

Charles E. Durning

Actor - Veteran



Charles Durning's War: Heroism, Exaggeration, Fabrication? War records don't match all Durning's accolades.

By: [Steve Karras](#)

Web2Carz Staff Writer

Published: May 24th, 2013

"My father's body was completely peppered with shrapnel — face, chest, and head. When we were young, I could put my fingers through his bullet holes in his leg." — Douglas Durning

When beloved actor Charles Durning died on Christmas Eve, journalists unanimously praised the actor's storied war record. "[Durning] was among the first soldiers to land on the Normandy beaches during the D-Day invasion of June 6, 1944," wrote *The Washington Post*. Other news sources and blogs punctuated their obituaries with stories of hand-to-hand combat and escaping Nazi execution squads at the infamous massacre at Malmady.

The truth, however, is more complicated.



At National Memorial Day Concert with friend Joe Mantegna.

As a frequent contributor to the National Memorial Day Concert, Durning shared war memories of his own with millions. In a 2007 Memorial Day speech about D-Day he recalled "I was the second man off my barge, and the first and third man got killed."

But military records show that Charles Durning did not land at Omaha Beach on D-Day.

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

Private First Class Durning returned from the war in Europe with 5,000 other soldiers on a liberty ship called the SS Samuel Adams, just after New Year's 1946. He left Fort Dix on Jan. 30 with an honorable discharge and \$196 in mustering out pay — a seemingly paltry sum for a 23-year-old that left a lot of his own blood in Northern France a year-and-a-half earlier. But here was a second chance at life and an opportunity to make up for lost time.

He did just that, and over the next 50 years the short, stocky Irish American known widely for his breathtaking ability to traverse archetypes played roles from gruff New York City cops to cotton tycoons in *The Sting*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, *Tootsie*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *To Be or Not to Be*, and *Death of a Salesman*, to name just a few.

Though modest about his abilities as an actor, he was driven to maintain a breathtaking work schedule well into his 80s and he continued to book film and TV roles until weeks shy of his death.

"Charlie was only happy when he was working," said close friend and actor Joe Mantegna. "The best job for Charlie was the next job. I mean, his body of work speaks for itself."

But for the lion's share of his adult life he didn't care to talk about his army service, his Silver Star, or the psychological trauma and physical wounds that came with the war.

"My father's body was completely peppered with shrapnel — face, chest, and head. When we were young, I could put my fingers through his bullet holes in his leg," Douglas Durning told us recently.

"He didn't talk about the war at all but it affected him greatly."



With Dustin Hoffman in *Tootsie*.

Most veterans didn't talk about the war. And, there was nothing unique about show business types, who had been to war. Every guy that could have been drafted between the ages of 18 and 38 was in WWII, and drama schools after 1946 were teeming with ex-servicemen paying tuition with the G.I. Bill.

Durning's IMDB page may just as well be an index of Hollywood's WWII veterans. Fellow cast-mates in *The Sting* Paul Newman and Harold Gould, as well as the film's director George Roy Hill, had all served in the war (Gould himself was badly wounded in Normandy). The following year, in Billy Wilder's *The Front Page*, co-stars Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon had both been in the service, as had his castmates Leonard Bremen, Biff Elliot, and David Wayne.

His involvement with veterans' affairs in the third act of his life was perhaps a delayed, if not mutual, healing process for him and the young servicemen he met who were returning from Iraq and Afghanistan suffering from paralysis, loss of limbs, PTSD, and traumatic brain injuries from IEDs.

But when Durning did finally begin to speak about the war, the facts of his service became more confused, not less. This is what we now know.

D-DAY

Durning was born on Feb. 28, 1923, in Highland Falls, New York. He grew up in the shadow of the United States Military Academy at West Point, where his mother worked as a laundress. It was an extremely close, yet blighted, family, often visited by tragedy. Out of the 10 children born to Louise and James Durning, five of them, all girls, died from smallpox and scarlet fever by 1940.

"He was born in a small town with no prospects. His father died when he was sixteen and his mother worked until she was well past retirement," said Douglas Durning.

"Not having anything and being told his entire life, 'You have no talent, you're too fat, too short' ... My father's really strong willed. He and his brothers were a very tough bunch — really tough fighters. So, they all fought for what they had — every bite of food on the dinner table."

All the Durning brothers would eventually serve in the military in WWII.

Charles Durning enlisted in the army on Jan. 17, 1943, and a month later was sent to "C" Battery of the 386th AAA (anti-aircraft) Battalion, a coastal artillery outfit stationed at Camp Edwards in Massachusetts.



Replacements come ashore, D-Day+6

After four months of training, his outfit was sent to Fort Polk in Louisiana to take part in large-scale maneuvers, alongside other inexperienced outfits. That August, he was promoted to Private First Class.

