

The 100th Battalion Leads the Way

Remember Pearl Harbor

On December 7, 1941, before the smoke of the bombing of Pearl Harbor had cleared, the Hawaiian Islands were placed under Martial Law. Martial Law suspended all civilian law and regulation and placed total control of every aspect of island life under strict U.S. Army authority. Within hours a pre-determined list of “dangerous” Japanese-American civilians on Oahu were rounded up and confined.

Rumors and allegations of Japanese-American sabotage, all later discredited, were made by many including by some high-level government officials. The entire Japanese-American population of Hawaii became confused and fearful.

On the day of the attack, the Territorial Governor Joseph Poindexter created the “Hawaii Territorial Guard” consisting of volunteers and enlistees as well as the ROTC students attending the University of Hawaii – many of whom were Americans of Japanese descent. As war hysteria grew, the belief that collaboration with the enemy might take place, all Japanese-Americans were summarily discharged from the Guard on January 21, 1942 -- without explanation.

By February 1942, 150 Japanese-American university students and others volunteered as civilian laborers and served under U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officers. They wore military fatigues, ate at the mess, and slept in Army barracks. As the self-styled “Varsity Victory Volunteers,” they dug ditches, quarried rock, built barracks, paved roadways, and strung barbed wire along Oahu’s beaches, among other things.

In September 1940, more than a year before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the President had instituted the first peacetime military draft and federalized the Hawaii’s National Guard placing it under control of the U.S. Army. The two units, which included many Americans of Japanese descent, consisted of the 298th Infantry Regiment based on Oahu and the 299th Infantry Regiment was apportioned among the islands of Hawaii, Maui, Kauai, and Molokai. By the end of October 1940, both undermanned regiments were in training at Schofield Barracks on Oahu, but the draft over the next year provided additional soldiers.

On January 5, 1942, the War Department classified all U.S. citizens of Japanese ancestry as Category IV-C (aliens not suitable for service), which meant the burden to prove they were loyal

Americans fell solely on those already in the Army -- 2,000 in Hawaii and a similar number in the Contiguous United States (Mainland). The question was, would our government give them the opportunity to fight. The War Department, fearing that the Japanese forces would invade Hawaii after the impending battle at Midway, secretly ordered military governor General Delos Emmons on May 28, 1942 to send the American soldiers of Japanese descent to the mainland as soon as possible.

On June 5, 1942, 1432 Japanese American enlistees, 798 from the 298th and 608 from the 299th and some from other units, including six white officers and 16 AJA officers were suddenly and secretly shipped out to the mainland. Upon arrival at Oakland California, the unit which had been called the "Hawaiian Provisional Infantry Battalion," was officially named, the "100th Infantry Battalion (Separate). The "Separate" designation indicated that 100th was not part of a permanent regiment and awaited assignment to a larger Army unit. The 100th was humorously called the "One Puka Puka" by the men as "puka" is the Hawaiian word for hole and puka was often used instead of "zero."

The 100th was sent to Camp McCoy in Wisconsin where they underwent vigorous infantry training much of which was repetitious of their earlier training in Hawaii. A select group of about 100 men, fluent in Japanese, were reassigned to Military Intelligence Language School to prepare to be interpreters and translators. Many were later assigned to combat and intelligence (MIS) units fighting in Asia. The service of these men was said to have shortened the war in the Pacific by two years.

The training record of the 100th Battalion at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin from June to December 1942 convinced the War Department to authorize the formation of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team (RCT) on February 1, 1943.

On New Year's Eve, the last day of 1942, orders came to ship out to Camp Shelby near Hattiesburg, Mississippi. At Shelby, the 100th trained enthusiastically and impressed inspecting officers during combat maneuvers. By the time training was concluded, some men from the mainland who had volunteered for the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, had joined the Hawaii soldiers.

The 100th left Camp Shelby on August 11, 1943 and made their way to Camp Kilmer New Jersey. In the early hours of August 21, 1943, the unit was moved by rail to Brooklyn and then ferried to Staten Island. There they boarded the S.S. James Parker, a repurposed banana transport and tourist ship. The ship joined a large convoy headed to an unknown destination.

