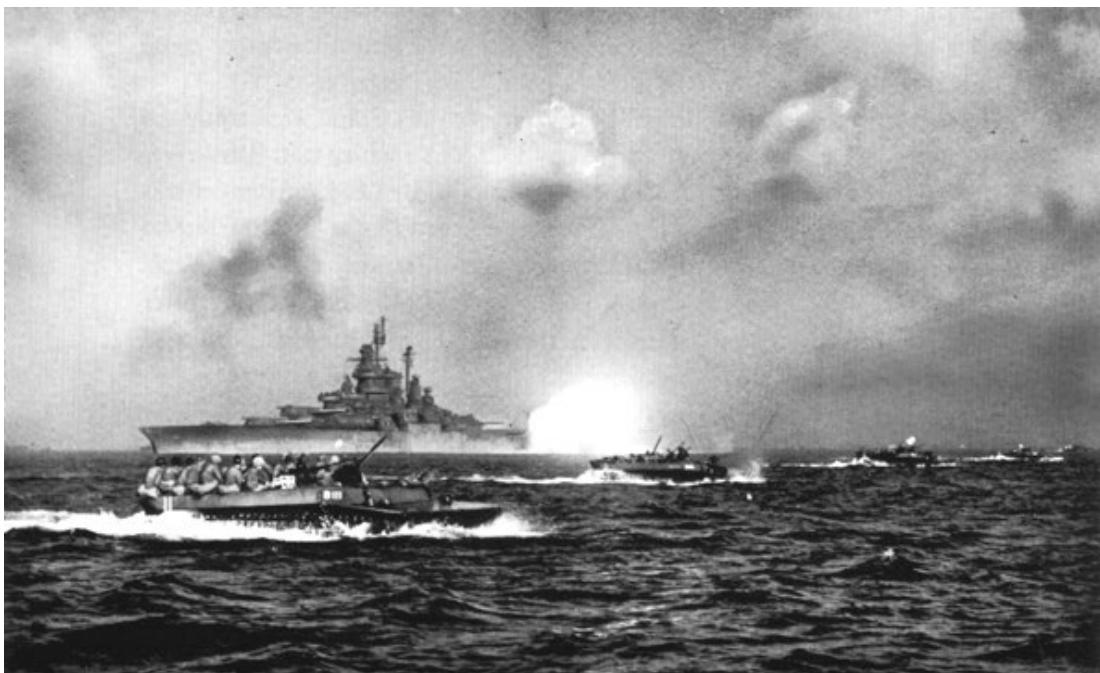


TIMES PAST

Rehearsal at Montaña de Oro

DAN KRIEGER - SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE



Marines in their AMTRACS head for shore, April 1, 1945. The battleship is likely the USS TENNESSEE, modernized after escaping destruction on Battleship Row, Pearl Harbor, on December 7, 1941



This 50-caliber shell casing was found at Montaña de Oro.

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The shores of our county once bristled with soldiers training for battlefields in North Africa, Europe and the Pacific.

Today, in *Times Past*, Arroyo Grande High School history teacher Jim Gregory writes a tribute to these men brought to memory through an artifact found along our coast:

Years ago, when my sons found a World War II 50-caliber shell casing near Montaña de Oro, they were waist-high.

The base of the shell is stamped S L 43 — it was manufactured in the St. Louis Armory — and it was likely fired by a machine-gun crew from the 96th Infantry Division — a division that would fight in the Philippines and Okinawa.

I remembered the 96th's local connection as I was reading an account of the deadly kamikaze campaign, during the spring of 1945, against the Okinawa invasion fleet.

The year before, the 96th had practiced amphibious assaults on the sand spit and beaches south of Morro Bay.

The connections between county history and what was truly a world war are sometimes staggering.

The 96th was one of six U.S. Army divisions that did at least part of its training at Camp San Luis Obispo. The 40th Division relieved the Marines at Guadalcanal; the 7th Division fought to dislodge the Japanese from the Aleutians; the 35th fought in the Battle of the Bulge; the 86th liberated Russian POWs from a German labor camp; and the 104th had finished its tour in Europe and was preparing to ship out to the Pacific when the war with Japan ended.

Indeed, the Japanese submarine that had helped to bring the war to our county — the I-21, which sank the UNOCAL tanker Montebello near Cambria — would, within weeks, be sinking ships off the east coast of Australia. She disappeared sometime after her last radio report in November 1943.

In 1945, when the soldiers of the 96th Division rode their landing craft toward the west coast of Okinawa, it must have seemed, oddly, as routine as their training assaults on the beaches below Morro Rock.

But the Okinawa campaign began on April Fool's Day, and the commander of the island's garrison, Lt. Gen. Mitsuru Ushijima, had no interest in challenging the landings, which, on D-Day, put 50,000 soldiers and Marines ashore.

Ushijima had instead prepared a defense in depth, one reminiscent of the tunnels and machinegun traps — many, on Okinawa, were concealed in family tombs — that had cost the Marines so dearly weeks before on Iwo Jima.

Ushijima's troops were veterans, and he had artillery, something the defenders of Iwo Jima hadn't. The 96th would endure the most intense artillery bombardment of any battle in the Pacific campaign.

Near the end of the battle for Okinawa, Gen. Ushijima committed *seppuku* — ritual suicide — but his artillery killed his counterpart, the American commander, Lt. Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr.

The 96th, nicknamed the 'Deadeyes' for their prowess on the target range, would lose 1,625 killed in action and more than 7,500 wounded in three weeks of assaults against a network of defenses called the 'Shuri Line.'



The Okinawa campaign would also bring the division four Medals of Honor, including one for 23-year-old Chicagoan Edward J. Moskala, at left, who silenced two machine gun nests and was credited with killing 25 of the enemy in three hours of combat. Moskala then volunteered to stay behind to defend his rifle company's wounded. That cost him his life.

The men who survived Moskala seem to be no less heroic. It's touching to visit the 96th's Web page and read the tributes to his comrades, men who would go on to lead good lives, raise good families, and who are now fast disappearing.

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A response to the article from the “Deadeye Dispatch,” the 96th Division’s newsletter.

Dear Mr. Gregory,

Thank you for writing the article about the 96th Infantry Division “Deadeyes” for the San Luis Obispo Union Tribune newspaper on 18 November 2012. Your article was well written and accurate. When the 96th departed from Camp San Luis they first landed on Leyte in the Philippines and from there went on to Okinawa. Their exemplary combat record later earned them the award of the Presidential Unit Citation.

Sincerely,

James P. Collins Major General US Army
Retired Past President, 96th Deadeye Association

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Arroyo Grande Marine John Loomis, AGUHS '44, drove an ambulance on Okinawa. His classmate, Gordon Bennett, was serving on a U.S. Navy fleet tanker just offshore at the height of the *kamikaze* campaign.

The battle resulted in 12,500 U.S. Army and Marine Corps deaths, 100,000 Japanese military deaths, and, as many as 150,000 civilian deaths, killed in artillery or air strikes; some were used as human shields.



Marines discover a baby, still alive among the dead, on the battlefield.