The outfit arrived in England on Feb. 18, 1944, in time to prepare for the invasion of France. Durning's battery would eventually be assigned to other organizations on an as-needed basis once in a combat zone.

But two weeks before the invasion, on May 23, Durning and 12 others were transferred to Unit 2, Replacement Detachment 06E of the 17th Replacement Depot.

It's not entirely clear why Durning — who had been with the same group for nearly a year and a half, with whom he had trained, forged bonds, and was shipped overseas — was transferred out of it.

"It was not uncommon for troops to start out in one unit and then, for various reasons, get transferred to another," said Colonel (IL) J.N. Pritzker (Retired), founder and chair of the Pritzker Military Library in Chicago.

"AAA battalions sometimes lost people, particularly later in the war if the demand for infantry was greater. Units that hit the beach on 6 June, 1944, often took extremely high casualties, driving up the demand for replacements."

Military records show Durning was one of those replacements, not "one of the first to land" on Omaha Beach.

"From the Replacement depot in England, he would have been allocated to units relating to the divisions who were in the process of landing," said WWII historian Gerhard Weinberg.



Replacements. December 1944.

"The Replacement depot would have been told, 'We need x number for the 1st division and x number for the 29th Division.' But sending off replacements, individual soldiers to fill the gaps in the units that had landed on D-Day, would not have begun for several days thereafter."

"By the time replacements arrived in Normandy, the survivors of the first wave that went in on Omaha Beach on D-Day would have been few and far between," WWII historian and author Alex Kershaw told us.

Durning suffered injuries at noon on June 15th, 7–10 kilometers inland from Omaha Beach, when shrapnel from an exploding s-mine — set off by long range German artillery — tore into him and another replacement named Leo Forster. Records indicate that Forster later lost his right arm.

PFC Durning, Charles E. 32726378 was received at the 24th Evacuation Hospital in Le Cambe on June 15th. Records describe a badly wounded G.I with a severe concussion, multiple lacerations to the face, and fragmentation shrapnel wounds to the right frontal region of his head, left chest-wall, both legs, left foot, knee, fingers, and hands.

It's still not exactly clear when he arrived in Normandy. Hospital rosters, as well as his subsequent Purple Heart citation, list Unit 2, 06E as his unit affiliation. He may have just gotten to France.

"It is entirely possible for a replacement to be wounded or killed, quite literally on the way to the company they are supposed to join, even after getting the assignment on the beach," Weinberg said.

"Of course it doesn't reflect in any way on the individual."



Surgeons operating in a field hospital. Normandy, 1944.

When Durning was awarded The Legion of Honor in 2008 for his participation in liberating France, Consul General of France Philippe Larrieu addressed Durning in his speech: "On D-Day, you took part in the invasion at Omaha Beach, landing early in the day with a battalion of Rangers, alongside the First Infantry Division. Your unit suffered heavy casualties, though you yourself made it to safety. You were seriously injured by a landmine."

But Durning didn't do anything to dispel all the things said about him. His actual service wouldn't have made him any less deserving of the Legion of Honor.

"Even if he hadn't been on Omaha Beach, what he experienced was massive trauma, so psychologically it affected him obviously. It's enough to haunt anyone for life," said Kersahw.

Hospital records indicate that Durning was declared "fit for full-field duty" on Dec. 6, 1944. The disposition note reads, "[Patient] is now able to walk 12 miles without pack."

Six days later, he was transferred to the 10th Replacement Control Depot, where he again became a replacement.

"The situation with replacements was one of the worst aspects of filling the ranks for the Americans in WWII. It was notoriously damaging to the individuals and it was something that came under a lot of criticism after the war and during the war. Most WWII historians that focus on the individual experience will always complain about it and say how unjust and cruel it was. What you had were kids with very little training, dropped into hell and thrust into a front line situation. They didn't know what they were doing, so they attracted fire, they made mistakes. It was a terrible situation to be."

BATTLE OF THE BULGE/MALMEDY

In a 2008 interview Durning told SAG AFTRA's Alan Rosenberg, "The day I got out of the hospital, the Battle of the Bulge started, and everybody had to go up there. If you could pull a trigger, you had to go up. I got wounded twice up there and got the Silver Star. But I got out. I did the march to Malmedy when they killed over 200 prisoners."

According to one military website, "Durning was stabbed eight times by a bayonet-wielding teenage German soldier. That day, he survived by killing the German with a rock in hand-to-hand combat. Durning recovered from those wounds and was released from the hospital just in time to fight in the Battle of the Bulge, where he was taken prisoner."



In Hudsucker Proxy

Durning does not appear on any roster of the 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion — the ill-fated outfit massacred by the 1st SS Panzer Division in Malmedy. Further, the only combat wounds listed on a medical report filed just prior to his discharge are the shrapnel wounds from June of 1944. There are no bayonet wounds listed.