The Nisei arrived in Oran, North Africa on September 2, 1943 and bivouacked near the city. Local Army HQ suggested that the 100th be deployed guarding rail shipments often pillaged by bandits. Lt. Colonel Farrant Turner (the Commander of the battalion), disagreed and indicated that his men were ready for combat. Major General Charles Ryder of the 34th Infantry Division then offered combat duty.

Over the next two weeks, the veterans of the 34th Division drilled the 100th in German ruses and battlefield tactics, passing on their hard-earned knowledge. The drills came to an end on September 19, 1943 when the division including the 100th Battalion, embarked on a convoy to face the Germans in Italy.

The battalion would become the War Department's test on whether American soldiers of Japanese descent could be trusted in combat when it landed in Italy in September 1943 as part of the 34th Infantry Division. The unparalleled bravery of the 100th Battalion in the first weeks of combat would forever answer this question of trust, paving the way for the 442nd RCT to join them in June 1944.

Arriving at Salerno, Italy on September 22, 1943, the 34th Division joined the Allied Fifth Army and began to fight their way up the length of Italy toward Rome. The 100th Battalion was temporarily attached to the 133rd Infantry Regiment, replacing their 2nd Battalion, which was assigned to special duty. The 133rd advanced southeast to Eboli, then on to Contursi and finally turned north toward Montemarano.

On September 28, 1943 the 100th took their first casualty. Corporal Conrad Choso Tsukayama was hit by shrapnel from an anti-tank mine detonated by a passing Jeep. He later set a precedent, becoming the first member of the 100th to "reverse AWOL", when he "escaped" from the field hospital to return to his unit. Many other Nisei men would follow his lead, using the excuse of "Da boys need me."

On September 29th, they got their first taste of combat and suffered their first losses. Departing from Montemarano on the Avelino Road, Company B was serving as regimental advance guard. Around 1000, the 3rd platoon rounded a curve in the road and came under heavy fire from machine guns, mortars, and cannons that had the road zeroed in. Sgt. Shigeo "Joe" Takata turned to his men and announced, "It's the first time, so I'm going first," before advancing toward one of the machine gun nests while firing his Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR). A German shell exploded near him, and shrapnel struck him in the head, dropping him to the road. Despite his grave wounds, Sgt. Takata held on until his men crawled near enough for him to pass on the German's positions. Intense fighting followed, and by the end of the skirmish another Nisei lay

dead and seven were wounded. For his bravery under fire, Takata posthumously received the Battalion's first Distinguished Service Cross (DSC).

The War Department ordered 5th Army Commanding Officer LTG Mark Clark to report on the 100th Battalion's performance after it first entered combat, and General Clark responded, "... I sent a cable to Eisenhower on October 8, stating that they (the 100th) had seized their objective and that they were quick to react whenever the enemy offered opposition".

Less than a month later, the 100th Battalion found itself in its first full-scale battle. On October 20, 1943, the unit was ordered to assault the 29th Panzer Grenadiers at St. Angelo D'Alife. The Germans, in well-fortified positions, had excellent forward observation posts for their artillery spotters. Company A led the attack at 1900 and made first contact with the enemy around 2230. As the leading elements approached a farmhouse, they saw a brief flash of light as the door opened. Seconds later the sounds of machine gun fire filled the valley. In the opening minutes 10 men were killed and 20 more wounded. Observing that there was little cover from the German positions, Turner ordered his men to withdraw and called for mortar fire on the farmhouse. During the retreat, Pfc Thomas Isamu Yamanaga covered his squad's retreat with his BAR, silencing one of the German machine guns before he was killed by enemy fire. He was posthumously awarded the DSC.

Nearby, Private Satoshi Kadota, a medic, crawled through the raging battle to treat twelve wounded soldiers. Pvt. Donald Hayashi took command of his squad when the sergeant was wounded, and single-handedly covered their retreat for two hours.

While wounded, Lieutenant James Vaughn crawled through the fight to encourage his platoon, and helped cover the unit's retreat with his carbine. These acts of heroism, and many others in the vicinity of St. Angelo, were awarded Silver Stars. Turner was finally ordered to withdraw and allow the 1st Battalion of the 133rd RCT to take up the fight. Eventually the 1st was also forced to withdraw.

