

442nd Regimental Combat Team

“Go For Broke”



Regimental History:

The 442nd Regimental Combat Team was an Asian American unit composed of mostly Japanese Americans who fought in Europe during the Second World War. The families of many of its soldiers were subject to internment. The 442nd was a self-sufficient fighting force, and fought with uncommon distinction in Italy, southern France, and Germany. The unit became the most highly decorated military unit in the history of the United States Armed Forces, including 21 Medal of Honor recipients.

When the United States entered World War II in 1941, there were 5,000 Japanese Americans in the U.S. armed forces. Many were summarily discharged. Those of draft age were classified as 4-C, "enemy aliens," despite being US citizens.

In Hawaii, however, a battalion of Nisei (2nd generation Japanese American) volunteers was formed in May 1942. As the 100th Infantry Battalion, they were sent to North Africa in June of 1943 where they joined the 34th Division in combat. By September 1943, they were sent to Italy where they saw fierce combat and came to be known as the "Purple Heart Battalion" due to their high casualty rate.

In January 1943, the US War Department announced the formation of the segregated 442nd Regimental Combat Team (RCT) made up of Nisei volunteers from Hawaii and the mainland. In June of 1944, the 442nd joined forces with the 100th Infantry Battalion in Europe and incorporated the 100th into the 442nd. Due to the stunning success of Nisei in combat, the draft was re-instated in January 1944 for Nisei in the detention camps to bolster the ranks of the 442nd. Eventually, the 442nd RCT consisted of the 2nd, 3rd, and 100th Battalions; the 522nd Field Artillery Battalion; the 232nd Engineering Company; the 206th Army Band; Anti-Tank Company; Cannon Company; and Service Company. Due to their outstanding bravery and the heavy combat duty they faced, the 100/442nd RCT became the most decorated unit in U.S. military history for its

size and length of service. There were over 18,000 individual decorations for bravery, 9,500 Purple Hearts, and seven Presidential Distinguished Unit Citations.

The 100th landed at Oran in Algeria on September 2, 1943, and was originally scheduled to guard supply trains in North Africa. However, Colonel Farrant L. Turner insisted that the 100th be given a combat mission, and it was attached to the "Red Bull" U.S. 34th Division.

The 100th sailed from North Africa with 1,300 men on September 22, 1943 and landed at Salerno on September 26, 1943. After obtaining its initial objective of Monte Miletto, the 100th joined the assault on Monte Cassino.

The 100th fought valiantly, suffering many casualties; by February 1944, it could muster only 521 men. The depleted battalion joined the defense of the beachhead at Anzio until May 1944, and then added momentum to the push for Rome, but was halted only 10 miles from the city. Some believe that the 100th was deliberately halted to allow non-Nisei soldiers to liberate Rome.

The 442nd (other than the 1st battalion, which had remained in the U.S. to train further replacements but many of whose members were levied as replacements for the 100th) landed at Anzio and joined the 100th Battalion in Civitavecchia north of Rome on June 10, 1944. On August 10, 1944, the 100th Battalion was officially assigned to the 442nd Regimental Combat Team as its 1st battalion, but was allowed to keep its unit designation in recognition of its distinguished fighting record. The 1st Battalion 442nd Infantry at Camp Shelby was then redesignated the 171st Infantry Battalion (Separate) on September 5, 1944.

The combined unit continued in the push up Italy, before joining the invasion of southern France, where the 442nd participated in the fight to liberate Bruyères in eastern France, and famously rescued the "Lost Battalion" at Biffontaine. Pursuant to army tradition of never leaving soldiers behind, over a five-day period, from 26 October to 30 October 1944, the 442nd suffered over 800 casualties—nearly half of its roster—while rescuing 211 members of the 1st Battalion, 141st Infantry (36th Infantry Division, originally Texas National Guard), which had been surrounded by German forces in the Vosges mountains since 24 October.

Following its combat in the Vosges, the 442nd was sent to the Franco-Italian border on November 28 to relieve the soon-to-be-disbanded 1st Special Service Force. The 442nd remained there, refitting and training, until March 25, 1945, when it returned to the Fifth Army in Italy and was attached to the U.S. 92nd Infantry Division. On Italian Front the 442nd had opportunity to made contact with men of many nationalities: beyond other segregated Americans of 92nd ID, They had contact with the also segregated troops of British and French colonial empires(Black Africans, Morrocans, Algerians, Indians, Gurkhas, Jews and Palestinians); as well as with exiles from Poland, Greece and former Czechslovakia, anti-fascist Italians and the nonsegregated troops of the Brazilian Expeditionary Force that had in their ranks troops of Japanese descent too but mixed with soldiers from different ethnics groups.

The 442nd resumed heavy combat, seizing Monte Belvedere on April 7 and Carrara on April 10. The 522nd Field Artillery Battalion remained in northern France and joined the push into Germany in 1945. Scouts from the 522nd were among the first Allied troops to release prisoners from the Dachau concentration camp.

The 442nd is commonly reported to have suffered a casualty rate of 314 percent (i.e., on average, each man was injured more than three times), informally derived from 9,486 Purple Hearts divided by some 3,000 original in-theater personnel. U.S. Army battle reports show the official casualty rate, combining KIA (killed) with MIA (missing) and WIA (wounded and removed from action) totals, is 93%, still uncommonly high. Many of the Purple Hearts were awarded during the campaign in the Vosges Mountains and some of the wounded were soldiers who were victims of trench foot. But many victims of trench foot were forced by superiors -- or willingly chose -- to return to the front even though they were classified as "wounded in action". Wounded soldiers would often escape from hospitals to return to the front line battles.

The unit's exemplary service and many decorations did not change attitudes of the general U.S. population to people of Japanese descent after World War II. Veterans were welcomed home by signs that read "No Japs Allowed" and "No Japs Wanted," and many veterans were denied service in shops and restaurants, and had their homes and property vandalized.

The stellar record of the Japanese Americans serving in the 442nd and in the Military Intelligence Service (US Pacific Theater forces in WWII) greatly helped change the minds of anti-Japanese American critics in the US and resulted in easing of restrictions and the eventual release of the 120,000 strong community well before the end of WWII.

One notable US national effect of the service of the 442nd was to help convince Congress to end their opposition towards Hawaii's statehood petition. Twice before 1959, residents of Hawaii asked to be admitted to the US as the 49th State, but each time Congress was fearful of having a co-equal State that had a majority non-White population. The exemplary record of the Japanese Americans serving in the 442nd and the loyalty showed by the rest of Hawaii's population during WWII overcame Congress' fears and allowed Hawaii to be admitted as the 50th US State (as Alaska was granted Statehood just prior).

In post-WWII American popular slang, the phrase "going for broke" was adopted from the 442nd's unit motto "Go for Broke," which was derived from the Hawaiian pidgin phrase used by craps shooters risking all their money in one roll of the dice.

