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LIFE

At 97, WWII veteran wants to see his friends from Santa Ana's Company L one more time

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World War II veteran Art Sherman, 97, wants to hold a reunion for whoever remains of the 200 Santa Ana men from the Army's Company L, 185th Infantry, 40th Division.

PAUL RODRIGUEZ, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

By THERESA WALKER / STAFF WRITER

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The old soldier in Art Sherman refuses to fade away before at least one more hurrah.

Decades after serving as part of Company L, the Army infantry unit he helped gear up for battle during World War II, Sherman is seeking out the men with whom he shared part of his youth. At age 97, he is hoping for a last get-together with the group known as “Santa Ana’s Own.”

During wartime, when he was barely in his 20s, Sherman served as a trainer for the National Guard unit of about 200 local youths who were pressed into action after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, honing them into fighting shape.

The group had a reputation to uphold – the legacy of “Santa Ana’s Own” pre-dated the Spanish American War. One of the largest assemblies to ever take place in Santa Ana saw thousands line Fourth Street in April

1918 to cheer on the Company L Doughboys of World War I.

An artist and an athlete, Sherman made his men do things like attempt pushups while prostrate on the ground, using only their fingertips and toes as leverage.

Looking for Company L

If you are or know of someone who served in Company L during World War II and would like to contact Art Sherman about a possible reunion, call HKA Marketing Communications at 714-426-0444. HKA represents Fairhaven Memorial Park & Mortuary in Santa Ana, which has offered to host a reunion.

They couldn't do it, Sherman says.

He could.

But they ended up outdoing him on the war front. The men of Company L, 185th Infantry, 40th Division shipped off to the Pacific theater.

Sherman didn't.

He was so good at training men, the Army made him a staff sergeant and kept him stateside to keep turning "workaday guys" into soldiers until war's end.

"I guess you had to be good enough that they respected you," he says of having in his hands the lives of men he taught to kill.

Sherman wasn't an imposing figure at 5 feet, 10 inches and 160 pounds, but he could command attention. He shouts across the dining room where he sits remembering those long-ago days: "I had a BIG voice."

Not getting the chance to fight beside the men he calls "my buddies" from Company L bothers Sherman to this day.

"I feel very guilty, actually," he says, lowering the gaze of his watery blue eyes.

"All the time I felt guilty for not sharing the war experiences they had. I had counted on leading them into battle."

Who knows how many, if any, have matched him in longevity?

Sherman remains in good shape for a man his age. He confesses to taking a fall not long ago and scraping an elbow and knee on the sidewalk. But otherwise, the athleticism of his youth has served him well into his 10th decade.

Sherman grew up swimming in the ocean near his boyhood home in Laguna Beach, ran hurdles and scored a touchdown from an interception in a 1936 game when the Laguna Beach Artists bested the Tustin Tillers as league champs.

He had hoped to make a living as a potter, but instead that became his avocation; he found more lucrative work as an interior designer. He helped customers of such upscale but now defunct department stores as Buffums choose furnishings and set up their homes. Later he designed and managed a furniture store.

Sherman continued athletic competition into his 80s, with the Senior Olympics. And during and after the war, he was an avid dancer who loved the big band sounds of the 1940s. He also performed in local musical theater productions.

Sherman still drives, still socializes, still enjoys a drink at his favorite bar. He takes no medications.

He lived in his own place in Mission Viejo by himself until moving a few months ago into the Santa Ana home of the younger of his two daughters.

Sherman's memory can be fuzzy on some details, like remembering the names of his five wives. But he recalls a short, stocky fellow from Company L with the last name of Arviso, who carried an extra-heavy machine gun.

"He always seemed like he was struggling to keep up," Sherman says of Arviso, who died in the war. "But he was a gutsy little guy."

Sherman clutches a copy of author Charles D. Swanner's 1958 book "The Story of Company L 'Santa Ana's Own'" where his name is among the 138 listed on the roster stationed at Camp San Luis Obispo in 1941. The book is worn from much handling, its spine busted, dust jacket torn and pages tilting loose.

Even if there's just one other World War II vet remaining from Company L, Sherman wants to shake his hand.

It might seem an odd venue to hold such a reunion should it come about, but Fairhaven Memorial Park & Mortuary in Santa Ana has promised Sherman to play host. The memorial park holds weddings, music concerts and movies. And its dedication to the military runs deep.

The park is the resting place for thousands of military veterans from multiple eras. It was at this year's Memorial Day service when Sherman approached Fairhaven's operators with the notion of doing something special to honor Company L.

"After the Memorial Day service, he came to the lobby," says Marla Noel, president of Fairhaven. "He wanted to know what we might be able to do or what could be done to try and find people from the company.

"He had his book with him."

At war's end, the men from Company L who survived came back home on their own, not as a unit, Sherman says.

Sherman made his way across country from Camp Robinson in Arkansas by way of the old Love Field in Dallas, hitching a ride in a bomber to San Diego. He was discharged in October 1945 and settled into married life in Los Angeles.

He lost touch with all but one or two of the men from Company L, even after returning to Orange County a few years after the war's end. Once they died, Sherman's Company L connections ceased.

Company L as an Army unit would fight again in the Korean War. In 1954, it was phased out.

Noel says Fairhaven is happy to help Sherman. "It just seemed like a natural to try and find his compadres."

A communications group working with Fairhaven has made inquiries at various places, including California National Guard offices and the California State Military Museum, but so far has had no luck. It has been told that records of Sherman's unit don't go back far enough.

Still, Sherman is hopeful something comes of it.

"Yeah," he says with a smile, "that would be good."

Contact the writer: 714-796-7793 or twalker@ocregister.com or on Twitter @TellTheresa

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Detail of photo of the Army's Company L, 185th Infantry, 40th Division, with Art Sherman standing at far right.

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Art Sherman at the Army's Camp San Luis Obispo, 1942.

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Art Sherman at the Army's Camp San Luis Obispo, 1941.

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