On October 24, 1943, Companies A and C of the 100th was redeployed to capture Hill 529, near St. Angelo. At the top of the hill were the ruins of an old castle which the Germans used effectively. When darkness fell, Companies E and F moved up to relieve A and C and keep pressure on the stubborn German lines. By morning, the men of the 100th maneuvered around the castle to attack the Germans from the rear. The Germans made one last charge from the castle but were repelled by the 100th with the help of 200 rounds from their 81 mm mortars. The German forces began a full retreat which allowed the Americans to secure St. Angelo. In five

days of heavy fighting, the 100th had advanced seven miles but at a heavy price: 21 killed and 67 wounded.

After a month in combat, 34th ID CO General Ryder authorized the 100th Infantry Battalion to wear the Red Bull patch as a symbol of his high regard for the battalion whose members continued to wear the insignia proudly, even when attached to other units.

From St. Angelo D'Alife, the 100th fought in several engagements including Ciorlano, La Croce Hill near Cerasuolo, and Mont Majo, which formed part of the German's defenses known as the "Winter Line."

On January 24, 1944, the 100th Battalion was ordered to advance on one of the most heavily fortified positions in all of Italy. It was during the next two weeks of savage fighting, that the 100th earned its nickname: "The Purple Heart Battalion."

Monte Cassino formed the lynchpin in the Germans' next defenses known as the "Gustav Line." The Germans had spent months (beginning in October 1943) fortifying the mountains and valleys to create a new and formidable defensive barrier. Reinforced concrete pillboxes were installed, bunkers were cut out of solid rock, and heavy artillery and machine guns were placed in key mountain locations to rain fire on any assaulting troops.

At Cassino, the Germans destroyed all houses that were of no use and fortified the rest with stone and logs. Roads and other alleyways were heavily mined; barbwire laced with trip-wire explosives guarded every German position and the Rapido River was made part of the defensive line. The Germans dammed the river and flooding miles of farmland under water up to two feet deep. To keep the water from draining they built a dike 7 to 12 feet (2 to nearly 4 meters) tall paralleling the river bank. The dikes were then topped with barbwire and mines to discourage scaling.

The river embankments were 14 feet (4 meters) high and heavily mined. Barbwire further limited attempts to reach the river bed. All trees and brush had been removed to ensure clear firing lanes but three-foot tree stumps remained to hinder tanks. Under the mud and shallow water of the flooded fields the Germans had placed mines every five feet (1.5 meters) with tripwires running off in all directions. Finally, the High Command of the Allies decided that they would not bombard or otherwise destroy the ancient Benedictine monastery that sat atop Monte Cassino. This attempt at historical preservation likely cost many lives and ultimately was rescinded.

On January 24, 1944, the 133rd RCT, including the 100th, was ordered to assault the Gustav Line at Cassino and capture the Italian barracks located in an old castle, at Monte Villa. To reach their

objective, the men of the 100th must cross the flooded farmland, scale the German dike, climb into the now nearly dry river bed, advance the 75 feet (23 meters) to the opposite embankment, scale it, cross the fortified road at the top and charge at German positions in the village.

Following an artillery barrage at 2330, the troops advanced at midnight. Engineers led Companies A and C, clearing and marking a safe path through the minefields. Sgt. Calvin Shimogaki, whose mine detection equipment had been disabled by German bullets, crawled through the mud feeling for tripwires with his bare hands. He successfully cleared a path five feet wide and fifty yards long, earning a Silver Star for his bravery.

As the 100th advanced, the 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 133rd was stopped by a combination of a minefield and heavy German fire, prompting Company B of the 100th to be ordered into the fight. Major Caspar Clough Jr., the CO of the 100th who had taken over after Turner had been hospitalized, refused the order, and was relieved of command. Nevertheless, Company B moved out.

Smoke was laid to cover their advance, but the wind direction changed and exposed Company B to German gunners. Eleven men fought through to the Rapido River dike, while many more took cover until nightfall. Under cover of darkness, the survivors of Company B regrouped, with some retreating to safety while others reached the dike. Companies A and C were ordered to cross the river bed but were unable to advance past the west bank due to heavy enemy fire.

