

Jerry McKelvy's  
**SANDYLAND CHRONICLE**

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**SPECIAL ISSUE**

**THE HERO OF HEN HILL**

Every war has its heroes—those who distinguish themselves in some way by a courageous act. Those heroes are later awarded medals for their heroism. Later in this article I will tell you about one such hero.

I recently was looking through some of my Dad's military papers. I learned that he was in Co. G of the 382d Infantry, a part of the 96<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in World War 2. I found a web site which says a unit designated as a "company" had from 100 to 250 men and was made up of two or more platoons. A platoon usually had from 16 to 50 men. A division such as the 96<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division had from 10,000 to 15,000 men.

We have a large book called "The Deadeyes—The Story of the 96<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division" which gives an interesting and detailed account of their part in the war. The book is almost 300 pages and has many pictures. Much of the information in this article comes from that book.

Expert rifle marksmanship was stressed by the commanding generals of The 96<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and for this reason they came to be known as "The Deadeyes". These men trained for months at Ft. Lewis, Washington and Camp Adair in Oregon before leaving on their mission to the South Pacific. The men sailed out into the Pacific under the Golden Gate Bridge at San Francisco on July 11, 1944. It was a long trip from San Francisco to the Philippines. The five ships were loaded heavily with supplies. The men were confined in cramped quarters and the tropical heat on the decks made the trip very uncomfortable. There was not much for the men to do except to continue with training and prepare for what was to come. The men exercised to keep in shape and had daily weapons inspections.

Everybody in the military had a job to do and they received training for that job. Some were assigned to be mechanics, electricians; radio technicians, clerks, and many other jobs. All these men had received combat training in addition to whatever specialty job they had been assigned to do. My Dad was assigned to be a cook and completed a six weeks course at the Cook and Bakers School.

## **SANDYLAND CHRONICLE**

Preparing food in wartime was quite a bit different than preparing food back in the States. Field kitchens had to be set up and that could only be done after an area was secure. Cooking was sometimes done in trucks. The men had to rely on “C” rations or “K rations” during an actual battle.

Five days after leaving San Francisco, the ships arrived in the Hawaiian Islands. For most of these men, this was their first trip outside the United States and for many it was their first trip across the ocean. I remember my Dad telling about how much he missed seeing trees while on that trip. The men didn’t get to enjoy their time in the Hawaiian Islands like tourists because most of their time was spent in jungle warfare training in a remote part of the island of Oahu. They learned how to keep their equipment dry while crossing swollen streams and how to survive by eating mangoes, papayas, and coconuts. This training lasted until September. The ships were again stocked with supplies and equipment and left the Hawaiian Islands headed into the South Pacific. The men knew they were headed for battle, but didn’t know the exact place.

### **LEYTE**

The destination for the 96<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division turned out to be the island of Leyte for a planned attack on October 20, 1944. It had been almost three months since they left San Francisco. Gen. James Bradley, the commander of the 96<sup>th</sup> Division had told the men “We must kill or be killed”. The plan was to make an amphibious landing on the beaches of Leyte. They had expected fierce resistance from the Japanese during the landing, but the Japanese had changed their strategy and the men were able to come ashore with little resistance. One reason was that the landing was in a very swampy area that was not well defended by the Japs. They didn’t think the Americans would attempt a landing in such a swampy area.

The biggest enemy the men faced during the landing was the swamp. The trucks, tanks, and other equipment all got stuck in the mud. Even the tracked vehicle called The Weasel had trouble getting through the swamps. The men waded hip-deep swamps carrying all their equipment and sometimes had to crawl on their hands and knees to keep from sinking in the mire. Only the basic necessities of life were carried; anything not absolutely needed was thrown away. They carried a few packs of “K rations” in their pockets and each man had two canteens of water. This was what they lived on for three days plus any coconuts they were

## **SANDYLAND CHRONICLE**

able to find. In battle, soldiers were given assault rations or “K rations” when normal field kitchens could not be used. The “K ration” was a three piece kit containing breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It provided 9000 calories per day of non-perishable foods. Imagine having to eat the same type meal every day during a long battle. Many cans of Spam were also used in World War 2. The men called it “ham that didn’t pass the physical”.

