GERALD A	SP3	RA 17367775
	KOWALSKI, CHESTER J	PVT 2	RA 55500066
*	KUYKENDALL, FREDDIE L	PVT 2	RA 16516054
	LAWLER, ARCHIE JR	PFC	US 53241340
*	LESLIE, HARRY	SP2	RA 34586994
*	LIBBY, WILLIAM J JR	SP3	US 55490946
	LIPSHITS, JULIAS	PFC	US 51310735
	LONG, JAMES M JR	PFC	RA 14520652
	LYNN, CHARLES A	PFC	RA 14554551
*	LOUNGE, JOHN J JR	PVT 2	RA 12490822
*	MACDOUGALL, RONALD J JR	PVT 2	RA 12490828
	MACPHERSON, LEON M	SP3	RA 16460904
	MACKENTHUM, ORVILL	PFC	RA 17413069
	MANNING, ROY M	SP2	RA 44171751
*	MCCUE, PHILLIP A	SP2	RA 12321243
*	MCGHEE, RAYMOND M	SFC	RA 14254850
	MCTAGUE, PATRICK J	PFC	US 52375345
	MEAD, JASPER S	SFC	RA 42188239
*	METSGER, CHARLES	PFC	RA 11268911
	MEYERS, EUGENE C	SFC	RA 16275183
	MICKEL, PAUL H	PFC	US 56259145
	MILLER, JOHN A	SP3	RA 13480773
	MORTIMORE, ORVILLE	SP3	ER 55189437
	NITEK, KENNETH J	PVT 2	RA 17444264
	OLIVER, JAMES JR	SP2	RA 14505049
	OROPALLO, ANTHONY JR	PFC	US 56251889
	PAUL, RICHARD	PVT 2	RA 16514799
	PAULK, FRANKIE	SP2	RA 38275941
*	PETERSEN, OSBORNE A	PVT 2	RA 16515410
	PETERS, JOHNNY A	PVT 2	RA 15548356
	PETREE, CHARLES E	PVT 2	RA 17448092
	PICKENS, LEAFORD L	PVT 2	RA 18490210
	PRATHER, BILLY R	PFC	RA 14517887
	PRITT, CHARLES L	SGT	RA 24410245
	REDSTORM, RINALDO J	SP3	RA 18447870
	ROORDA, NORMAN W	PFC	US 55491728
*	SAUNDERS, ADDISON W	SP2	RA 11260126
*	SCHOONOVER, WILLIAM P	PFC	RA 14480227
	SCHUSTER, WALTER	PVT 2	US 52392349
*	SCHULTS, PAUL R	PFC	US 55502356
*	SCHOENENBERGER, DONALD N	SP3	RA 16330629
	SCHOTT, DONALD L	SP3	RA 16330629
	SCHARF, JOHN B	PVT 2	RA 16489131
	SMITH, GEORGE A JR	SP3	ER 53314475
	SMUSZ, BENJAMIN J	SP3	RA 16369367
*	SPENCE, PAUL W	PFC	RA 16369367

	SPRINGFIELD, HENRY J	PFC	US 54168899
	STEEN, DONALD D	PFC	US 52372180
	SVIHOVEC, DELMAR W	PFC	US 55470660
*	SPEERS, GILBERT FT	PVT 2	RA 16511315
*	THORP, JAMES G	SFC	RA 14071753
	WILLIAMS, WILLIAM R	PFC	RA 10481624
*	YOUNG, ROBERT R	SP3	RA 11423265
*	YOUNG, VICTOR R JR	PVT 2	RA 14330633
*	YOUNG, RICHARD C	PVT 2	RA 19531376
	ZITZELBERGER, GEORGE E	SP3	ER 15508233
	ZOLLER, DONALD F	PVT 2	RA 16453035
	BASSETT, CHARLES E	PFC	US 55530941

* MEN THAT WENT IN THE AIR SHAFT TO WORK.