Over the next three days, the 100th was pulled back and put in reserve while men from the 1st and 3rd Battalion renewed the assault. By February 8, 1944, little ground had been gained. A new plan was drafted. Working in concert with the 168th RCT, the 133rd was to pivot southwest and flank the German defenders. The 100th would be at the outer edge of the arc and therefore have the farthest to travel. Under the cover of smoke, men began maneuvering around the German lines, but again the wind shifted and exposed the Nisei soldiers to enemy fire.

Major Lovell, the unit XO, was wounded and left writhing on the ground some distance from Sgt. Gary Hisaoka. Hisaoka, determined to rescue Lovell, began digging a shallow trench toward the wounded officer. Impatient with his progress, Hisaoka dashed the remaining 8 to 10 yards, (7 to 9 meters) grabbed Lovell's arms and dragged him to safety. Sgt. Gary T. Hisaoka was killed in action on April 10, 1944, near Carano.

Elsewhere on the line, a German assault gun rolled in to attack the Americans. Carrying his bazooka, Pvt. Masao "Tankbuster" Awakuni responded. Rushing forward, Awakuni dodged enemy fire to reach a position 30 yards (27 meters) from the German tank. There he fired his

bazooka, but only struck the vehicle's track. He reloaded and exposed and again exposed himself to the enemy and fired a second round. The warhead struck the tank's hull solidly, but nothing happened -- a dud. Reloading for a third attempt, Awakuni ignored the German guns and fired. This round destroyed the tank. German machine gunners concentrated on his position. Wounded in his arm he took cover behind a boulder until nightfall. Pvt. Masao Awakuni was awarded the DSC.

Over the following days, the American forces dug in, unable to gain ground. Eventually most of the 100th was put in reserve. Company B was sent forward to support 3rd Battalion, who were fighting in the town. There, the Nisei soldiers held an ancient church against German assaults for four days and nights.

On March 10, 1944, the remnants of the 100th Infantry were sent to St. Giorgio to rest, rearm, and reorganize. There they received 161 rookie replacements from the 1st Battalion of the 442nd. On entering Italy, the 100th had 1,300 men. After Monte Majo on the Winter Line, they were left with 832. After Cassino that number shrank to 521, less than half their original strength. The fighting at Cassino left 48 killed, 144 wounded, and a further 75 succumbed to various illnesses.

War correspondents began to call the unit the Purple Heart Battalion because of the horrific casualties they suffered from Salerno to Monte Cassino.

During this rest period, the 2nd Battalion of the 133rd returned to the fight, but General Ryder kept the 100th as a Separate Battalion within his Division. After two short weeks of rest and training the rookies, the 34th Division boarded LSTs bound for the Allied beachhead at Anzio. On April 2, 1944 Colonel Gordon Singles was appointed CO. A few days later another 280 reinforcements arrived from the 442nd. The next two months were relatively quiet, with neither the Allies nor the Germans making significant headway.

On May 16, 1944, Capt. Young Oak Kim and Pfc. Irving Akahoshi volunteered to capture a couple of German soldiers to obtain intelligence for Allied command. Along with three volunteers, they departed HQ just before midnight. As the men slipped past the German front lines about 0200 on May 17, 1944, they heard digging. Capt. Kim and his men waited for daybreak, then advanced through a field of grain. Two hours and 250 yards (230 meters) later they found two German soldiers in a slit trench. They surrender at the point of Kim's Thompson, and were led back to Allied lines. Kim and Akahoshi were awarded DSCs for their daring raid.

On June 2, 1944 the 100th was attached to the 135th RCT in place of their 1st Battalion. They advanced under heavy mortar fire near the small town of Pian Marano, just west of Lanuvio.

They engaged the enemy around 0900 and fought continuously until the next morning. During the fighting, Pfc. Hiroshi Yasotake of Company C capturing an abandoned German gun emplacement and used the position to stop a German flanking attack. Using his BAR, he eventually silenced a machine gun nest some 700 feet (210 meters) away. His gallantry earned him the DSC.