As they got on higher ground, they encountered the enemy. This was the first actual battle experience for most of these men. Three days after landing, the men of Co. G (my Dad’s company) came upon a river and found some Japanese soldiers bathing in the river. At least ten were killed, literally caught with their pants down. At night, the Deadeyes dug in, sleeping in “foxholes” with orders to shoot anything above ground that moved.

Over the next several days and weeks, they flushed the Japs from the area with major battles being fought at Catmon Hill, Tabontabon, Dagami Heights, White Chalk Ridge, and other places. The Leyte campaign lasted until March 9, 1945—almost six months from the time they first landed on the island. The 96<sup>th</sup> Division troops had killed 7700 Japs. The U. S. casualties were 376 killed, 4 missing, 1289 wounded, and 2500 suffering from illness or injury. The Leyte campaign was an overwhelming victory for the Americans.

It was during this battle for Leyte that my Dad developed a foot condition known as “jungle rot” which caused severe itching and scaling of the feet and hands. This condition bothered him the rest of his life. I remember one bad attack when he had to keep his hands and feet wrapped in plastic bags for several days while the medicine worked to heal the sores.

The Deadeyes deserved a long rest after Leyte, but it was not to be. They received orders to go to Okinawa and they only had six weeks to prepare for the next battle.

### **OKINAWA**

The Okinawa campaign had the code name “Operation Iceberg”. The island was about 67 miles long and 3 to 10 miles wide. Okinawa was only 330 miles from Japan and the plan was to take the island and construct an air field and place for

## **SANDYLAND CHRONICLE**

troops to deploy when it came time to invade Japan. The island was more scenic than Leyte and the humidity wasn't as bad. Choices of where to come ashore were limited due to coral reefs and a sea wall. Again, the Deadeyes chose to make a landing in a place that was not well guarded and the landing was carried out with few casualties. The 381st and 383<sup>rd</sup> made the initial assault on Easter Sunday while the 382<sup>nd</sup> (the unit my Dad was in) carried out a diversionary move and made their landing later the same day.

It was said this island was well populated with the very aggressive poisonous habu snake. All the men carried snake bite kits, but few of the snakes were found. The hillsides on Okinawa had many elaborate ancestral burial vaults or tombs. These burial vaults (or tombs) were of different sizes. Some were just for one family and others were large enough for a large number of people. They were well maintained by the families. All burials in Okinawa were above ground. A coffin was placed inside the tomb for three years where it decomposed. The family (mostly the women) then entered the tomb and washed the bones of the deceased and placed them in an urn. The urn was placed back in the tomb for 33 more years until a final ceremony was held. Families visited the tombs in April of each year for a ceremony of prayer, singing, and having a picnic at the tomb in honor of the deceased. This has been the custom in Okinawa for generations.

The Japanese had taken over many of these tombs which were located on hillsides and used them as look-out posts to attack the Americans. The Deadeyes had to search these tombs as they went to make sure they were not being used by the enemy. Some had been booby-trapped by the Japs. They had been given orders not to desecrate the tombs, but many American soldiers used them for shelter during the battle. I remember my Dad telling about taking shelter in the tombs with the bones of the deceased. Many civilians of Okinawa also sought refuge in the burial vaults during the battle because the Japanese had told them the Americans would torture them. Many of them committed suicide rather than risk being captured by the Americans.

