

WORLD WAR II IN THE PACIFIC IN RETROSPECT

Reflections by an Infantryman
Who Fought the Japanese

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Members of the Daughters of the American Revolution, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. It is an honor to speak here today before the DAR, a society whose noble purposes we all can embrace: historic preservation, promotion of education, and patriotic Endeavor. The National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution has a motto which rings true to all who love and respect the United States: “God, Honor and Country; quite similar to the words of General Douglas MacArthur in his moving farewell address to Cadets at West Point: “Duty, Honor, Country.”

It has been 50 amazing years since the end of WWII which found me on Mindoro Island in the Philippines. Why am I here I have often wondered? God given unbelievable luck which in my opinion, included the Atomic Bomb. My Company L, 382nd Infantry Regiment and most of the rest of the surviving members of the 96th Infantry Division, U.S. Army had just returned to the Philippines to prepare for the invasion of Japan after the brutal Okinawa campaign. Okinawa, the Last Battle. The Typhoon of Steel, had claimed over 10,000 casualties in my Division. Of the 96th Divisions , three Infantry Regiments had borne about 94% of these casualties, a rate of well over 100% per regiment.

I recently returned from the commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Battle of Okinawa, where I witnessed the dedication of the Okinawa Battle Monument, called the “Cornerstone of Peace” by the Prefecture Government of Okinawa. This monument, patterned after the Viet Nam Memorial but on a much larger scale, has inscribed on it the names of 234,000 people who were killed during the battle, including 14,005 U.S. Names. Think of it, 234,000 people killed while taking just a tiny Prefecture of Japan.

Had not the Atomic Bomb ended the war, easily over 1,000,000 would have perished during the climatic invasion of the Japanese main lands including a conservatively estimate of 50,000 Americans. As terrible as the Atomic Bombs were their use saved over a million lives. Don’ t let anyone convince you or the American public otherwise. What would the judgment of President Truman by the American people have been had he not allowed the use of the Atomic Bomb and 50,000 Americans Servicemen had been killed in the November 1945 Invasion? The buck stopped at Harry and he did what was right.

This talk is dedicated to my comrades of the 96th Infantry Division, U.S. Army, World War II especially to the 3,000 men who were killed and the 12,000 who were wounded. Ever etched in my mind is my buddy Tony Nicholo. My last conversation with Tony was November 20, 1944 during combat on Leyte Island in the Philippines. Tony said, “those guys that got hit today were lucky. I have a feeling that when I get hit it will be bad.” (Co. L had 3 men hit by Japanese machine gun fire in the legs that day) The next day I saw Tony dead, a Japanese bullet through his heart.

Whoever heard of the 96th Infantry Division? Not many, I' m afraid. When I have told people I was in the Battle of Okinawa, I' ve been asked: were you in the Marines? This hurts. The Marines fought with great valor on Okinawa, but it did not exceed the valor and achievements of the U.S. Army 96th Division.

My Division was a true cross section of the United States 50 years ago, except for blacks. It was not a regular Army Division, or a National Guard Division, but it was an amalgamation of citizens of our Republic who left their peacetime pursuits: who left their farms, jobs or schools to fight for our Country. It turned out to be one of the great fighting units of World War II. The 96th Infantry Division gave to the nation a proud legacy, one in which glory and victory were the lessor ingredients, hone and courage the greater.

While on Okinawa in June 1995, I had the honor to led a program dedication two monuments to fallen leaders of my Division, both killed in action on Okinawa. General Claudius Easley, Assistant Division Commander and Col. Edwin May, Commanding Officer, 383 Infantry Regiment were chosen as representative of the unsurpassed valor of the men of the 96th Infantry Division. General Easley' s inscription reads: "His disregard of Personal Safety Inspired the Men of the 96th to hold their Lives Lightly in Performance of Their Duty. For His Example he paid the "Supreme Price." The inscription for Col. May reads: "A great Soldier Died Here. His Bravery, Courage and Leadership Will Never Be Forgotten."

I have never ceased to be amazed by the courage and determination shown at the from line Infantry Company level on Okinawa. The Japanese threw everything they had at us including heavy artillery and mortar barrages, but my Company L, "Lover Company" never gave up the attack; though always greatly under-strengthened. We landed on Okinawa with 168 men vs. A table of organization strength called for 192 men. After heavy casualties in April, our May attacks sometimes were down to 50 men.

