

Brave Men of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team

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NCO History Magazine Article
SGM Garza, R11
April 29, 2004

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Many Japanese-Americans born and raised in the United States or Hawaii serving in the military were discharged from the military in 1942 and classified as 4-F (unfit for military service) or 4-C (enemy alien). To a society and culture that holds honor as one of their revered values, Japanese Americans took every opportunity to show their country that they were not only loyal, but willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice to prove it. The 442d Regimental Combat Team and 100th Infantry Battalion's motto, "Go for Broke," expressed the drive and persistence of its members throughout the unit's short history.

After Pearl Harbor was attacked, many young men rushed to the War Department to volunteer to serve and defend their country. The Japanese Americans were no exception. Hundreds of American-born Nisei, second generation, were members of the Hawaii National Guard. On January 19, 1942, they were summoned in the early morning and informed that "all guardsmen of Japanese ancestry would be released..." By law, the Nisei could not be thrown out of the Hawaii National Guard, so they were put under armed guard at Schofield Barracks and had their rifles taken away (Crost 11).

On the mainland, there were over 110,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry living on the West Coast. Even though over two-thirds of them were U.S. Citizens, Members of Congress demanded they be evacuated away from the Pacific Coast. In February 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066:

Now therefore, by virtue of the authority vested in me as President of the United States, and Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy, I hereby authorize and direct the Secretary of War, ... to prescribe military areas in such places and of such extent as he ... may determine, from which any or all persons may be

excluded, and with respect to which, the right of any persons to enter, remain in, or leave shall be subject to whatever restriction the Secretary of War or the appropriate Military Commander may impose in his discretion (Executive).

With over 155,000 people of Japanese descent in Hawaii (35 percent of the population), and the Islands' major workforce, evacuation was not an option (Crost 13). However, in June 1942, roughly 1,300 Hawaiian Provisional Battalion soldiers were transported by ship to the mainland and were redesignated the 100th Infantry Battalion (Separate) (Sterner 4).

A year later, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team (RCT) was formed. 2,686 Hawaiian men had been accepted for the new Nisei combat team. Daniel Inouye, an 18 year-old pre-medical student, was number 2,685 (Inouye). Inouye remembers the day he reported to Schofield Barracks when his father reminded him of his duty to repay America for its goodness. Many men were told to "fight with honor and die if you must," but do not bring shame on your family (Inouye). Another 1,200 volunteers from the mainland internment camps made up the rest of the 442d RCT.

The training of these men occurred at Camp Shelby, Mississippi. The 100th Infantry Regiment had been training for over a year and would be departing for Italy by September. Their motto, "Remember Pearl Harbor," depicted their deep rooted desire to fight bravely for their country. Though just as determined, the crackshooting experts of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team used "Go For Broke" as their unit's motto.

The men of the 100th Infantry Battalion earned the title of "The Purple Heart Battalion" during the Naples-Foggia Campaign in Italy. During their first six weeks of combat, they suffered nearly 25 percent casualties: 3 Officers Killed In Action; 75 Enlisted Men Killed In Action; 239 Wounded (Sterner 7). After only two weeks rest, the unit went back into action to

push the Germans out of the hills near Cerasuolo. There, Staff Sergeant Allan Ohata and his squad were protecting the platoon's flank when 40 enemy soldiers attacked their position with rifle and machinegun fire. Ohata rushed 15 yards, fully exposed to the enemy's attack, to hold the position while Private Mikio Hasemoto ran back to the rear to get a working rifle. Together, Ohata and Hasemoto killed a total of 37 enemy soldiers. A second force of 14 Germans attacked and Ohata and Hasemoto stood their ground, killing four more and wounding three (Sterner 8). This fearless example of courage continued the next day when they again held their ground, but in the end Private Hasemoto was killed in action. For their heroic stand at Cerasuolo, Private Hasemoto (posthumously) and Staff Sergeant Ohata were awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

The 100th Infantry Battalion continued fighting bravely during the spring of 1944. In June the 442nd RCT joined them in Italy and over the next two months fought in the Rome-Arno River Campaign. The 442nd RCT earned 9 Distinguished Service Crosses while the veteran 100th Infantry Battalion earned 12. In August, the 100th Infantry Regiment formally became part of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team as its 1st Battalion.

The unit was shifted to the French Vosges Mountains to push the Germans over the border. The Germans had instructions to hold their ground "at all costs" (Bruyères). The Germans were extremely well dug-in and occupied four key hills around the valley. With the mountains more than 1,000 feet high and covered with tall pine trees, the fog and thick underbrush limited visibility to 40 feet. For three days, the men fought back repeated German attacks. With the help of artillery fire from the 522nd Field Artillery Battalion, the 100th took Hill A, the 2nd Battalion took Hill B, and the 3rd Battalion pushed the enemy out of Bruyères. The Germans still controlled Hills C and D (Sterner 30).

On October 19, 1944, the fight for Hill D was intense. When Technical Sergeant Abraham Ohama ran to render aid on one of his fallen soldiers, he was hit. As he was being taken away, the Germans fired upon the group and killed Ohama in the stretcher. The F Company men spontaneously charged the hill, killing 50 Germans. When Hill D was secured, the Nisei renamed it "Ohama's Hill" (Stern 31).

