

1945 September 17-23

Cloak & Dagger Soldier

Vingers, With Army Strategic Service Division, Discharged



—Tribune Photo
HAROLD O. VINGERS

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 September 23, page 11)

Harold O. Vingers of La Crosse was discharged from the Army on September 16, 1945, at Camp McCoy. According to the article in the *La Crosse Tribune* of September 23, he had served in the [Office of Strategic Services](#) in England.¹ The [OSS](#) was the famous American intelligence and undercover military operations unit of World War II that was the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Of course, there is some glamour in being associated with an elite or secret military organization. But Harold Vingers was not a "[stolen valor veteran](#)" making up stories to impress the hometown folk. There are records for him in the "[Personnel Files of the Office of Strategic Services](#)" at the National Archives.

Harold Oscar Vingers was born on April 3, 1907, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. His parents were John and Minnie (Schildmann) Vingers.² He was the fifth son for the couple; his older brothers were Leroy, John, Frederick, and Walter. Two years later, younger brother Leonard was born.³ Another son and a daughter died before 1918.⁴

The family moved to La Crosse sometime between 1911 and 1913. Their home was at 1307 South 6th Street. John Vingers had worked in a flour mill in Minneapolis. His other jobs were as a mechanic and in candy manufacturing. Sons Frederick and Leroy (Roy) also worked in the candy trade in La Crosse.⁵

Roy, the oldest Vingers son, enlisted in the U.S. Army on February 19, 1915. He was part of the American expeditionary force at the U.S.-Mexico border in 1916. In September 1917, Roy left La Crosse for training in Texas. He shipped over to France in February 1918 as part of General John Pershing's American Expeditionary Force in the 128th Infantry Regiment of the 32nd Division. Sgt. Roy Vingers was killed in action during the Second Battle of the Marne in France on August 5, 1918. In April 1921, his mother, Minnie, petitioned the local American Legion to rename their post after her son. The [American Legion Post No. 52](#) in La Crosse still bears his name.⁶



Sgt. Roy L. Vingers
(La Crosse Public Library Archives)

By 1920, the family had moved to 1329 Farnam Street in La Crosse. They also had a seventh son, Leslie, and an eighth son, George, who was seven years old in 1920.⁷

Harold Vingers attended high school for just one year.⁸

In 1924, when he was 18 years old, Harold and his 21-year-old brother, Walter, got into trouble with the law. Nine young men were implicated in the theft of liquor and wine from the home of Dr. F. R. Weston, 1627 Main Street. Four of the group were members of the National Guard. After an evening of military drilling, the four drove to a cigar store on Main Street where they met up with the other five. The group decided to get some booze and have a party. After driving around for a while, 19-year-old Ralph Duerrwaechter told them he had seen wine kegs on the back porch of Dr. Weston's home, so that

seemed to be a likely source for alcohol. (This was during Prohibition.) Four of them broke through several doors and stole multiple jugs and bottles of wine, along with 12 pints of whiskey. The Weston family was away from home at the time. The group first drove to "the aviation field" to split up their booty and start consuming it. The party then moved to 20-year-old Donald Burritt's cellar before concluding at Pettibone Park around 3:00 a.m. Three of the group met the next day and sold the remaining beverages. Judge Higbee sentenced the eight men who were 18 to 21 years old to three years in the Green Bay reformatory for theft, and a 16-year-old to three years at the state industrial school for boys. Harold Vingers, who had admitted to being the driver that night, had the possibility of parole after serving at least part of his sentence. His brother, Walter, who was one of the four who had broken into the Weston home, had to serve his sentence without the possibility of parole.⁹ The judge gave no leniency to the brother of a war hero.

