

Eastern Kentucky's Raymond E. Cox: POW and Unsung Hero of World War II

by James M. Gifford, Ph.D.

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Throughout the twentieth century, American school children learned about heroes at an early age. For example, they learned of George Washington whose physical courage and perseverance enabled him and his small rag-tag army to defeat the large, battle-tested British army and win American independence. They also learned that heroism could emerge from moral courage, like Abraham Lincoln's resolute efforts to abolish slavery in America. Many of the stories their teachers and parents read to them were tales of heroism.

As these children grew older, they read about heroes in their school books and in the books they checked out of public libraries. Long before Fess Parker became "Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier," they read about Crockett and other frontiersmen fighting to the death at the Alamo. In the history of the Ancient World, they learned about 300 Spartans fighting to the death against the invading Persians at Thermopylae Pass and saw parallels with American history and began to realize that heroism was a part of the human condition.

But heroism became less fashionable as the century unfolded. By the middle of the twentieth century, cynics argued that there were no more heroes. Members of several generations of Americans began to think that heroes, rather than defending society, rebelled against it. Their anti-authoritarian model was Marlon Brando in the 1953 movie, *The Wild One*. When asked what he was rebelling against, Brando's motorcycle boy responded, "Whattya got?"

Time passed, and Americans became obsessed with physical comforts and addicted to entertainment. Some “dressed for success” and sought salvation in upward mobility and high-tech gadgets. Others conducted themselves as if self-indulgence, criminal behavior, and vulgar talk were virtues.

And then came September 11, 2001, and Americans realized that we still needed old-fashioned heroes. We had to defend our nation against cowards who had sent a challenge written on the caskets of innocent people in the bright red blood of American heroes. Those cowards believed that we were too weak, too spoiled, and too divided to respond, but policemen, firemen, soldiers, and everyday folks stepped up and demonstrated great courage and resolve.

Now, as we stand at the brink of a long battle against international terrorism, our society has spawned new heroes, like the men and women who serve (d) in Iraq and Afghanistan. As we move into an uncertain future, we realize that heroism can be learned and some of our best teachers are the men and women who fought and won World War II and who made up what some have called the “greatest generation.” If we look to these men and women for models of behavior, we can learn how to be heroes. You don’t have to look far because millions of American families produced heroes. One such hero was Raymond Cox.

“When we were little, Daddy never talked about the war very much,” said Ethel Stafford, Raymond Cox’s daughter and a retired teacher and school administrator. However, as

Ethel and her brother Ray and sister Nancy got older they began to realize that their father Raymond E. Cox had been a World War II hero.

Raymond Cox had a typical Appalachian background. He was born in Toler, Kentucky, February 11, 1920, raised in eastern Kentucky, and attended school in Sprigg, West Virginia. At age sixteen he began working in the mines for Crystal Block Coal Company. He made fifty-eight cents a ton, and it took him about two hours to load a ton.

On December 7, 1941, Japanese planes attacked and severely crippled the America fleet at Pearl Harbor. The next day Congress responded with a declaration of war against Japan and three days later Germany and Italy declared war on the United States. A month later, on January 13, 1942, Raymond Cox joined the army and took basic training at Camp Walters, Texas. He was assigned to Company E of the 47th Infantry Regiment of the Ninth Infantry Division and received further training in amphibious landings.

In November 1942, the Ninth Infantry Division boarded ship in Newport News, Virginia, and twenty-eight days later Cox was a member of General Dwight Eisenhower's forces that invaded North Africa. Using Higgins Boats made out of plywood, part of the Ninth went ashore with little resistance at Safi, a small harbor about ninety-one kilometers south of Casablanca. By early 1943, Cox's unit had moved for the Safi area in French Morocco, some 800 miles eastward to Algeria, probably in the vicinity of the Tunisian border. There the division reformed and went into the desert thinking they were going to fight a battalion of Italian troops.

That morning, Cox told First Lieutenant David Conroy that “we would go out and kick the hell out of them Italians and get back for supper.” Conroy laughed and observed that if they didn’t they’d get “a quick ticket to hell.”

Victimized by faulty intelligence, Cox and his fellow soldiers of the 47th Infantry Regiment soon found themselves “eyeball to eyeball” with two units of Germany’s Fifth Panzer Army, which had been sent from Sicily to reinforce Tunisia against the pincer attack developing from the Allied armies. Within fifteen minutes, Company E lost 179 men. Cox and 242 others were taken prisoner by the German Army.

“We walked through the desert for five days,” said Cox, “with one loaf of bread and one drink of water a day. The water tasted of gasoline, where they kept it in gasoline cans.” They arrived at a little village on the Algerian coast and the prisoners were “fenced in” for the night. The next morning they were loaded into boxcars and taken to Tunis, Tunisia, where they spent more than two weeks in a “bombed-out” school building with Allied bombs falling around them all night.