Even more confusing is the absence of the word "Ardennes" from the "Battles and Campaigns" section on his discharge papers, implying that he missed the Bulge altogether.

Unfortunately, the heroic act for which he was subsequently recognized with the Silver Star still remains unknown.

What also remains unknown is the unit Durning shipped out to from the 10th Replacement Depot during the Battle of the Bulge.

"All this movement of Durning from one outfit to another is fairly typical of what happened to many members of the U.S. Armed Forces that reached the limits of institutional turmoil," Pritzker said.

"Remember, between 12 to 16 million people served in the U.S. Armed Forces between 1939 and 1945 — 12 million on duty in 1945. So it is no wonder that tracing what happened to one private nearly 70 years ago is such a challenge."

Reports after the war indicate that he was a rifleman with the [159th Infantry Regiment](#) — an outfit sent in the last weeks of the war to reconstitute the regiments in the [106th Infantry Division](#) that were decimated in the Bulge. It's entirely possible that Durning had been sent as a replacement to one those companies after he was declared fit for duty, but the records don't indicate that he participated in the fighting in the Ardennes.

Durning isn't the first person to have exaggerated his military record. Fellow actor Brian Dennehy repeatedly claimed to have been wounded in action in Vietnam, when in fact his only Marine service was in Okinawa in 1962, playing football.

Other cases include Iowa Senator Tom Harken, who lied about participating in combat in Vietnam and Cuba; silent film actor Tom Mix, who said he fought at San Juan Hill with Teddy Roosevelt, but never participated in combat of any kind; and historian James Ellis, who spun untrue tales of having served as a paratrooper in Vietnam.

"When veterans recount their experiences, it changes quite a bit," said Kershaw.

"Over the years, their stories change slightly, because all of our memories change. Even with credible veterans, not inclined to exaggerate to make stuff up, and then suddenly a movie comes out. The classic example was the USS Indianapolis, and every single Indianapolis survivor you could find and interview before *Jaws* would say, 'there were absolutely no sharks in the water when the Indianapolis went down.' After Robert Shaw makes that great speech about sharks in the water and suddenly all of these Indianapolis survivors remember sharks. So, it's interesting how broader popular culture affects even veterans."



Getting a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

And then there are those who invariably take issue with their fellow veterans, celebrity or otherwise, that misrepresent their war records.

"I don't know about Mr. Durning, but it makes me angry when somebody lies about their military past," said Joseph Davis, a USAF veteran of the Gulf War and a public affairs official for the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

"You're a con man if you pass yourself off as someone you aren't. It makes me extremely angry."

THE MEDIA

The discrepancy between military records and Durning's stories raise questions about the press' responsibility to check records that have been available to the public since the Freedom of Information Act.

This hasn't been an easy task. A massive fire at the National Personnel Records Center in 1973 destroyed 80 percent of U.S. Army's WWII personnel records, causing most people to rely on the inaccurate source material, like word of mouth information or faulty testimonies.

But while the fire also destroyed all rosters for 1944-46, Army morning reports miraculously survived.

Morning reports are army documents detailing personnel changes for the day, status of soldiers in the unit, which unit they may have transferred from, if they've been promoted, demoted, assigned temporarily to another unit, etc.

Military historians swear by these records, which, when pieced together correctly, create a realistic timeline of an individual in the military — more reliable than the veterans' often less-than-accurate versions of their past.

Durning's is just one of many worth re-exploring.

Among the media outlets who have repeated Durning's unsubstantiated claims are *The Boston Herald*, *The Orlando Sentinel*, AOL.com, salon.com, *The Washington Post*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Guardian*, Reuters, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the Associated Press.

SUCCESS IN MILITARY, ACTING

After Durning returned from the war, he achieved a success on Broadway and in Hollywood that seemed to reflect his fighting spirit. Ironically, his many post-war accomplishments need no embellishment.



Charles Durning is at rest. Mysteries around his military service are not.

He won a Tony Award for best actor and also received 2 Academy Award nominations for best actor, 9 Emmy Award nominations, a Golden Globe award for best actor, 4 Golden Globe nominations, and a Lifetime Achievement award from the Screen Actors Guild.

"One of the last things written about my father was 'if he had his druthers he would have loved to die on Christmas day,'" said Douglas Durning.

"That's not true at all. He didn't want to die. He thought he'd live forever and one actually thought that he would, because he was one strong son of a bitch. My father never wanted to write a memoir; he never wanted anyone to write anything about him. He didn't want to direct or produce, he just wanted to act. That's all he ever wanted to do. He was proud of every role because he was an actor, not a critic."

