

# Blazing Old Trails

## World War II recon troops search out friendships

By HAROLD BECHARD  
The Salina Journal

The tears in Dale Iliff's eyes spoke volumes.

The "family" was together again — the men who had played the dangerous and vitally important cat-and-mouse reconnaissance game in World War II.

The men from the 70th Reconnaissance Troop — an attachment of the 70th Infantry Division, called the Trailblazers — gathered in Salina Wednesday for a three-day reunion at the Country Inn & Suites, 2760 S. Ninth.

There were the Rothchilds from Kansas; the Busbys from Missouri and the Coopers from Ohio. There were the Nadlers (Wisconsin), the Norlings (Washington), the Cassidys (Illinois) and the Wolfes (California).

Al and Marialice Ramos from Paradise, Calif., are newcomers to the "family." Marlin Stewart rolled in from Detroit, Mich., and Peggy Cranford of Peoria, Ill., brought her mother, Evelyn Shugart, whose late husband, Walter, had been a member of the 70th Reconnaissance Troop.

"It's special; it really is" said the 84-year-old Iliff, taking off his glasses to wipe away tears. "This is like a family to all of us, it really is."

The former soldiers swapped war stories and good-natured jabs as the wives sat nearby in their own group. They greeted visitors, even members of the media, like they were one of their own.

"I've been going since '92, and we don't miss any," said



**Dale Iliff, Salina, says his troop's reunions grow smaller every year, but it's important to keep the "family" together.**

Dale Rothchild, Mankato. "It's like a close-knit family ... well, it's like this, we don't go from room to room to visit. All our time is spent in here except when we go to eat or go to bed. It's just wonderful.

"It's not rowdy. It's not loud. It's just a good three or four days of talking and visiting."

### Three decades later

John Busby, 78, was one of the original seven men from the 70th Reconnaissance who attended the first reunion in 1975. Iliff and William Nadler, Lake Mills, Wis., were the other two who were on hand Wednesday.

"It's something we kind of dreamed about after we got out of the service, but we didn't have our first one until 1975," said Busby, Parnell, Mo. "We almost forgot about it, and we've lost a lot of the old buddies since then."

The group will travel to

Abilene today to view the Eisenhower Museum and Presidential Library. Many of the men have not been to their general's final resting place. It's bound to be another emotional moment. Friday's schedule features a trip to the Rolling Hills Zoo and a final gathering later at Ranger's Steakhouse, 716 N. 12th.

### Going on recon

Each member had his story to tell. Some were eager to do it, while others weren't.

Rothchild, 76, entered the Army as an 18-year-old and hooked up with the 70th Infantry Division in Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., after the division had trained in Camp Adair, Ore.

The 70th Reconnaissance didn't go overseas until late December 1944, after the Battle of the Bulge had started. The 70th Infantry Division had entered the fray earlier, and casualties were very high.

"It was devastating," Rothchild said.

Rothchild said he originally was a member of the infantry but was moved to the reconnaissance group at the last minute by a lieutenant.

"At the time, that aggravated me because I thought I wanted to be in the infantry," Rothchild said. "But the battalion they originally put me in ended up losing all but 18 men in the Battle of the Bulge."

The mission of the reconnaissance troops in Europe was simple — take a patrol into suspected enemy territory and expose themselves enough to draw fire from German troops. The objective was to learn where the

enemy was hidden. Sometimes, the reconnaissance troops drove as much as 70 miles behind enemy lines.

"The tanks we drove were on rubber, they were not as heavy as regular tanks," said Iliff, 817 Sheridan. "We could travel 60 miles per hour, and our jeeps the same speed."

Rothchild simplified his troop's assignment.

"We were to go out and see who's where, get shot at and to report back to division who's shooting at you and what they are shooting so we could do something about it," he said.

"They always gave that second platoon the worst damn jobs," said Nadler, whose quick wit and smile belies his 84 years.

"Oh, I don't know, we were there, too," Busby answered.

Busby said the moment he remembers vividly is when the 70th Reconnaissance crossed the Saar River into Germany on rubber boats and helped take the strategically important town of Saarbrücken.

The 70th Reconnaissance returned home in June 1946, and members went their separate ways. Nearly three decades passed before the first reunion.

"We have one every year, somewhere," Iliff said. "It's getting smaller and smaller all the time, but we also meet some new ones all the time as well."

"It's family; it really is ... and we hate to lose any of them."

• Reporter Harold Bechard can be reached at 823-6464, Ext. 149, or by e-mail at [sjhbechard@saljournal.com](mailto:sjhbechard@saljournal.com).