Along with several other American fighting units, the 100th mopped up the heavily entrenched 29th Panzer Group on Hill 435, near Lanuvio. The battle commenced at 2030. The 100th soon became pinned down by machine gun and mortar fire. Company B moved to flank the enemy on the left and C Company moved to flank the Germans on the right. The accompanying tank destroyers saturated the crest of the hill with intense accurate fire, wiping out enemy gun emplacements. By midnight the hill was captured and the 29th Panzer Group routed. Company C captured over 50 prisoners.

It was at that point that a terrible error occurred. Other Allied elements mistook the 100th for German soldiers as they broke through the German salient. Allied artillery, reacted to the perceived threat, fired on the 100th, wounding and killing several before a ceasefire was ordered. The action at Lanuvio cost the 100th more casualties, but the battle also created more heroes with 6 DSCs awarded, 1 Silver Star, and 3 Bronze Stars.

With the last German resistance between Anzio and Rome defeated, Singles's unit sped down the road and by 1500 on June 5, 1944 reached a road sign that indicated that Rome was only 10 kilometers (6 miles) away. The task force was ordered to halt and await transportation. To the shock of the Nisei soldiers, they watched as other American units sped on to liberate Rome. Finally, after 2230 on June 5th, the men of the 100th Battalion began to filter into Rome, two years to the day after they had left Hawaii.

The next day the unit moved to Civitavecchia. On June 10, 1944, they moved 7 miles (11 kilometers) further north to a valley. Elements of the 442nd RCT began to arrive on June 11, 1944, and on June 17th the 100th Infantry Battalion was attached to the 442nd, replacing its 1st Battalion. The badly depleted 1st Battalion of the 442nd remained at Camp Shelby from which it had provided replacements to the 100th. The units drilled together, and the veterans passed along their combat knowledge just as the 34th Division men had done in Oran.

On June 26, 1944, the 442nd RCT saw its first combat at Suvereto-Belvedere where the 100th Battalion distinguished itself and received its first Presidential Unit Citation. The two units continued to fight together up the Italian boot, and on August 10, 1944, the 100th Battalion was formally redesignated and reorganized as the 100th Battalion, 442nd Infantry.

The 100th/442nd would leave for southern France on September 21, 1944 and by the end of the year, liberate the Vosges and rescue the encircled “Texas Lost Battalion” (141st Infantry Battalion). Minus the 522nd Field Artillery Battalion, the 100th/442nd would return to Northern Italy and play a pivotal role in piercing the Gothic Line, Germany’s last major defensive position in Italy.

By the end of the war, around 10,000 Nisei served in the 100th/442nd Regimental Combat Team. These units suffered a high combat casualty rate in part due to their tenacious fighting spirit and their “Go for Broke” refusal to back down. The soldiers of the 100th Infantry Battalion and the 442nd fought to prove their loyalty to the United States. They succeeded.

The 100th Battalion and 442nd Regimental Combat Team were one of the most decorated units in WWII. These men were widely recognized for fighting with incredible bravery, motivated by loyalty to friends and family, and a deep commitment to their country. Many of them fought valiantly, even though some of their families on the mainland lived behind barbwire in internment camps.

Despite the valor with which these men fought, only one American soldier of Japanese descent received the Medal of Honor for his sacrifice above and beyond: Sadao Munemori, A Company, 100th Infantry Battalion.

Over fifty years later, the United States Senator Daniel Akaka requested the Army to review the records of Japanese recipients of the DSC during World War II. As a result, on June 21, 2000, President William Jefferson Clinton presented 7 Medals of Honor to living veterans, and a further 13 posthumous awards. In all, the 100th/442nd earned 21 Congressional Medals of Honor.

Six of them were original members of the 100th Infantry Battalion, three of them were killed during the assault on La Croce Hill. Among the other individual awards granted to members of the 100th/442nd were 29 Distinguished Service Crosses, 371 Silver Stars, including 28 Silver Stars with Oak Leaf Cluster, 848 Bronze Stars, and over 4,000 Purple Hearts.”

Credits: “Remember Pearl Harbor” The US Army’s 100th Battalion in Italy” by Robert Morrison; “Ambassadors in Arms” by Thomas Murphy; The Quiet Americans by Bill Hosokawa; “Go for Broke” by Chester Tanaka; “Story of the 100th Infantry Battalion: One Puka Puka Leads the Way” by Kathi Hayashi, Amy Kwong and, Isami Yoshihara