The next day, Staff Sergeant Robert Kuroda was leading his men in an advance to destroy snipers when they encountered heavy machine gun fire from a heavily wooded slope. Staff Sergeant Kuroda boldly ran through the heavy fire to the crest of the ridge and identified the enemy's location. He advanced within 10 yards and killed 3 enemy gunners with grenades. He continued to fire, clip after clip, killing or wounding at least three of the enemy. As he expended the last of his ammunition, he ran to aid an American officer that had been hit by machine gun fire on an adjacent hill. After he reached the officer, he realized the officer had been killed. He picked up the officer's submachine gun and advanced through continuous fire toward a second machine gun emplacement and destroyed the position. As he turned to fire upon additional enemy soldiers, he was killed by a sniper. Staff Sergeant Kuroda was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions (Stern 32).

As the men fought on to Biffontaine, they experienced eight days of brutal battle. The brave NCOs had lost much of their leadership and they struggled to hang on without new supplies. The Nisei soldiers had to resort to fighting the Germans with weapons taken from the dead bodies of their enemies. "Miraculously they held, forcing the enemy to withdraw" (Stern 32). Unfortunately the triumph came at a very high cost: 21 soldiers were killed, 122 wounded, and 18 captured. With less than two days rest, the men of the 442d were called to do the

unthinkable: rescue the 1st Battalion, 141st Regiment, known as the “T Patchers,” roughly nine miles east of Biffontaine behind enemy lines.

About 211 men of the Texas National Guard unit were cut off by the Germans for more than a week and had run out of food. The weary men of the 442d pushed forward and took numerous casualties over the next few days. The brave Nisei infantrymen faced German armor and artillery as they cleared minefields and booby traps. A medic named Technican Fifth Grade James K. Okubo continuously crawled through heavy fire to reach wounded soldiers. For his efforts saving 25 men during those 2 days of fierce combat, he was awarded the Silver Star Medal (Sterner 42).

Braving tree bursts from artillery, rockets and mortars, the Nisei soldiers had only an option of a frontal attack (Tanaka 98). Desperate and exhausted, many man charged the hills yelling “Banzai!” and set aside personal safety as they assaulted the hills and captured German prisoners. On 30 October 1944, eight men reached the “Lost Battalion.” The Nisei had around 200 deaths and over 800 men wounded in 5 days of battle to rescue 211 (Williams). To this day, for their size, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team is one of the most decorated units in U.S. military history. The Presidential Unit Citation read, “...Fighting yard by yard through a minefield, the battalion was stopped by an enemy strong point... the battalion was forced to a frontal attach against a strongly entrenched enemy. Attacking in waves of squads and platoons, and firing from the hip as they closed in to grenade range, the valiant men of the 100th Battalion reduced the enemy defense lines within a few hours” (Presidential).

The bravery and sacrifice these men and exhibited was only half the story. Staff Sergeant Kuroda was one of seven brothers living in Hawaii when Pearl Harbor was attacked. He and three of his brothers, Ronald, Wallace and Joe, all served in World War II to prove their

loyalty (Kakesako Honoring). SSG Kuroda's brother Ronald, was a member of B Company, 100th Infantry Battalion and was also awarded the Distinguished Service Cross (Kakesako Becoming). In 2003, the Army Reserve's 9th Regional Support Command's first ship, a 314-foot support vessel (LSV-7) was christened "Kuroda" and is berthed in Pearl Harbor (Kakesako Honoring). Biggs Army Airfield Aerovista housing area has also named one of its streets after SSG Robert Kuroda.

Unlike Kuroda and other Hawaiian-born Nisei, Okubo volunteered to join the 442nd Regimental Combat Team from a mainland internment camp. He was an American citizen born in Anacortes, Washington and was relocated, in 1942, with his family to Heart Mountain internment camp located in Wyoming. He joined the military with his two brothers and two cousins. His family spent two years in the internment camps while Okubo served in the Army (Penta).

At the end of World War II, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and 100th Infantry Battalion had received: 7 Presidential Unit Citations, over 9,000 Purple Hearts, 4,000 Bronze Stars, 559 Silver Stars, over 45 Distinguished Service Crosses, and only 1 Medal of Honor (Asian/Pacific MoH). With the exception of one, all of the Combat Team's recommendations for award of the Medal of Honor were downgraded to the lesser Distinguished Service Cross (Croft 179). Racial prejudice during World War II prevented many Japanese-Americans from receiving proper recognition for their actions and sacrifices. However, on May 12, 2000, this error was corrected when President Clinton upgraded 19 Distinguished Service Crosses to Medals of Honor for 442nd RCT survivors and their family members (Williams). Of the soldiers mentioned in this article, Private Mikio Hasemoto's, Staff Sergeant Allan M. Ohata's, Staff

Sergeant Robert T. Kuroda's, and Technician Fifth Grade James K. Okubo's medals were upgraded to Medals of Honor (Asian/Pacific MoH).

Like many men of the time, the Nisei men stepped up to the country's call in support of World War II. These men seemed to fight for more than "their duty." Rather, their honor and their family's honor was at stake. Their dedication and motivation to defend their country should not be questioned. They, like many other American men, wanted to preserve the freedom their family's had enjoyed and felt it was their duty, if required, to die fighting for it. Major General Robert Brautigan stated at a recognition ceremony for Okubo, "No medal or award can repay the nation's debt to these soldiers. But the Army and nation offer their humble and heartfelt thanks" (McGann).

The accomplishments and sacrifices of this unit are overwhelming when compared to the short time the unit was active. The examples set by the enlisted men and noncommissioned officers of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and the 100th Infantry Battalion should be lessons for military personnel everywhere. The men worked and fought as a team, never questioned their mission, and protected their brothers-in-arms at all costs. They carried the burden of being called "the Purple Heart Battalion" and lived up to their motto, "Go For Broke" until the end of every battle. Americans owe a great deal to the brave soldiers of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and 100th Infantry Battalion for their bravery against a reinforced enemy and loyalty to an ungrateful nation.

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