

# Howard Bentley

96th Infantry "Deadeye"  
Leyte, Okinawa, Korea

## **"Guns of war finally silent for 99-year-old Ohio veteran"**

By THEODORE DECKER | The Columbus Dispatch |  
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Even late in life, he sometimes thought he heard the big guns in the rumble of summer thunder. His nightmares persisted, too, and right up until his last hours, a part of Howard Bentley, 99, was somewhere in the Pacific, on the island of Leyte, or maybe Okinawa.

Early Monday, he was sure that Japanese soldiers were advancing on him in his hospital room at Mount Carmel Grove City.

"I kept telling him, 'The war's over, the war's over,'" said son-in-law Ken McClary. That did not calm him, so McClary, a fellow Army veteran, told his father-in-law to move toward the safety of a Jeep's headlights.

"See those headlights? That's where we're going." "That's when his body started to relax," McClary said.

Bentley, a Grove City resident and combat veteran of two wars, died a few hours later.

A bad fall on March 1 hastened the end of a life that spanned just shy of a century, one begun in the Kentucky hills and forever altered by battlefields half a world away.

But if war had shaped Bentley's life, it was only a part of what friends and family have honored this week.

They remembered a husband, married for 69 years and separated only by his wife's death two years ago. A civilian who delivered pianos for a music store all day long before working second shift for the railroad. A sweet tooth who could be counted on to have butterscotch candies in his pocket and a steady supply of



caramels, circus peanuts, or those sugar-encrusted fruit slices in all the colors of the rainbow.

Through everything, he was a pillar of strength.

"Until he died, his grip was so strong," daughter Katrina Orin said.

"You couldn't get your hand away from him," said her sister, Bev McClary.

Bentley was born on Dec. 8, 1920, in Greenup, Kentucky, where his family farmed and ran a general store. As a boy, he delivered the mail using a two-mule team.

He was working in the shipyards of Baltimore, Maryland, during World War II when he was called into the Army. He served in the 96th Infantry Division, known as "Deadeyes" for their marksmanship.

The war took the 96th to Leyte and Okinawa, where the soldiers endured months of ferocious fighting. Of his company's 150 original soldiers, "only eight of them came home," Ken McClary said.

Bentley was wounded twice: when a bullet grazed a leg on Leyte, and again on Okinawa when a mortar exploded behind him, and shrapnel tore into his back.

"They sewed him up and sent him straight back out because they needed men on the line," Ken McClary said.

Bentley shared some lighter war stories — more as he grew older. Like the time he used his Kentucky farmboy skills to hitch up a water buffalo to move a large, wheeled gun.

"It was under fire, too," Ken McLary said.

Other stories, Bentley kept to himself.

"Some of 'em, nobody wants to know," his son-in-law said.

Bentley was haunted by what he had seen, but also by what war had compelled him to do. Katrina Orin said her father, an unfailingly kind man and longtime church deacon, sometimes confided that he wondered if his time as a combat infantryman would keep him from heaven.

"He had a lot of regrets for what he did, right up until the end," Ken McClary said.

In an era when PTSD wasn't much talked about, son-in-law David Orin said, "he really did suffer quietly."

Bentley settled in southern Ohio after the war. He met his wife, Mildred, through his sister, who knew her sister.

Bentley saw combat again in Korea. After that, a railroad job eventually took the family to Indiana. He and Mildred moved to Grove City in the 1990s to be close to their daughters. He doted on grandchildren, then great-grandchildren.

He stayed involved with the local American Legion post and struck up a friendship with Grove City Mayor Ike Stage, who gave him the keys to the city and once declared an entire month Howard Bentley Month.

Along the way, he beat cancer and weathered a mitral-valve replacement. "He was strong as an ox and gentle as a colt," Ken McClary said.

Mildred passed away on March 1, 2018.

Since then, Bentley had said more than once that he was ready to go, that he wanted to be with her, his daughters said. So it seemed no coincidence to them that the fall that precipitated his death came on March 1, two years to the day that she died.

Bentley had expressed some desire later in life to see the places where he had fought and where so many of his buddies had died.

He left Ken McClary with a task. He wanted his son-in-law to return a Japanese flag taken from the battlefield.

It held the signatures of Japanese soldiers, and Bentley believed it deserved to be in Japan, where they, too, knew the cost of war.