The Allies foiled three attempts by the Germans to fly these prisoners out of Tunisia to a POW camp in Germany. Finally, in the middle of the night, the Germans marched the prisoners to a cow pasture, loaded them in groups of fourteen into JU-52 transport planes, and took off at daylight.

Because of excellent Allied intelligence, American and British fighters intercepted the transport planes over the Mediterranean Sea and forced them down near Palermo, Sicily and their German captors turned the prisoners over to Mussolini's Fascists.

"They took us to the snow line in the mountains where we didn't have any beds and only half a blanket," Cox remembered. The men at POW camp 98 in the mountains near Palermo received 150 grams of bread per day with water boiled over greens. Cox was held in this camp for thirty-three days and nearly died of starvation. Many others did not survive.

Finally the survivors were taken to the Italian mainland and transported by train to Camp 59 in Central Italy, where the prisoners received "a little more to eat...just enough to keep us from starving." For four months the POWs lived on 150 grams of bread, a small ladle of soup, and a thin slice of cheese each day.

Cox was there until September 1943 when, aided by Yugoslavian partisans, 2200 POWs escaped and scattered into the Italian countryside. "I couldn't walk but about fifty yards without sitting down and resting," said Cox, who had lost almost sixty pounds. "On the second day, I barely got outside the ring the Germans had formed, where they were combing prisoners out of the mountains."

Cox survived because he was befriended by an Italian family. Primo Mecossi and his wife and daughters hid the young American in a cave, fed him, and warned him when

German and Italian soldiers were searching the area. Cox was often on the move to avoid recapture. He spent eleven months eluding the Nazis and the Blackshirts and he learned to speak Italian so that he could ask for food and help. Only two Italian families ever refused assistance and one of them suffered reprisals from the Italian underground. During his months as a fugitive, he saw two of his fellow escapees killed by German soldiers and several more wounded and recaptured.

In the spring of 1944, American paratroopers dropped behind enemy lines to assemble the escaped POWs, who were loaded on PT boats and taken to larger ships. Cox missed that opportunity. He later told his adopted son Aaron that Primo gave him a bicycle and he rode until he reached the Polish forces who were part of the great Anglo-American effort to push the German army out of Italy. The Poles took Cox to an Allied field hospital where he got his first “good cigarette” in sixteen months. He reported that he smoked until he got sick and more than thirty years later he said, “And I ain’t caught up to this day.”

He was returned to North Africa and finally arrived in the United States on August 2, 1944. He had been a prisoner of war from March 1943 to June 1944, and he was extremely anxious to get home. One of his friends who made it to the Allied lines with him left and returned to the Italian countryside to marry an Italian girl whose family hid him from the Germans.

Cox's ordeal had also visited misery upon his family. He had been a prisoner of war for more than a year, and his family thought he was dead. On March 28, 1943, his mother received a telegram that her son Raymond, who was missing in action, was "a prisoner of the Italian government." The telegram was sent by the War Department based on information provided by the American Red Cross. In July, she received a card from the Prisoner of War Bureau that stated briefly:

I am alright. I have not been wounded. I am a prisoner of the Italians and I am being treated well. Shortly I shall be transferred to a prisoner's camp and I will let you know my new address. Only then will I be able to receive letters from you and to reply.

Raymond E.

April 17

Then they received another letter which had been sent by a Catholic priest in Italy to the priest at the Catholic Church in Williamson, West Virginia.

June 21, 1943

Mr. Edward B. Cox

Louisa, Ky.

Dear Mr. Cox:

I was down in Merrimac, W.Va. looking for you to convey to you the information that your son, Raymond Cox, is a prisoner of war in Italy.

I am the Catholic priest here designated by the Holy Father, Pope Pius XII, to convey this message.

You can answer 25 words on the back of the enclosed papers. Please Write the same thing on the white paper and on the yellow one, and send your answer to:

The Chancellor
Cathedral Residence
Wheeling, W. Va.

And the message will be delivered to your son in Italy. Prisoners are well treated in Italy.

Sorry I could not see you personally. Sincerely,

Rev. T.J. Keating,
Sacred Heart Church
Williamson, W. Va.

A year passed. Then his parents received the following letter, dated June 26, 1944. It was written on English air mail stationery and bore an English crown stamp with a postmark that read "Poczta Polona 127."

Dear Mother and family:

I am o.k. and free. I am with the English now. In a few days I will be with the U.S. Army. I stayed with an Italian family for 9 months. The people here sure were good to the ex-prisoners.

I have a good chance of coming home. I hope so anyway.

I don't have an address. I will write more in a few days.

Love to all.

Raymond E. Cox A.S.N. 35261675

The handwriting was clearly her son's and Mrs. Cox and her family were overjoyed.

