



BY CHRIS LANDSBERGER, THE OKLAHOMAN

David Wagner of New York, left, Arie Breshears of Mustang, center, and Howard Waugh of Ohio visit the Oklahoma National Memorial after arriving Friday for a reunion with their World War II unit, the 39th Combat Engineers. The group is meeting this weekend in Oklahoma City for its 61st annual reunion.

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World War II reunions get tougher for ...

'Vanishing breed'

By Bryan Dean
Staff Writer

When Arie Breshears first started going to reunions in the 1970s with the 39th Combat Engineers, he could generally find a couple hundred of his fellow World War II veterans in attendance.

He's hoping half a dozen show up for the group's 61st reunion being held this weekend in Oklahoma City.

"We're a vanishing breed," said Breshears, of Mustang. "I'm 88 years young myself, and some of the boys are older than me. World War II guys are dying at 1,000 a day."

The unit has held reunions every year since 1947. Breshears and his squad mate, Dave Wagner of New York, claim it is the longest ongoing annual unit reunion. Time may end the tradition sooner than they would like.

Wagner and Breshears talk about their fellow soldiers like family.

"This is the best friend I've ever had," Wagner said of Breshears. "When things were tough, he held my life in his hands, and I held his life in my hands. You can't get any closer than that."

War stories

The 39th Combat Engineers served in North Africa, Sicily and Italy during World War II. They were part of the Allied amphibious invasion of Anzio in 1944.

Many of the men who landed there with Breshears and Wagner didn't come home. The Germans had the high ground and pounded the beachhead with artillery.

The combat engineers were tasked with clearing the way for the rest of the Army.

"We were building bridges and bypasses," Breshears said. "But we also fought as infantry many times. We laid mines and cleared mine fields."

There were many close calls. Breshears didn't even report his injury when he took shrapnel in the back of his neck. The injury still bothers him from time to time.

"I thought there was no chance of seeing Oklahoma again," Breshears said. "If hell is any worse, I sure don't want to sample it."

When they gather now, they talk more about the fleeting happy moments than the fear of death that lingered over the horizon in the form of German artillery.

Wagner remembers a horse race the men organized on the beach while the Allies were still struggling to break through German resistance.

The combat engineers and another com-

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bat unit they were attached to, the 1st Special Service Force, each found a horse during patrols. The bragging soon began.

"There was a lot of, 'My horse is better than your horse,'" Wagner said. "So we had a race."

Each unit came up with \$500. Wagner said one of his fellow combat engineers exercised the unit's horse by running him every day to a post in the ground that was a quarter mile away.

The day of the race, soldiers from the Special Service Force, a joint American and Canadian commando unit, insisted the race be half a mile.

"We started off and our horse was winning," Wagner said. "But then he came to the post and said, 'This is where I stop.' So the other horse walked on by, and we lost."

'We're still here'

Such stories bring the men and their wives together even as their numbers are dwindling.

Betty Washburn, of Carlisle, Pa., began coming to the reunions with her husband. She made friends with his buddies and their wives.

After he died, she kept coming.

"My husband's been gone 17 years, and I still feel comfortable coming," Washburn said. "This really is a family affair."

The men stay in touch through e-mail and the telephone. But it's getting harder to gather in person every year. Breshears said he fears each reunion could be their last.

That fear is nothing new for the combat engineers.

"Everybody in combat has close calls," Wagner said. "We've had a number of times when we didn't think we were going to make it. But God was good, and we're still here."

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