HEADQUARTERS
97TH ENGINEER BATTALION (CONSTRUCTION)
APO 122 US ARMY

26 APRIL 1956

SUBJECT: OFFICER PERSONNEL WORKING ON RESCUE PARTY

TO: COMMANDING OFFICER
97TH ENGR BN (CONS)
APO 122, US ARMY

ROBERT A ATKINS SR	MAJOR	01 118 155
WALTER A STEES	MAJOR	04 236 20
MARTIN D TURSI	CAPTAIN	02 262 860
JAMES B SHERMAN	CAPTAIN	01 115 106
CLIFTON T ZABKA	LIEUTENANT (2D)	04 040 290
RAYBURN L WILLIAMSON	LIEUTENANT (2D)	04 017 897
LLOYD A LEFFERS	LIEUTENANT (2D)	04 030 492
JAMES E PAULUS	LIEUTENANT (2D)	04 044 540
HENRY T FILLION	LIEUTENANT (1ST)	02 097 797
DAVID S HANKE	LIEUTENANT (1ST)	04 016 980
ROBERT W ADAMS	LIEUTENANT (2D)	04 026 929
CHARLES J DEAN	CHIEF WARRANT OFF.	W2 141 249

CLIFTON T ZABKA
2D LT, CE
ADJUTANT

TP: VERDUN MIL 7398

Dick's story



Dick in 1955

In Verdun on the other side of the railway tracks as you cross over them, if you look to the right, you will see a large fenced in areas with lots of warehouses. In 1955, there was a small fire-department building there and my job was to answer the telephone and send the fire trucks and ambulances to where they might be needed, as part of the U.S. Army installation. On a Sunday afternoon, the telephone rang and when I answered it, someone told me that an American Army soldier had driven out to the battle fields with his wife and new baby. He went inside some kind of fortress and never came out. At that time, no-one knew exactly what had happened to him except he had disappeared and his wife was going out of her mind with worry. Because I had to stay at the fire department by the telephone, we had a young, very short GI that worked there. He was about 5 foot 2 inches tall. Maybe he weighed 135 lbs. He went with some of the rescue firemen in a truck out toward the battlefields. Now we had Frenchmen who worked for the U.S. Army that lived out at the fire department when they were on duty. The rest of the time they went to their homes around Verdun. I don't remember the short GI's name, but everybody called him "Mouse". Mouse and the Frenchman in the truck arrived out on the battlefields and met the soldier's wife. In your mind follow what I say, now, as you have been there. You leave the main road, turning right on the small road that leads to Tavannes. Just as you arrive at Tavannes, a French sign to your left says "Stop, Military, Entrance Forbidden". You walk past the sign and turn left going into a valley and you are now heading down around where the woman last saw her husband walking. She had absolutely no idea where he had disappeared to. So from this point on, no-one was sure where to look. Because you know, I am sure, there are so many little caves, openings, doors. You could go on for a long time and not find him. Mouse came back to the fire department that Sunday evening and said, "We don't know where he is!" The next day was Monday. They were asking for volunteers to go in trucks out toward Tavannes to see if they could find him. At that point, everyone thought he was probably alive, but perhaps trapped in a cave-in, somewhere. Monday night, they lowered Mouse (he volunteered) with ropes down an air shaft. At the bottom of the air shaft, there were railway tracks. When he was lowered farther down the shaft, he was in a tunnel with his feet touching steel railway tracks. With his flash light, he looked up the tracks and down the tracks. But he didn't walk more than 2 or 3 feet in each direction. Because he had to wear a gas-mask and he only had a 2 battery army flashlight, he could only see a few feet in each direction. But he saw no-one. So he shouted up the shaft, "Pull me up, I don't see anyone here." And they pulled him up. In the United States, where they mine for coal, like Kentucky, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, these men are used to being underground in small tunnels. So the U.S. Verdun Army asked for volunteers who might have been coal miners, if there were any. They managed to find about 20 or 25 of these men. So on Tuesday morning, these fellows left Verdun and were trucked out to Tavannes to start picking their way through the different openings that they could find which might lead to the tunnel or where the GI might be. Tuesday morning and the GI coal miners are now slowly going through the broken up rooms and passages of Fort Tavannes. I was given the assignment of taking out their food and coffee to them in a small truck. I got out there about noon. First thing I did was get the food and coffee to all the guys who were hanging around on the outside. And then I started taking thermos bottles of coffee to the men who were slowly working their way through. In some of the passageways there was room for about three men side by side. There were electric lights on long extension cords and they were taking out bricks and rubble and passing everything back sort of hand to hand. I followed the electric extension cords down the line and sooner or later found men who were happy to see me. I didn't feel like I was a hero or brave or anything else. I was 18 years old, a skinny kid with red hair and blue eyes. (That's my Viking heritage!) And this was as great an adventure as any boy could ever want. During this adventure, it seemed like I was my own boss and could come and go as I pleased. I had the little truck to run around in to where-ever I wanted. All I had to do was to run back and forth to Verdun and load up with food and coffee and get back there for the guys. This was much fun. Wow, do I feel special. When we left off, Dick was having a wonderful time driving all over the battlefields in his little truck carrying sandwiches and coffee, coca cola, even ice cream once. And poking his nose into all the little doorways and tunnels and rooms in Fort

