The Round Tablette

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Welcome to the first October session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight's speaker is David Hogan, author of *U.S. Army Special Operations in World War II.* He will discuss the development of the Rangers; specifically, the leadership of their founder, William Darby, who came out of the 34th Infantry Division, along with many the first Rangers.

One of the more debatable questions from World War II remains how much impact a company-sized unit can have in a battle, especially during a global conflict involving massive three-dimensional operations. The stories of these small groups have become legend with movies made of their daring exploits, for example: *The Guns of Navarone* (1961); *Where Eagles Dare* (1968); and *Darby's Rangers* (1958) to name a few. Beyond being a great story that fits into the American ethos of ingenuity, dogged determinism, and rugged individualism, were these units tactically valuable part of the strategy to win the war?

While the army dithered, William J. Donovan, chief of the Office of Strategic Services, began special operations units in July 1942. Both the Operational Groups (OG) and the later *Jedburgh* teams were intended to operate behind enemy lines supporting resistance and guerrilla operations. The Jedburgh teams consisted of either an American or a British officer, a French officer, and an enlisted radio operator.

During World War II, the Rangers were the American army's first official foray into what is now known as special operation units. The actual term "Ranger" goes back to the colonial era when a group was first organized in 1676 during King Philip's War. Its founder is perhaps the most famous American Ranger, Maj. Robert Rogers, who developed a manual of 28 "Rules of Ranging" that present day Rangers still learn. In the Revolutionary War and the Civil War there were also units, mostly Confederate – called "Rangers," though for many it was in name only. The World War II incarnation came about when then Col. Lucian K. Truscott encouraged General George Marshall to create a training program along the same lines as British Commando units. Marshall liked the idea but did not want them to be called "commandos" since it sounded too British. Truscott, who remembered Rogers' colonial era group, suggested calling them "Rangers."

Major William O. Darby, of the 34th Infantry Division, formed the first "Ranger" unit, mainly with men from the 34th ID. Darby graduated from West Point in 1933, and served at numerous posts during the 1930s. Shortly before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Darby was assigned to be the Aide-de-camp to Major General Russell P. Hartle, commander of the 34th ID, and deployed with the division to Ireland in January of 1942. With the creation of American "commando" units, Darby was promoted to major and began recruiting and training the 1st Ranger Battalion.

The battalion trained with British commandos and were the first Americans to see action in Europe when they participated in the failed Dieppe Raid where three were killed and several more captured. The unit was then sent to spearhead the North African campaign in OPERATION TORCH, capturing the Algerian city of Arzew and paving the way for the 1st Infantry Division to capture Oran. The Rangers went on to fight in Tunisia at the Battle of El Guettar.

After the North African campaign, the 1st Ranger Battalion fought in OPERATION HUSKY (the invasion of Sicily). Later, landing at Salerno, they captured and held the Chiunzi Pass. The Fifth Army mounted an attack on the German Winter Line, using the three Ranger battalions as line units, a role they were ill-suited for, and they suffered significant casualties. The Rangers then participated in the Anzio Landing and suffered devastating losses during the Battle of Cisterna. American intelligence failed to notice a major German buildup and when Truscott ordered the Rangers to conduct a reconnaissance into the area, they were so badly battered that the Army deactivated the 1st, 3rd, and 4th Ranger battalions in the Mediterranean theater.

European theater commanders still needed Ranger-style special units. General Marshal authorized the formation of the 2nd and 5th Ranger Battalions in April and September 1943, respectively. Their training in the United States ended in November 1943 when they were sent to Great Britain, where they began training for the mission at Pointe Du Hoc.

The 2nd Rangers were led on their most famous mission – to Point du Hoc – by Lt. Col. James Earl Rudder. They were tasked with taking out the six 155mm guns the

Germans had positioned at Pointe du Hoc, but they had removed the guns to construct enclosed casements. Intelligence analysts did not notice that the guns were missing, so after climbing the cliffs, the Rangers found no guns. A small patrol later found the five remaining guns in a nearby field (one was destroyed earlier in a bombing raid) and disabled them using thermite grenades.

Analogous units in Alaska and the Pacific and China-Burma-India Theaters had similar missions, structures, and training. Unlike the ETO, these were drawn from Army, Navy, Marine, OSS, and Philippine sources, their stories are as unique as their operating environments. Some units were scouts of reconnaissance units, others were "long-range penetration groups" (LRPGs), and others were raiders and rangers.

