

THE HERALD-PALLADIUM

FRONT PAGE

A portrait of patriotism

WWII vet Arden Pridgeon served his country in war and peace

- By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer
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St. Joseph Township resident Arden Pridgeon at the time he entered the army in 1943. He was in a special college training program stateside when he got called up, and took part in the invasion of the Philippines and the battle for Okinawa. He continues to visit veterans at the Hanson Hospice Center, wearing the same uniform.

ST. JOSEPH — Decorated World War II veteran and St. Joseph Township resident Arden Pridgeon didn't attend reunions of his army unit for 50 years after fighting in the Philippines and being wounded on Okinawa.

When he did show up, one of his comrades told him “You were the best sergeant I ever had.”

Pridgeon had to tell him “I was only a private first class” but was called to take a leadership role in combat, as did many others. He was only 20 at that time.

That willingness to step up, volunteer and get the job done has been the hallmark of the 95-year-old Pridgeon's life, as it has for many who came to be called The Greatest Generation.

He is one of the co-founders of Lest We Forget, which honors American veterans, and continues to make visitations in his uniform for veterans at Lakeland's Hanson Hospice Center.

Pridgeon will speak at 10:30 a.m. Tuesday at the St. Joseph-Lincoln Senior Center, 3271 Lincoln Ave., about his experience as a combat infantryman. As an added bonus, he will share a video prepared by the U.S. Army in commemoration of the Presidential Unit Citation presented to his 96th “Deadeye” Division in 2001.

It is the first time Pridgeon has shown the video in public.

The citation notes that the 96th Division took part in 73 days of fighting on Okinawa from April 1 to June 30, 1945. The division suffered 7,294 casualties, including 1,504 killed. Five members earned the Medal of Honor, with three awarded posthumously. They killed 37,763 of the enemy. Okinawa was the last major assault in the Pacific, and resulted in 49,000 American casualties, twice the number from the battles on Iwo Jima.

In the video, General John Riggs declares that the men of the 96th “not only won World War II but came home, rolled up your sleeves and made America the greatest nation in the world.”

That certainly applies to Arden Pridgeon.

Greetings from Uncle Sam

Pridgeon was a full-time student at the University of Wisconsin in March 1944 as part of the Army Specialized Training Program, the same program that included future Sen. Bob Dole and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. He had qualified for college engineering training during the war and came to the campus after completing basic army training at Fort Benning, Ga.

With the war raging, the army needed an additional 50,000 troops, Pridgeon recalled. There was a limit on the number of men who could be drafted at one time, so the government selected 2,500 students to enter the service.

“They needed warm bodies,” Pridgeon said. “The army wanted seasoned troops, not college kids.”

After additional training in California, Pridgeon was on his way to the invasion of the Philippines, spending 35 days on board ship before the landing.

The men had a grim sense of humor about what they were about to face. Pridgeon said they re-wrote the lyrics to the popular song “Don’t Fence Me In,” singing “Let me float on the boat til the enemy’s remote/Don’t send me in.”

But go in they did. Pridgeon took part in the Battle of Leyte Gulf to recapture the Philippines, that had been taken by the Japanese in conjunction with the attack on Pearl Harbor and other installations. Pridgeon said they had practiced scaling down rope ladders to landing craft, but doing so for real was a lot different.

Along with the enemy, the troops had to fight the elements.

“We didn’t have pup tents. We’d just dig a hole in the ground, and water would get in,” Pridgeon said. They used purification pills for drinking water, and quinine pills to stave off malaria.

Once the Philippines were secured and General Douglas MacArthur made good on his promise that “I shall return,” Pridgeon and his outfit were sent to the invasion of Okinawa and some of the fiercest fighting of the war. Okinawa was considered part of the Japanese mainland and their troops dug in and fought nearly to the last man, incurring 100,000 casualties, along with thousands of civilians killed.

Pridgeon landed on Easter Sunday, April 1, 1945. The landing was largely uncontested as the Japanese drew the Americans into the interior of the island, where they were dug in.

The night before Pridgeon was wounded, the Japanese decided to try to overrun his outfit’s position. He was given a bazooka to carry, along with a small .45 caliber “burp” gun that he said he had never fired before. That night, hundreds of Japanese soldiers assaulted the Americans.

“I didn’t even have to aim it,” Pridgeon said as he sprayed bullets into the oncoming troops. “I thought, it was them or me. If they want to keep coming, all right. If they overrun me, that’s the end of it.”

Pridgeon’s actions earned him a Bronze Star.

The next day, he was hit in the neck with grenade fragments while carrying supplies to his unit. Some of the fragments drove the chain from his dog tags into his neck. Pridgeon spit and was relieved to see that no blood was coming from his lungs and throat. He patched himself up and headed to the rear, where he was evacuated to a hospital on Guam, and later to Saipan.

He had a chance to return to the States, but he wanted to go back to his outfit. When he arrived, everyone from his company had either been killed, wounded or taken ill and removed. All he found were replacements. Suddenly, Pridgeon was the “old-timer” and had to take charge.

“When I got back to Okinawa I thought the war would be over,” Pridgeon said. “Instead, we had the worst fighting there was.”

