

A Deadeye Dogtag Story

It was October 1943. It is not exactly clear how 27 year old Tony Znidarsic came to be at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas.

He was born in Minnesota on May 11, 1916, the only child of Mary and Frank Znidarsic, most likely Austrian immigrants.



The U.S. had already been involved in World War II for almost two years by the time Tony enlisted. PFC Tony Znidarsic was assigned to the 96th Infantry Division, 383rd Infantry Regiment, Company A, also known as “The Deadeyes.” Most likely, Tony spent some time training at Camp White in Oregon before heading for Japan (Hill).

On April 1, 1945, designated as “Love Day,” the 96th Infantry Division landed on the island of Okinawa, Japan. Little did they know that this would be the largest battle to take place in the Pacific during WWII: code named Operation Iceberg.

It was planned to use Okinawa as a base for air operations for the impending attack on mainland Japan (Battle). American forces met lighter than expected opposition during landing. However, that was all part of the Japanese plan for “extended battle attrition which would delay the expected invasion of main land Japan” (Okinawa).

On April 6th American forces reached the main Japanese defenses. Hidden in underground bunkers and stationed at fortified bunkers atop the ridges, clearly the Japanese had the upper hand. Through air raids “and firing everything they had,” American forces were able to push further up the ridges (Appleman).

The next day, April 7, 1945 strong pushes of American forces were able to overtake the opposition, however with heavy losses on both sides.

Tony’s fight was over. He died, most likely near Kakazu (Hill). Over two months later, on June 21, 1945, the US officially gained control of the

island. Two months after that, on August 15, 1945, the Japanese would announce their surrender.

Tony Znidarsic was buried in the 96th Division cemetery on Okinawa. Tony was posthumously awarded the Purple Heart and a presidential commendation for his service, signed by President Roosevelt. These two certificates were mailed to Tony's mother in Kansas City, Kansas. Tony was awarded the Purple Heart, Bronze Star, Asiatic Pacific Medal with two battle stars, Combat Infantry Badge, and two Presidential Unit Citations. On June 15, 1949 he was re-interred at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu, Hawaii.

In 2013, Shawn was going through her recently departed mother's things. Digging through an old trunk, she came across a mailing tube, addressed to a Mary Znidarsic in Kansas City, Kansas, which contained a Purple Heart Certificate and a Presidential commendation letter.

The name on the certificates was not one she had ever heard before. Znidarsic. Surely a name like that would have stuck with her had she heard it mentioned before. Tony Znidarsic must have meant something to someone. Someone out there would treasure these mementoes of his service. But why did her mother have them?

Shawn's journey began to find out who Tony Znidarsic was. Her search led to many brick walls. All she had were a couple of certificates and an old mailing tube with presumably his mother's name and address. She started by going to Ancestry.com and finding no families claiming a Tony Znidarsic. She created an ancestry tree for him with what little info she knew in hopes that someone would see it and contact her.

Eventually she called me and I wanted to help her place Tony's certificates with his family and maybe help Shawn solve the mystery of Tony Znidarsic. My research led me to the same brick walls that Shawn had reached, so I reached out to James Denno of the 96th Infantry Living History Group, Don Dencker of the 96th Infantry Division website, and William Hill of the Remember The Deadeye's website. Through them we were able to discover more about Tony's military history, but still his family remained vague.

Through research it was determined he had no siblings. He wasn't married that any of us ever found record of. It seems that the mystery of Tony Znidarsic may never be solved...until...

January 2014, nearly a year after finding the original documents, Shawn sat going through more of her mother's things. Interested in piecing together her own family tree, she came across a yellowed and crumbling piece of paper, typed many years ago on a typewriter. It listed her father's side of the family, his parents, her father, his sister, and his brother, Joe.

Handwritten in pencil next to Joe's name was the word "Zendarsic". Uncle Joe, born in 1943, had been adopted, and Shawn knew this. But in all her life, she had never once heard his birth name. She couldn't believe it. Was it possible that Tony Znidarsic did in fact have a son?

Shawn knew her grandparents had adopted her uncle when he was a young boy; they lived in Kansas City at the time. Perhaps Mary, Tony's mother, wanting Joe to have a piece of his father, had sent the certificates to Shawn's grandparents, Joe's adopted parents. Naturally, when her grandparents passed, it would explain how the papers ended up in Shawn's mother's things.

Did Uncle Joe know anything about his birth parents? Shawn hadn't seen or spoken to her uncle in many years. But she knew she had to call and find out what he knew. Would he be willing to talk about it? She didn't know. But, she had to find out.

Reaching out to her uncle, she was a little apprehensive about bringing up the past. She started the call with telling him of her mother's passing, which led to, "I was digging through my mom's things. Does the name Znidarsic mean anything to you?"

"Yes, that was my biological father's name," replied Uncle Joe. He went on to share the story of how Tony and his mother married at some point after Tony entered the service, which explains why his entry records stated he didn't have dependents. Joe was about two years old when his father was sent to Japan and shortly after was killed in action. Joe's mother, who lived next door to Shawn's grandparents, went over one day and asked if they could watch little Joe for a few hours while she ran some errands.

That was the last they ever saw of her. After several years and layers of red tape, Shawn's grandparents were able to officially adopt Joe and he took their last name. He has no recollection of his mother or what her name was. Finally, after a year, Tony Znidarsic's mystery was solved. His memory will live on thanks to the determination of Shawn. Uncle Joe is excited to receive the papers that belonged to his father and through the research of the many people who helped piece together the story of Tony Znidarsic, he will have a little piece of the biological father he barely knew.

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