"To me Charlie's legacy is that he was the consummate professional and he was able to show that the good guys don't finish last," Mantegna said. "If people are going to ask me who my heroes are, he's right at the top of the list. He was the consummate character actor. The range this guy had. Every role, he brought something special to it. But the joy, professionalism, and spirit, all of that was equal to the talent. Then of course Charlie is the reason I got involved with the Memorial Day concert, which changed my life in many ways.

Durning had a respectable military past and a successful acting career; he was awarded the military's third highest honor for valor in WWII, the Silver Star. Why he didn't dispel the untruths surrounding him remains unclear.

This year's National Memorial Day Concert, just held in Washington, DC paid tribute to Durning, touching on his D-Day experiences thus perpetuating inaccurate claims surrounding his war years..

DURNING CHARLES E 32 726 378 Pfc CMP AUS *Page 2*

6. ORGANIZATION 7. Date of Separation 8. Place of Separation
 398th Inf Regt 30 Jan 46 Sep Ctr Ft Dix NJ

9. PERMANENT ADDR. FOR MAILING PURPOSES 10. Date of Birth 11. Place of Birth
 2 Cooks Lane Highlands Falls NY 28 Feb 23 Highland Falls NY

12. ADDR. FR. WHICH EMPLOYMENT WILL BE BOUGHT 13. Color Eyes 14. Color Hair 15. HT. 16. WT. 17. NO. TEETH
 See 9 Blue Brun 5-6" 160

18. RACE 19. MARITAL STATUS 20. U.S. CITIZEN 21. CIVILIAN OCCUPATION A
 White Single Yes No Student X-02

MILITARY HISTORY

22. DATE OF INDUCTION 23. DATE OF RELIST. 24. DATE OF ENTRY INTO ACTIVE SERV. 25. PLACE OF ENTRY INTO SERVICE
 20 Jan 43 27 Jan 43 NYC NY

26. REGISTERED SERVICE DATA 27. LOCAL SS ED. NO. 28. CNTY & STATE 29. HOME ADDR. AT TIME OF ENTRY INTO SERVICE
 YES NO 304 Grange Co NY See 9

30. MILITARY OCCUPATIONAL SPECIALTY AND NO. 31. MILITARY QUALIFICATION AND RATE (I INF, AVN, etc.)
 745 Rifleman M1 Rifle Ex 165 5 Mar 45

32. BATTLES AND CAMPAIGNS
 Normandy GO 33 WD 45 as amended

33. DECORATIONS AND CITATIONS
 American Service Medal European African Middle Eastern Service Medal Good Conduct Medal Purple Heart Silver Star World War II Victory Medal

34. WOUNDS RECEIVED IN ACTION 29 Jun 44 ETO

35. LATEST LIEUTENANT DATES

36. SERV. COURSE COM. U. S. AND FOREIGN	DATE DEP.	DATE ARR.
17 Jan 45	7 Dec 43	7 Dec 43
12 Feb 44	None	19 Feb 44
8 Jan 46	USA	24 Jan 46

37. TOTAL LENGTH OF SERVICE 38. HIGHEST GRADE HELD
 2 0 21 1 11 13 Pfc

39. PRIOR SERVICE None
 40. REASON AND AUTHORITY FOR SEPARATION
 Convenience of the Government AR 615-365 15 Dec 44 and RR 1-1 (Demobilization)

41. SERVICE SCHOOLS ATTENDED None

42. EDUCATION (YEARS)
 GRADE SCH HIGH SCH COLLEGE
 8 4 0

PAY DATA

43. LONGEVITY FOR PAY PURP.	44. MONTHS FOR PAY	45. SOLD. DEPT.	46. TRAVEL PAY
3 0 11	\$ 300	\$ 100	\$ None
47. TOTAL AMOUNT 192.23	NAME OF DISBURSING OFFICER J HARRIS COL PD		

INSURANCE NOTICE

48. KIND OF INSURANCE	49. HOW PAID	50. DATE OF SEPARATION	51. DATE WHEN PLAN. PUS	52. PERS. DUE EACH MO
X U.S. GOVT. NOSH	X ALLOT. 20 P.A.	31 Jan 46	28 Feb 46	\$ 6.50
53. INTENTION OF VETERAN: CONTINUE		CONTINUE ONLY \$ DISCONTINUE X		

54. RIGHT THUMB PRINT
 Lapel Button Issued
 ASR Score (2 Sep 45) 61 Inactive ERG from 20 Jan 43 to 26 Jan 43

55. SIGNATURE OF PERSON SEPARATED
 /s/ Charles E. Durning

56. PERSONNEL OFFICER (Type name grade and organization, signa.)
 /s/ G W MILES CWO USA
 AUTHORITY: VETERANS ADMINISTRATION FORM 4505
 June 18 1946.

Thomas J. Kelly
 C.D. 181

MIMO CD # -10
 This is a true copy:

source: Steve Karras 05/27/2013



Page last revised
James D. West
www.IndianaMiliary.org