He remembers leading his squad on a daytime patrol through the swamps, and then the unit being ordered to take the same route at night. Pridgeon volunteered to go along.

“I thought it was a death deal. I couldn’t send someone somewhere if I wouldn’t go with them,” he said. Pridgeon still has dreams about being lost in the swamps and carrying his rifle above his head.

On May 8, the day the Germans surrendered and victory in Europe was declared, the men of the 96th endured miserable, rainy weather, the commemorative video shows.

Once the island was secured, Pridgeon and the others were sent back to the Philippines to train for the likely invasion of Japan. Based on estimates of casualties, Pridgeon doesn’t think he would have made it home if the Americans had been forced to storm the mainland.

But two atomic bombs were dropped at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Japanese surrendered on Aug. 15 (Aug. 14 on the other side of the International Date Line). Pridgeon and the other troops didn’t know much about the highly secret atomic bomb mission.



Photos provided Arden Pridgeon and parrot friend in the Philippines, after having taken part in the landing at Leyte Gulf and the battle for Okinawa. Pridgeon was wounded twice, receiving the Purple Heart, and the Bronze Star for action in combat. He returned to Michigan to become a leading engineer and a community volunteer, which continues at 95.

“I wrote a letter home that said I didn’t know what was happening with the air force or the bomb, but if they want to end the war it’s all right with me,” he said. Hearing that the war had ended “was better than any dream you could have.”

For his service, Pridgeon earned the Bronze Star with two bronze oak leaf clusters; the Purple Heart with two oak leaf clusters, indicating he was wounded twice; the Philippine Liberation Ribbon with two bronze service stars; the Combat Infantry Badge 1st Award; the American and Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medals and World War II Victory Medal.



Arden Pridgeon, right, holding a monkey, with comrades of the 96th "Deadeye" Division in the Philippines, who were being trained for the likely invasion of Japan. The dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan ended the war, and Pridgeon was discharged in January 1946.

He had earned enough combat points that he returned home ahead of his outfit, and was discharged in January 1946. He was ready to put the war behind him.

"When we got home, we wanted to make up for lost time and raise a family," Pridgeon said.

On the homefront

Another thing he was anxious to do was continue his education. He enrolled at Michigan State University, studying mechanical engineering, graduating in 1949. He still has his student ID card. Even though he was 25 years old and a veteran, the university mailed his grades to his parents. He later earned a master's degree in business.

He was anxious to finish his schooling and get into the job market before the other returned veterans. He was hired by Benton Harbor Malleable Industries in 1949, where he worked until 1965, and then became an associate professor of mechanical engineering at Western Michigan University.

He married his wife, Vada, in 1947 and they had six children, and 15 grandchildren. Mrs. Pridgeon passed away in 2014.

Pridgeon showed his commitment to his community in many ways, right up to the present. He was a president of the Twin Cities Junior Chamber of Commerce, and a Grand Knight for the Knights of Columbus, along with membership in several professional organizations. In 1980 the Pridgeons were named the Benton Harbor-St. Joseph Knights of Columbus Family of the Year for their many volunteer activities in scouting, 4-H, the American Cancer Society, the YMCA, blood drives and membership in the St. Joseph Catholic Church.

This wasn't the end of honors for Pridgeon. Two years ago he received the Margaret B. Upton Volunteer Leadership Award. His activities include membership in the St. Joseph Lions Club and the St. Joseph-Lincoln Senior Center. He served as a volunteer with Forgotten Man Ministries at the Berrien County Jail for 25 years and has volunteered with the Hospice for Veterans Program, which he continues to do.

It was at a meeting of Lest We Forget in 2010 that the director of the hospice program asked for a volunteer who would meet with terminally ill veterans, while in uniform. As he had done all his life, Pridgeon volunteered.

Pridgeon said the response from the veterans and their families has been “tremendous.”

During a recent visit, Pridgeon met with a fellow World War II veteran who wore his own uniform jacket. They compared stripes on their sleeves and realized the man had been a tech sergeant, outranking Pridgeon, who had risen to the rank of staff sergeant.

The next day the man passed away. His son had videotaped the meeting, giving the family a record of their loved one’s service.

Pridgeon’s daughter, Linda Barker, said her family didn’t see her father’s uniform or hear much about his war service for 50 years after his discharge, until he was invited to participate in a local parade. Boxes of priceless wartime artifacts, from photographs and company rosters to an English-Japanese phrase book, stayed in boxes on a shelf.

Pridgeon has since contributed to oral histories, and his stories have been included in Lest We Forget books. And he isn’t the only member of his family to take part in historical events. His grandfather fought during the Civil War and was with Sherman’s army during the siege of Atlanta and March to the Sea.

Pridgeon hopes that his presentation at the senior center and the video make people realize that it was just ordinary men who did these extraordinary things.

“The esprit, heroism and continuing demonstrations of raw courage throughout the battle exemplified the highest traditions of military service,” the Presidential Citation declares.



World War II veteran Arden Pridgeon, of St. Joseph Township, shows off several of his medals he received during his service in the U.S. Army, including the Purple Heart and Bronze Star. He will talk about his experiences and show a commemorative video of the 96th “Deadeye” Division at 10:30 a.m. Tuesday at the St. Joseph-Lincoln Senior Center.

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