Less than two years later, Harold Vingers was out of prison and married to a 17-year-old girl. He and his wife were living at 224 State Street when they had a baby boy at St. Ann's Hospital on September 21, 1926.¹⁰

By 1930, twenty-three-year-old Harold and his twenty-one-year-old wife, Lorraine, were back living with his parents at 1329 Farnam Street. Harold's occupation was listed as a salesman for a malt manufacturer.¹¹

By 1935, Harold's parents and Harold moved to 1335 Farnam Street. In 1940, Harold, then 32 years old, was no longer married and lived with his parents. He was working as a truck driver.¹² Harold worked for Stukins Distributing Company at 221 Cameron Street.¹³

At the age of 33, Harold Vingers entered the United States Army on April 14, 1941, at Milwaukee as a single man without dependents.¹⁴ He was back home before the end of November the same year after being discharged from [Camp Livingston, Louisiana](#).¹⁵ Vingers was in the [32nd Infantry Division](#) until he was released because of his age.¹⁶

After Pearl Harbor, Vingers was called back into the Army.¹⁷ He was a sergeant in the military police at [Fort Jackson, South Carolina](#), in May 1943.¹⁸

When he was home on furlough in November 1943, Sgt. Vingers suffered a severe concussion when he fell down a staircase at Recreation alleys at 11:35 p.m. on a Wednesday night.¹⁹ He apparently spent some time recuperating in the hospital at Camp McCoy.²⁰

His next assignment was the 1672nd Service Unit at Fort Sheridan, Illinois, in January 1944.²¹ This may have been where he started his Office of Strategic Services (OSS) training. He was in England two months later when his father died in La Crosse.²²

What he did with the OSS in England for seventeen-and-one-half months is unknown.

The OSS was born in July 1941 when President Roosevelt appointed [William J. Donovan](#) as the Coordinator of Information (COI). This was an intelligence agency intended to collect and analyze information related to national security. It also took on propaganda, subversion, and commando operations during World War II.²³

In 1942, the OSS was operating intelligence and clandestine operations around the world. By late 1944, there were almost 13,000 men and women working for the OSS on propaganda, subversion, and commando operations against the Axis.²⁴



OSS shoulder patch
(ebay)

Some of the activities of the OSS during World War II were:

- gathering intelligence in foreign countries
- developing networks of informants
- supporting, supplying, organizing, and training resistance groups in occupied countries
- operating clandestine radio stations
- infiltrating occupied countries
- rescuing downed Allied airmen
- training and inserting agents into foreign countries
- counterintelligence activities
- target identification and assessment for bombing raids
- sabotage against enemy targets

When OSS agents were captured, they were often subjected to torture and execution.²⁵

Vingers left England on August 15, 1945, and he was discharged on September 16 at Camp McCoy.²⁶

President Harry Truman dissolved the Office of Strategic Services in October 1945. But in February 1946, President Truman created the Central Intelligence Group (CIG). This became the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) with The National Security Act of 1947. A former member of the OSS, [Colonel Aaron Bank](#), organized U.S. Army Special Forces in 1952 to continue some of the other missions pioneered by the OSS.²⁷

Many of America's cold warriors in the early decades of the CIA were World War II veterans of the OSS. These included future CIA directors [Allen Dulles](#), [Richard Helms](#), [William Colby](#), and [William Casey](#).²⁸

Other notables who worked for the OSS during its existence were: U.S. Supreme Court Justice [Arthur Goldberg](#), historian [Arthur Schlesinger Jr.](#), film director [John Ford](#), actor [Sterling Hayden](#), Nobel Peace Prize winner [Ralph Bunche](#), baseball player [Moe Berg](#), and chef [Julia Child](#).²⁹

The rest of Harold Vingers life was not as notable. He was returned to his previous job as a salesman for the Kraft Cheese Co.³⁰

Here Is News From
GRA-BAR'S P and J 320 Pearl St.