All told, Company L had 6 Company commanders on Okinawa and for a day was commanded by a Sergeant when we lost our last officer. Without replacements, L Company would have ceased to exist. I have a great respect for those replacements who survived and which I meet today. They entered combat under the worst possible conditions. The learned the dark, foreboding truth about going through a replacement training center.

In October 1994 I joined a group of "Deadeyes" , the 96th Infantry Division Veterans and family and friends returning to Leyte in the Philippines for the 50th Anniversary of the Leyte Landing on October 20, 1944. This group was capably lead by Chuck Moynihan, father of Judy Moynihan, DAR member. Leyte turned out to be a place where us old "dogfaces" of World War II are

still considered heroes. When we arrived at Tacloban, Capital of Leyte, early on the morning of October 17, 1994 we were treated to song by the Tacloban City Chorus. The first song sung was "God Bless America. This brought tears to the eyes of a number of veterans including myself. Fifty years after the liberation of Leyte from the Japanese were still called liberators. This made us feel that the casualties and ravages of disease we suffered were not in vain. Especially rewarding were our visits to the four 96th Infantry Division Memorial Libraries constructed for the children of Leyte by donations from the 96th Divisions veterans at Dagami, Jaro, Tobantabon and Burauen. Cherished in memory is the fact that we gave Tabontabon a library in a Barrio we absolutely destroyed in a fierce battle with the Japanese on October 26-27, 1944. Henry Callihan, Co. C, 392 Infantry is the inspirations behind these libraries. Henry is a recipient of the DAR Medal of Honor.

Hill 120 on Blue Beach 1, taken by my Co. L and Co K, 3rd battalion, 382nd Infantry Division as our first objective on October 20, 1944 is now the site of the 96th Infantry Division Veterans Memorial Park. God Bless the Filipinos on Leyte for remembering us so well. Where else in the world can an American G.I. Walk on a beach and be hailed as "Joe" by a 10 year old kid?

In recent years there has been some debate about the appropriateness of some of the actions of the United States Government during World War II. These questioning individuals all seem to claim a moral basis for condemning certain of our actions taken 50 or more years ago. To this I say, it's easy to mount righteous indignation and condemn after 50 years of hindsight. Had these same critics been alive and a part of WW II populace they then most likely, without the aid of hindsight fully supported the internment of Japanese Americans for example. The overriding fact is our leaders had to make decision and these decisions ultimately led to complete victory.

On a personal level, that is as a combat soldier whose life was on the line, it was not reasonable to ask him to risk his life because there is some possibility that in the darkness the figure creeping up on his foxhole may have been a civilian, instead of a Japanese soldier about to throw a hand grenade into his position. When light came it usually was the enemy, but sometimes it turned out to be an Okinawan woman or old man.

An interesting sidelight was that this summer I was interview by a Japanese Professor who was studying the interaction of U.S. Combat troops with Okinawan civilians during the battle. He told me that one question he was trying to answer was why U.S. Troops on the whole treated Okinawan civilians considerable better than the Japanese 32nd Army men.

A few comments about the current members of our armed forces are appropriate. It was the universal opinion of every member of the 72 person group for which I was a tour leader on Okinawa, that as a whole, the men and

women serving at this time are outstanding. We had as our guides, young service people from the Army, Air Force, and Marines who had spent many weekends of their time on a volunteer basis preparing for our visit by searching out the now almost unidentifiably battle field sites and researching the events of the battle. Contact with many other Army personnel on base and at the events held for us reinforced our most favorable view of people now serving. Retention of high quality officers and enlisted personnel into the future is a must.

And in concluding, a bit about the present. When I came home in January 1946 the prevailing mood of our country was Optimism – faith that our country had the brightest of futures. Unfortunately, I fail to find this abundant optimism today. The reason I believe is that we are bombarded in the media by what’ s sensation and what’ s wrong with our country and the world. Let us all make it a point to talk up what is good about our country, and what a bright future it really can have.

Think of it, The Cold War is over and we won. Peace, progress and prosperity is within our grasp. What’ s wrong with a little cheerleading for our side, the United States? Let’ s do it and see that Optimism is contagious.