Even though the landing at Okinawa was pretty much uneventful, the Deadeyes soon encountered stiff resistance from the Japanese. The Japanese had heavily fortified the island using caves, tunnels, and the burial vaults on the hillsides. For the Americans, it was like walking into an ambush

## **SANDYLAND CHRONICLE**

It was about this time the Japanese unveiled a new weapon—a 320mm mortar which left a crater 30 to 40 feet wide and 15 feet deep. This weapon caused many injuries from flying rocks and other debris. It was very frightening to be near where one of these shells hit.

The battle for Okinawa continued on for weeks. Battles were fought at places with such names as Cactus Hill, Kakazu Ridge, Sawtooth Ridge, and Tombstone Ridge. The Japanese holed up in caves and had to be rooted out. One of the generals stated “A thing you’ve got to bear in mind about the Japs is that they are burrowing animals. They can climb trees and they can swim, but primarily they’re burrowers. You have to dig ‘em out before you can kill ‘em”.

A week of almost constant rainfall during the battle caused all kinds of problems. Equipment became stuck in the mud. Foxholes filled up with water so that the men had no protection but had to just lie on the ground. The men were covered from head to toe with mud.

American casualties were much higher here than on Leyte. On April 19, 1945, the Deadeyes lost more men than any other single day. The battle for Okinawa is considered to be the bloodiest battle of the Pacific during World War 2.

Casualties for the 96<sup>th</sup> Division at Okinawa were 1598 killed and 5614 wounded. The 382<sup>nd</sup> (my Dad’s unit) lost 382 killed and 1948 wounded. Soldiers who were killed in battle were buried in the 96<sup>th</sup> Division’s cemetery on Okinawa. Large graves were dug by bulldozers. The bodies were wrapped in canvas and buried in a common grave. There is a short video on YouTube showing this being done.

The fighting at Okinawa lasted from Easter until June 24, 1945. The men dug “foxholes” for protection from the shells and slept whenever they could. They took baths in streams they came across. Even while dodging the enemy shells, they had to be watching out for the poisonous habu snakes. Near the end of the war, the Japanese resorted to suicide missions, attacking the Americans naval and land forces. When one Japanese unit ran out of ammunition, they began throwing rocks and trying to attack the Americans with swords. Total casualties for the Allies at Okinawa were 12,000 killed or missing and 38,000 wounded. Japanese military killed were about 107,000 plus about 100,000 Okinawa natives.

## SANDYLAND CHRONICLE

The Japanese committed many atrocities during this battle including beheadings. They often used the natives of Okinawa as human shields. Many of the civilians committed suicide because the Japanese had convinced them the Americans were barbarians who would kill and torture them. In some cases, whole families killed themselves by jumping off high cliffs. Many poisoned themselves with strychnine. The Japanese even gave the people hand grenades and ordered them to use them to kill themselves. Many hid in caves and burial vaults and died as a result of the artillery shelling. About one-third of the civilian population of Okinawa died during the Battle of Okinawa from suicide or from the fighting. There was also the danger of diseases like cholera due to the large number of dead bodies left unburied for long periods of time. There is a book available about the mass suicides of the people of Okinawa during this battle. It is called *Descent into Hell: Civilian Memories of the Battle of Okinawa*. The book is about 500 pages and contains interviews with Okinawans who survived the battle and witnessed some of these things.

Americans captured by the Japanese were often subjected to harsh treatment as POWs, including being forced into slave labor, starvation, and being used for medical experiments and target practice. Reports say that 27.1% of the American prisoners of war held by the Japanese died while being held compared to only 3.6% of POWs held by the Nazis in Europe. History also records some cases of atrocities committed by American soldiers on the bodies of dead Japanese soldiers. Some soldiers searched the dead bodies of the Japanese soldiers looking for souvenirs.

The large number of casualties suffered at the battle of Okinawa played a big part in convincing President Truman to drop the atomic bomb on Japan. The battle of Okinawa was a preview of what the planned invasion of Japan might look like. The decision was made to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and this convinced the Japanese it was time to surrender even though the Japanese strongly believed it was more honorable to die than to surrender. Most people believe that the decision to drop the atomic bomb saved thousands of lives on both sides that would have occurred if a full-scale invasion of Japan had been necessary.