Tavannes. About 16:00 hrs. an officer said, "nobody seems to be able to find this man" "We suspect he came in through that entrance and fell through the covering of that airshaft and he's down there somewhere. We need a volunteer." I told a sargeant who was standing there, "why don't you go find mouse, he's already been down there once, and I'm sure he'd be glad to do it again." He said, "Mouse has gone back to Verdun, how about you?" I said, "I'm not as small as Mouse" and he said, "I think you'll fit in that airshaft just fine and we'll fix you up." Everyone standing around the air shaft looked at me. I said, "are you sure nobody needs any sandwiches and coffee?" They wanted someone to go down that hole. In the U.S. there is a game called "football" ... not like European football. So they put a football helmet on my head so if any rocks fell on my head, they would bounce off the helmet. Then they put football shoulder pads on top of my shirt, so that any falling rocks wouldn't break my shoulders. Then they threaded a rope around my waist and fitted it with some straps like a parachute harness so they could pull me up and down.



Dick outside the airshaft some years ago.

Picture this in your mind. Next to the hole there was a drum with a crank handle on each end with the rope around the drum so they could have more leverage to slowly lower me or raise me. They put a gas-mask over my face, which I hated. Gave me a crummy army flashlight just like Mouse had. I sat on the edge of the shaft and slowly let myself into the darkness. I was hanging free in the middle of the shaft as they slowly lowered me down. It didn't seem like such a long distance, before my feet hit the ground. I yelled up, "hold it" and I looked around. Everything was pitch black. There was a curved ceiling, brick walls, narrow gauge railway tracks, crushed rock in between the tracks. I wasn't afraid, but it was like standing in a cemetery at midnight with no moon and you're waiting for something but you don't know what. On my head and neck, the air felt cool but not cold. I walked a little to the left and a little to the right, trying to look as far as I could see. I really wanted to find that guy, but when I didn't see anything, I was relieved. I tried to stay as long as I could so that the men on top wouldn't get the impression I was coming back up in fear. I listened as intently for any type of sound, and I heard nothing. I was probably down there a total of 15 very long minutes. If I close my eyes today, I can see everything in my mind. It made that much of an impression on me. I gave the rope a little pull and yelled, "pull me up, I can't see a thing" and they slowly pulled me up. They took all the gear off me when I got to the top and I drove my little truck back into town. Things fade away, and I didn't go back out to the battlefield again, so I had no knowledge of what was going on. But a few months later, they had a memorial service at the Army post in Verdun for the dead soldier. They sent his wife and child back to the U.S. She received the soldier's \$10,000 life insurance policy. That's one reason the army was moving heaven and earth to try to find him. Now, here's what happened to him. Sure enough he had fallen down that air shaft, but when he hit the bottom it didn't kill him. He was totally disoriented, and in the pitch darkness, he managed to crawl one or two hundred feet and then he fell into a deep cistern on one side of the tunnel, that originally had been used to hold drinking and washing water. I don't know any more than that, except that at some point, they lowered another GI down, gave him more rope and a better flash light and he wandered down the tunnel awhile until he looked down and found him at the bottom of that cistern. Prologue: About a year later, I was stationed near Nancy, France at the U.S. Army camp, and they told me that I had to go on a Saturday back to Verdun to the Etain airport, where I was forced to stand with about 4 other men in line and about 500 men paraded around this big field and all that stuff. A French general came up to me, shook my hand, kissed me on both cheeks, and pinned a medal on my chest. The other men got medals too. One of them was Mouse. He got the top medal you can get in peace time, which is the soldiers medal. The rest of us got an Army commendation medal with the ribbon and the stuff that hangs down on your chest like old French soldiers have. Well, that's the end of the story.