

# Buena Vista University Remembers:

## A tribute to Beavers who gave their all in World War II



The destruction at Cisterna, near where Don was killed.

*“Oh, gather round me comrades,  
and listen while I speak  
Of a war, a war, a war where hell is  
six feet deep...”*

- Audie Murphy, “To Hell and Back”

### BY PHOEBE FEIS Anzio was a bloodbath

Thick, wet mud coated the ground and stuck to everything that touched it. Nights came fast and stretched seemingly endlessly on, some 14 hours of darkness separating sunrise from sunset. When night fell, so did the temperatures, the 60 degree weather of the day plummeting into the low 30s. A thick fog coated the landscape and puddles froze in the mud. And, scattered across this broken, bombed out landscape, lay hundreds of American dead. The young men who had rejoiced at the ease of an almost completely unopposed landing on the beaches of Anzio now created a carpet of American youth. Lost among them, a khaki uniform in a sea of khaki uniforms, was Don Sexton.

### “Scranton’s Outstanding Young Man”

The agony of Anzio is where this story ends, but it began in Scranton, Iowa with a boy who loved baseball. To the people of Scranton, Don’s pitching skills gave him an almost celebrity-like status, with the Scranton Journal ef-



PHOEBE FEIS

fusively praising him nearly every game, especially the one where he pitched six innings and only gave up two hits. When Don was out with a sprained ankle, the Journal went so far as to attribute the team’s losses to his mere absence. He adored watching and playing for the American Legion, and was never more at home than on the field. When he left for Iowa City to attend college, the Jefferson Bee remarked that “Don is one of Scranton’s outstanding young men, and we are as proud of him as he is of the scholarship awarded to him.”

Don spent a year at Iowa State University but, ultimately, something called him closer to home. In the summer of 1940, in between baseball games, Don enrolled in Buena Vista College. In September, he made his debut on the football field as the new 170-pound starting end. Don’s first semester at BVC was, ultimately, his last, for at the end



DON SEXTON

of the 1940 school year, winter was far from the only thing on the horizon. The ominous clouds of war loomed and, like thousands of other young men, Don saw the writing on the wall. In February 1941, Don enlisted with the Iowa National Guard. Exactly one year later, he became one of the first Beavers to leave the United States, arriving in Ireland in late February 1942. While in Ireland, the same determination that gave Don an almost perfect six-inning stretch pushed him to volunteer for the highly experimental 1st Ranger Battalion, aka “Darby’s Rangers.”

### “Ready for the Next One”

On Nov. 8, 1942, Don and the Rangers stormed the

ton Journal that he had made it through the Sicily Campaign “without a scratch” and was “ready for the next one.”

The “next one” was Operation Shingle: the Battle for Anzio, Italy.

On January 22, 1944, the VI Corps (including Don) landed at the Anzio beachhead. The initial landing went smoothly for the Rangers, in fact, it was their smoothest of the war. Like the other Rangers, the easy landing likely bolstered Don’s spirits. The Allies were hopeful they would secure Rome and the Italian mainland within a few weeks.

But Anzio would not go down so easily.

### “The Loneliest Place on Earth”

It has been said that the pitcher’s mound is the loneliest place on the field, and, if that’s true, then Don was standing on the mound in January 1944. Anzio was the loneliest place on earth, and the Rangers had no way out.

By Jan. 25, the Allied advance had slowed to a crawl, and what had once been sporadic, low-level resistance became constant, fortified attacks as the Germans encircled the VI Corps. German troops poured toward the Anzio beachhead. The Rangers, like an animal caught in a steel trap, fought back fiercely, but it was not enough. Back home, classes were starting up again. Snow was softly falling and what lit-

tle chocolate rations students had were turned into cocoa. There was no snow at Anzio. It must have felt a million miles away.

On Jan. 27, at the cresting of the sun or the dying of the day, Don Sexton was killed in action. He was just 22 years old. The details of his death are not known. Perhaps it was a shell smashing into the mud and exploding outward. Perhaps it was a German machine gun, the sound cracking through the air like a bat hitting a ball on a perfect pitch. Perhaps Don thought about the snow coated ground of BVC. Perhaps he thought of leather gloves and freshly cut grass. Perhaps he thought of nothing at all.

Three days later, the remaining Third Rangers attacked the city of Cisterna, some 17 miles inland from Anzio. German tanks and infantry closed in around Cisterna. Communications were cut. Ammunition dwindled.

With the noose slowly closing around their necks, the Third Rangers tore apart their weapons and smashed their radios to keep them out of German hands. The last communication by the Third Battalion was simple, resigned: “Some of the fellows are giving up. Colonel, we are awfully sorry.”

It was the last thing anyone heard from the Third Battalion.

Of the 767 members of the First & Third Rangers that attacked Anzio, only six made it back to friendly lines. The Third Ranger Battalion had been obliterated. The battle for Anzio raged for another four months.

Somewhere, in the enormity of that loss, there was a boy from Scranton who would never play baseball again. Somewhere, in the enormity of that grief, there was a colleague that mourned.

“The crosses grow on

Anzio  
Where hell is six feet deep...”

### BVU REMEMBERS

That is how the story ends. But, in those precious years between the ballfields of Scranton and the crosses of Anzio, there was life. There was love. Love from a hometown newspaper to its star player, love of baseball, love of country, and love of a college to its son. From time to time, Don Sexton’s name and memory will still pop up in his local paper. The tale of his six-inning stretch will be recounted. The plaque on Victory-Edson Hall is dedicated to the memory of the boys like Don who gave their lives. This article is for Don. About Don. Here, we love him still.

It is in the falling snow and in the stillness that overtakes the world in those brief seconds between darkness and dawn, just before the day-break spreads over the land and turns the snowflakes into tiny flecks of sunlight that fall to the earth and paint the world in gold. It is in the thin layer of shimmering ice that coats the blades of grass on Peterson Field, in the baseball bats and gloves waiting for practice to start up again next month, in the students wandering to class. In the newspaper that is still proud of him.

Yes, here in Iowa, the love for Don Sexton lingers, quiet as the falling snow.

Did you know that 18 young men who attended Buena Vista College were killed in action in World War II? It’s a staggering number, arrived at by husband and wife BVU history professors Dixee Bartholomew-Feis and Bill Feis, along with their daughter Phoebe Feis, a 2019 graduate of Alta-Aurelia High School and graduate student at American University in Washington, D.C., studying Public History. All three have searched old issues of the student newspaper *The Tack*, Storm Lake newspapers and other sources to uncover the stories of the 18 deceased veterans. Now the Feis family wants to share the fruits of their research with Storm Lake Times Pilot readers in a series of columns by Phoebe about the young soldiers and the sacrifices they made. The series comes at a fitting time, the 80th anniversary of D-Day and the upcoming 80th anniversary of VE-Day next April.

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