My Dad served one year and five months in the Pacific at Oahu, Leyte, and Okinawa. He never talked much about his war experiences, but occasionally he

## **SANDYLAND CHRONICLE**

would mention some of the horrific things he witnessed in these battles. He was one of the lucky ones who survived without any physical injury. He did sometimes have nightmares after his service and also suffered greatly from his skin disease acquired during the war. He also developed claustrophobia which he blamed on some of the training he had to go through. In one of the V-Mail letters I have that he sent from Okinawa, he says, "You can tell \_\_\_ that he don't know what it's like over here unless he has been in the infantry in battle. Neither can I tell you for there are not words to express how bad it truly is".

He must have gotten his fill of cooking during the war, because for the rest of his life, I never saw him cook anything except maybe once or twice when he would fry a slice of bologna.

My Dad was discharged in Dec., 1945 after three years and four months of service. He was glad to get back home and resume his normal life of just being a farmer. He never cared much for travel after the war. He had seen enough of the world to last him a lifetime. I was born in 1943 just a few months before his unit left for the Pacific. He only saw me one time during the first two years of my life but he didn't forget me. I have a V-mail letter he sent to me from Leyte on my first birthday in which he expressed hope the war would soon be over and he would be able to come home.

Soldiers must follow orders from their superiors. How things turn out for a particular soldier in wartime depends on many things. Situations can develop rapidly in battle and about all soldiers can do is follow the orders of their superiors and use their training to respond in the best way they know how for each particular situation. In each battle, there must be a winner and a loser. In each battle, there are people killed on both sides. Sometimes, it's just a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I'm sure many prayers were said by these men in battle and by their families back home.

### **PRIVATE FIRST CLASS CLARENCE CRAFT THE HERO OF HEN HILL**

The book I mentioned about the Deadeyes contains many stories of courage in all of the battles in which the 96<sup>th</sup> Division fought. One of the most famous stories was about a young man in Co. G of the 382<sup>nd</sup> Infantry (my Dad's company). He

## SANDYLAND CHRONICLE

had been sent in as a replacement and was an expert rifleman. His act of courage occurred on May 31, 1945 as the Deadeyes were trying to take a place called Hen Hill on Okinawa. They had made several attempts to take the hill but had been driven back each time. Pfc. Clarence Craft managed to get to the top of the hill with a supply of hand grenades and his rifle where he conducted a one-man battle against the enemy. He killed as many as 25 to 30 Japs within 15 minutes while standing in plain view of the Japs on top of the hill. His actions allowed the strategic hill to be taken, hastening the end of the battle at Okinawa. Since my Dad was in the company trying to take this hill, I suppose it is possible Pfc. Clarence Craft may have saved my Dad's life and many others that day.

After the war, Clarence Craft was summoned to the White House and was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest honor for military service, by President Harry Truman. He also served later in the Korean War. Clarence Craft died in 2002 and is buried at Fayetteville National Cemetery in Fayetteville, Arkansas. A city park in Fayetteville is named in his honor.

You can read Clarence Craft's story at the following web site and at the bottom of that page, you can watch a four minute video in which someone tells his story as if Clarence Craft were actually speaking. I would encourage you to watch that video. You can also find his story on the find a grave web site if you search for his name and choose Arkansas as the state.

<http://www.rememberthedeadeyes.com/MedalHonorCraft.html>

### AWARDS AND MEDALS

Here is a list of various medals awarded to the men who served in World War 2 and what they mean. This information is in the back of the book I have.