Starting Thursday Feb. 13th at 11:00 a. m. you will again be able to enjoy a quick noon light lunch. It will be properly prepared and quickly served under the supervision of

HAROLD O. VINGERS

If I Don't Know You I'd Like To!
Come In And See Us

SCHLITZ ON TAP AS ALWAYS

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1947 February 12, page 4)

Harold Vingers married for a second time on July 17, 1948, to Elizabeth Nolan, in St. Paul, Minnesota. They were divorced in September 1951. Elizabeth took her maiden name and \$5.00 a week in alimony.³¹

Vingers lived at 333 Buchner Place in La Crosse in his later years. He was 74 years old when he died on March 21, 1982. The only survivors mentioned in his obituary were four brothers, including Leslie and Leonard in La Crosse. Of his wartime exploits, it simply states: "He was a World War II veteran." Harold Vingers is buried in Oak Grove Cemetery.³²



Oak Grove Cemetery, La Crosse, Wisconsin
(Find a Grave.com)

Who knows what secrets and tales rest beneath this simple gravestone.

Jeff Rand
Adult Services Librarian
La Crosse Public Library
jrand@lacrosselibrary.org

Sources & Notes:

¹ "Vingers, With Army Strategic Service Division, Discharged," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 September 23, page 11.

² Ancestry.com, *Minnesota, Births and Christenings Index, 1840-1980* [database on-line] (Provo, Utah: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011).

³ Ancestry.com, *1910 United States Federal Census* [database on-line] (Lehi, Utah: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2006).

⁴ Jenny DeRocher, "Silent City 2018-Roy L. Vingers," 2018. DeRocher is an assistant archivist at the La Crosse Public Library.

⁵ DeRocher.

⁶ DeRocher.

⁷ Ancestry.com, *1920 United States Federal Census* [database on-line] (Provo, Utah: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010).

⁸ Ancestry.com, *U.S., World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946* [database on-line] (Provo, Utah: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2005).

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- ⁹ "Eight Youths Sentenced For Liquor Theft," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1924 July 2, page 1. The names of the four who were in the National Guard are not indicated in the article, but Harold Vingers was with the 32nd Infantry Division, a National Guard unit, in 1941 after it had been called up for federal service.
- ¹⁰ "Births," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1926 September 24, page 5.
- ¹¹ Ancestry.com, *1930 United States Federal Census* [database on-line] (Provo, Utah: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2002).
- ¹² Ancestry.com, *1940 United States Federal Census* [database on-line] (Provo, Utah: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012).
- ¹³ Ancestry.com, *U.S., World War II Draft Cards Young Men, 1940-1947* [database on-line] (Lehi, Utah: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011).
- ¹⁴ *World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946*.
- ¹⁵ "Locals," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1941 November 22, page 2.
- ¹⁶ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 September 23.
- ¹⁷ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 September 23.
- ¹⁸ "Our Men In Service," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1943 May 17, page 3.
- ¹⁹ "Soldier Is Injured In Fall Down Stairs," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1943 November 4, page 20.
- ²⁰ "Our Men In Service," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1943 December 9, page 11.
- ²¹ "Our Men In Service," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 January 18, page 5.
- ²² "John Vingers," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 March 10, page 10.
- ²³ "COI Came First," *Central Intelligence Agency*, 2008 June 28, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/intelligence-history/oss/art02.htm>.
- ²⁴ "What Was OSS?" *Central Intelligence Agency*, 2008 June 28, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/intelligence-history/oss/art03.htm>.
- ²⁵ For more on the OSS in World War II, see: Anthony Cave Brown, ed. *The Secret War Report of the OSS* (New York: Berkeley Publishing Corporation, 1976); and Edward Hymoff, *The OSS in World War II* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972).
- ²⁶ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 September 23.
- ²⁷ "An Enduring Legacy," *United States Army*, accessed 2020 September 28, <https://www.soc.mil/OSS/oss-legacy.html>.
- ²⁸ Sarah Pruitt, "OSS: The Predecessor of the CIA," *History.com*, 2018 August 31, <https://www.history.com/news/oss-the-predecessor-of-the-cia>.
- ²⁹ Pruitt.
- ³⁰ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 September 23.
- ³¹ "Grant Divorce Decrees Here," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1951 September 25, page 6.
- ³² "Harold O. Vingers," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1982 March 30, page 27.