After four months of processing and debriefing in Italy, Cox was shipped home—arriving in Boston and then being sent to Pine Camp, New York. From there he returned to Mingo County, West Virginia, on a furlough, where he had to convince several friends that he was not the ghost of a soldier they believed to be dead.

In his absence, Cox's family had moved back to eastern Kentucky. While visiting them, he met Eloise Hall who worked at a hospital in Louisa. Ten days later they started dating and soon fell in love and planned to marry.

Cox, who still had an obligation to active duty, was assigned to Camp Croft, South Carolina. On November 20, 1944, Raymond's mother and his fiancé left Louisa for Spartanburg, South Carolina. Raymond and Eloise were married on November 22, and lived in Spartanburg until Raymond was discharged from the army on October 13, 1945. In less than a year, they returned to Mingo County, where Ray worked in the mines until he was disabled in 1969.

Raymond Cox was a devoted husband and loving father to Raymond E Cox, Jr., Ethel Lee Cox, and Nancy Carolyn Cox. Later Raymond and Eloise adopted Aaron Ray Cox.

Raymond Cox was a hard worker and a good friend to the young men who worked in the mines with him. He also served in Company D of the West Virginia National Guard at Williamson, West Virginia, until he retired on December 6, 1976. During his years as a miner, the family lived in Matewan and later Red Jacket, West Virginia. Raymond and Eloise moved to Russell, Kentucky, in 1986 to be closer to their children.

As the years passed, Cox's war experiences affected his nerves and emotions. Beginning in the early 1960s, he received medical treatment from the Veterans Administration hospital in Huntington, West Virginia. He also spent some time at the Veterans Administration hospital in Chillicothe, Ohio, in 1963. His father's death intensified his post-traumatic stress syndrome and he had a nervous breakdown. The VA then sent him to a hospital in Salem, Virginia. He was there for nine months before returning to his family. At that time, according to his wife, "he accepted Jesus Christ as his personal savior." After another brief stay in the Salem hospital, he returned home and worked in the mines for five more years. He retired in 1969 because of health problems and died October 22, 1994, of lung cancer. Throughout his life, he suffered terrible physical and emotional stresses from his painful experiences as a POW.

After World War II ended, Raymond Cox and Primo Mecossi corresponded for several years, then lost touch with one another. After Raymond died, his family, with the

assistance of John Trowbridge, former director of the Kentucky Military History Museum, were able to contact Giannina Rossi, the youngest daughter of Primo Mecossi. Giannina remembered her family's assistance to Raymond Cox, the young American escapee. She even remembered "sitting on his lap" when she was a little girl.

Today Raymond's widow and children are corresponding regularly with Giannina through an Italian interpreter, and they have learned that former escapees have organized to provide educational assistance to the descendants of the brave Italians who befriended them, fed them, helped them escape detection, and, in many instances, saved their lives.

On October 27, 2006, a ceremony was held at the Jesse Stuart Foundation where Colonel Patrick Dolan, State Chaplain of the Kentucky National Guard, presented Eloise Cox with the Prisoner of War Medal on behalf of her late husband. Command Historian John Trowbridge introduced Colonel Dolan and commented on Cox's military exploits. This ceremony was attended by more than 40 persons, including three World War II veterans who lead the assemblage in the pledge to the flag.

"It was a grand day!" said Cox's daughter Ethel Stafford. "Daddy would have loved it."

EPILOG

After Raymond died his family asked me to help them piece together his remarkable war story although I had not known him personally. Using his family's memories, scrapbooks, and other historical resources, I have compiled this brief account of his life and wartime experiences. I continue to research his life and am still trying to locate his debriefing records because they will help to clarify and expand the memories that he shared with friends and family. Possibly some of the 2200 men who escaped from Camp 59 with Raymond Cox are still living and will read this story and add exciting new details to my sparse account of that heroic episode. I would urge all families not to wait until their veteran is gone before trying to record his/her story. Each day, many of these men and women who served their country in a time of great peril pass away and often their special stories go with them.

Although Raymond Cox's story is incomplete, I am presenting it here as my sincere thanks to millions of unrecognized World War II heroes and especially as an encouragement to Kentuckians to express their appreciation to all veterans. Raymond Cox marches through this story as a representative of every Appalachian soldier, just as every Appalachian soldier represents soldiers from all over America. They were all members of the greatest generation, and they helped America fight and win a war that spanned the entire globe. Men and women like Raymond Cox were patriots for what they did and heroes for what they were willing to do.

Patriots and heroes, I salute you.

James M. Gifford is the CEO and Senior Editor of the Jesse Stuart Foundation, headquartered in Ashland, Kentucky. Gifford holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Georgia and has published widely in historical, literary, and educational journals and has won professional awards as a teacher, author, editor, and publisher. Thanks to Colin Baxter, head of the History Department at East Tennessee State University, Command Historian of the Kentucky National Guard, and William Crouch, retired editor of the University Press of Kentucky who read earlier drafts of this essay.