**Medal of Honor** – “For Conspicuous Gallantry and Intrepity at the Risk of Life Above and Beyond the Call of Duty”

**Distinguished Service Cross** – “For Extraordinary Heroism in Action”

**Distinguished Service Medal** – “For Exceptionally Meritorious Service to the Government in a Duty of Great Responsibility”

**Silver Star**—“For Gallantry in Action”

# SANDYLAND CHRONICLE

**Legion of Merit** – “For Exceptionally Meritorious Conduct in the Performance of Outstanding Services”

**Soldier’s Medal** – “For Heroism not Involving Actual Conflict with the Enemy”

**Bronze Star** – “For Heroic or Meritorious Service in Connection with Military Operations against the Enemy”

**Air Medal** – “For Meritorious Achievement While Participating in Aerial Flight”

The 96<sup>th</sup> Division was awarded “Battle Honors” for “Extraordinary Heroism and Gallantry in Action” on Okinawa from April 1 to June 30, 1945 and received the **Presidential Unit Citation**.

You can find complete information for a veteran in your family by checking their discharge papers. Some can be found at local court houses. In Nevada County, they are found in the circuit clerk’s office. The discharge papers show dates of service, personal information about the veteran (birth date, marital status, height, weight, occupation, etc.). They also show their military history (where they entered service, military occupation, rank, where they served, decorations and citations, place and date of discharge, service schools attended, etc.)

From my Dad’s discharge papers, I learned that he received the World War II Victory Ribbon, Good Conduct Medal, Theater Ribbon, AP Theater Ribbon with Two Bronze Service Stars and One Bronze Arrowhead, Philippine Liberation Ribbon, and one Bronze Star.

For a long time after the war, my Dad didn’t want anything marked “Made in Japan”. It took a long time for some of these men to forget the pain and suffering Japan caused resulting in the loss of some of their friends. In the 1950s and later, many Japanese automobiles and electronic products began to be sold in the U. S. A few years before his death, my Dad won a used Datsun car (made in Japan) in a contest and he drove that old car for several months around Bluff City. I guess he had finally put his anti-Japanese feelings to rest.

After the war, Japan was occupied by the Allies, led by the U. S., until 1952. Today, Japan is an ally of the United State. We have military bases in Japan and also in Okinawa with thousands of men and women still stationed there. These

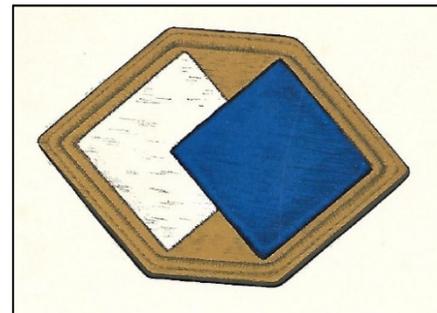
## SANDYLAND CHRONICLE

bases may become very important if North Korea continues to cause problems in that area.

In December, 2016, President Obama and the Japanese prime minister met at the Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the attack. The prime minister of Japan did not officially apologize for the attack on Pearl Harbor, but did say “we must never repeat the horrors of war again”. The two men reaffirmed the friendship and alliance between the two nations. This was quite a change from 75 years earlier when the two nations were bitter enemies.

After reading through the book about the 96<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division (The Deadeyes), I have a greater appreciation for the service of those brave men who served their country in one of the worst wars in human history.

Stories of courage and sacrifice are associated with every branch of military service in all wars and in peacetime. Americans should be thankful for the freedoms we enjoy. We owe a debt of gratitude to these men who gave so much in service to their country. We are blessed to live in “the land of the free and home of the brave” which some have changed to “the land of the free **because** of the brave”.



Sleeve Insignia for the  
96<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division

This picture was among my Dad’s military papers. This was the ship that brought him home after the war. It was the *USS General D. E. Aultman*, one of several ships used for troop transport. This particular ship had accommodations for 3595 enlisted men and over 200 officers. I’m sure the mood of the troops was much better on the voyage home than on the voyage over there. Many from the 96<sup>th</sup> Division did not get to make the voyage home.

# **SANDYLAND CHRONICLE**