

Amonett Family Newsletter
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Hundreds of Veterans Expected to Attend Infantry Reunion

By Ray Westbrook

Remnants of the 96th Infantry Division will gather at the Lubbock Memorial Civic Center Thursday through Saturday to renew friendships and remember the battles of Leyte and Okinawa half a century ago.

More than 900 people, including veterans and wives, are expected to travel to Lubbock from across the United States for the event, according to Glen Amonett of Petersburg, reunion chairman.

"Members of our organization are in their mid-70s because most were in their early 20s at the time of the battles," Amonett said. "We had quite a few 18-year and 19-year-olds going in as replacements. That's really how we kept the infantry divisions on line, was just to replace the casualties. There were a lot."

Pre-registration packets will be available Tuesday afternoon and Wednesday for those veterans who arrive early. Also, a 200-member tour group is scheduled to leave the Holiday Inn Civic Center at 4 p.m. Wednesday to visit the Pitchfork Ranch at Guthrie.

Official activities of the division's reunion will get underway at 8:30 a.m. Thursday with the convening of an executive committee meeting at the Civic Center.

The 96th Infantry Division, which was formed in World War I and disbanded after the war, was reassembled during World War II for combat in the Pacific theater of operations. It was again disbanded after service in that war.

The division gained the nickname of Dead-Eye because of its superior marksmen and became legendary through its prowess with hand grenades.

During the battle of Okinawa, for instance, Pfc. Clarence B. Craft, now of Arkansas, was credited with eliminating 25 enemy soldiers while grenading his way alone to the top of a Japanese-held hill.

Once the routed enemy soldiers were pursued into a cave, Craft bombed the entrance with a satchel charge, sealing them inside.

"He has come to some of the reunions," Amonett said, "But I haven't heard from him yet (this year)."

The 96th Infantry Division lost high-ranking officers in the battle of Okinawa, including Gen. Claudius M. Easley, assistant commander.

Easley had been a veteran of World War I and was known as a front-line soldier.

A portrait of Gen. Easley is scheduled to be presented to family members during the division's meeting at Lubbock.

Amonett's own exploits on Okinawa became news copy following the end of hostilities on the island. He had acquired a Japanese rifle during combat and hid it in a brush-covered hole, planning to return later for the souvenir when the fighting subsided.

When he went back for the weapon, he discovered two war-weary Japanese soldiers were occupying the hole.

"When I came walking into camp with those two Japs after hostilities had ended, it kind of surprised everybody, and the company clerk wrote it up," he said.

"It just happened." He added. "There were a lot of things that would have made equally good stories but didn't happen to get written."

The battle of Okinawa cost the nation 36 ships and the loss of more than 13,300 men, According to Amonett. Another 36,600 were wounded. More than 60,000 military personnel took part in the invasion.

Japan lost more than 110,000 soldiers, Amonett said.

Referring to the 96th Infantry Division's annual convention, Amonett noted, "A lot of the sharing of memories is done one-on-one, sitting around a table up in R&R or something like that."

The reunion will feature a kickoff party at 7 p.m. Thursday in the banquet hall of the Civic Center. Also, 300 people have signed up for a trip to Palo Duro Canyon for a production of "TEXAS."

On Friday, a general meeting will be held at 9 a.m., and an R&R has been planned for 1:30 p.m. to 5 p.m. in the Terrace Suite. The ladies Auxiliary will meet from 9:30 a.m. to 11 a.m. at the Holiday Inn Civic Center.

Saturday's activities include a memorial service at 11 a.m. at the Civic Center and will be followed by church services in the afternoon.

Table reservations may be made at 12:30 p.m. for a concluding banquet and dance at 6:30 p.m. Saturday at the Civic Center.