Reconnaissance units included the Alaskan Scouts, Marine Amphibious Reconnaissance Companies, Amphibious Battalion Scouts, the 5217th (later reorganized as the 1st) Reconnaissance Battalion (a Filipino unit supporting guerrillas in the Southwest Pacific Area of Operations), and the Sixth Army's Alamo Scouts. Raider units included the 1st and 2nd Marine Raider Battalions, and the 7th ID's Provisional Reconnaissance Battalion. Finally, was the 6th Ranger Battalion. In the CBI, there were several units – notably "Merrill's Marauders (the 5207 Composite Unit [Provisional]), the Office of Strategic Services unit 101, the 5332 Brigade (Provisional) – which were all "Long Range Penetration Groups."

The 2nd Marine Raider BN conducted the raid on Japanese forces on Makin Island in August 1942, led by Lt. Col. Evans Carlson and his XO, Maj. James Roosevelt. Soon after, President Roosevelt transferred his affection for British Commandos to the Marine Raiders.

Throughout World War II, commando and guerrilla operations harassed Axis operations, gathered intelligence, and supported the conventional military operations. Rangers and other special operation forces, like those provided by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), aided partisans and gathered intelligence. Ranger units operated best in mountainous and rocky terrain where larger units either infantry or armored were unable to penetrate effectively. Special Operations did not win the war alone but provided the tip of the spear into the heart of the Axis defense.

Further Reading:

David W. Hogan, Jr., *U.S Army Special Operations in World War II* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, Department of the Army, 1992).
David Lyle Williams, *The Road to Cisterna: Darby's Rangers and Their Most Consequential Battle in World War II* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2025).
Robert Black, *Ranger Force* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2009).
Patrick O' Donnell, *Beyond Valor: World War II's Ranger and Airborne Veterans Reveal the Heart of Combat* (New York: Simon & Schuster. 2001).
Charles F. Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *Time Runs Out in the CBI* (Washington DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1999).
Joseph H. Alexander, *Edson's Raiders: The 1st Marine Raider Battalion in World War II* (Annapolis, MD; Naval Institute Press; 2000).
William B. Breuer, *MacArthur's Undercover War: Spies, Saboteurs, Guerrillas, and Secret Missions* (Hoboken, NJ; John Wiley & Sons Ltd.; 1995).
Bruce F. Meyers, *Swift, Silent, and Deadly: Marine Amphibious Reconnaissance in the Pacific, 1942-1945* (Annapolis, MD; Naval Institute Press; 2004).

Announcements:

Twin Cities Civil War Round Table – 20 Oct. 2026– *"Life and Death at Swope Manor,"*– Historic Ft. Snelling! www.tccwrt.com – e-mail: info@tccwrt.com

Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 21702 Haven Road, Little Falls, MN 56345. 320-616-6050. http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org.
8th AF Historical Society of MN, Place TBA, 2nd & 4th Wednesdays at 1100. https://www.8thmn.org.
Wings of the North – Eden Prairie- 952-746-6100 - www.wotn.org
Friends of Ft. Snelling - www.fortsnelling.org
Alliance Française 612-332-0436 - www.afmsp.org
Friends of the National WW II Memorial – http://www.wwiimemorialfriends.org.US
Pittsburg Veterans Breakfast Club - http://www.vbcphg.org.
Western Naval Historical Association – info@wnha.net
WWII Discussion Forum – wwiidf.org
History Happy Hour - Sundays, 3 pm - www.historyhappyhour.com
CAF - Commemorative Air Force - 651-455-6942 - www.cafmn.org
Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - 651-338-2717 - jkyser45@gmail.com

We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

Round Table Schedule 2026 – 2027

27 Oct.	ABMC Military Cemeteries
10 Nov.	Ike and Winston
8 Dec.	Pearl Harbor – 85 years on

2027

12 Jan.	East Front: Guderian's Panzers
9 Feb.	War in Yugoslavia
9 Mar.	China-Burma-India: Stilwell
23 Mar.	"The Dangerous Shore"
13 Apr.	Fall of the Philippines – 85 years on
27 Apr.	Naval Battles of World War II
11 May	Patton: January – December 1945

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William O. Darby

James E. Rudder

William J. Donovan