



## HISTORY

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### GOTHIC LINE AND PO VALLEY CAMPAIGN

On March 25, 1945 when the [442nd Regimental Combat Team](#) arrived in Pisa, Italy some soldiers thought, "Here we go again." Last summer, the 100th/442nd had liberated Pisa. Now, eight months later, the [Nisei](#) were back. But during the *Nisei's* absence the [Allies](#) had not budged in the Apennine Mountains.

The saw-toothed Apennines rose up from the Ligurian Sea. Starting from the northeast, the peaks hugged the east coast of Italy and stretched diagonally southward across the Italian boot. To the west, on the other side of the mountains, was the wide flat Po River Valley that led up to the Austrian Alps - the last barrier to Germany.

For nine months German Field Marshall Kesselring directed the construction of the Gothic Line along the top of the Apennines. The Todt Organization (known for its fortifications at Monte Cassino) used 15,000 Italian slave laborers. They drilled into the solid rock to make gun pits and trenches, which they reinforced with concrete. They built 2,376 machine gun nests with interlocking fire.

The Allies faced steep marble mountains some rising 3,000 feet high - bare of vegetation save for scanty scrub growth. Starting from the southwest and zigzagging northeast, the hills were known as Georgia; Florida; Ohio 1, 2, 3; Cerreto; Folgorito; Carchio; and Belvedere. Allied planes air-bombed it and Allied artillery blasted it, but they couldn't crack the Gothic Line.

Now, the 442nd, under General Mark Clark's Fifth Army, 92nd Infantry Division was ordered to do it. But how? The Germans, safe and snug in their mountaintop observation posts, could see troops coming from miles away. The 442nd's Regimental Commander, Colonel Virgil Miller, and the Battalion commanders and their staffs went over possible plans. Colonel Miller, Lt. Colonel James Conley (100th Battalion Commander) and Lt. Col. Alfred Pursall (3rd Battalion Commander) made their decision. The plan was to conceal the *Nisei* approach by moving at night, and then make a surprise pincers attack at dawn.

On the night of April 3, the 100th Battalion moved west of Cerreto. Meanwhile, the 3rd Battalion hiked eastward, all night to the village of Azzano, southeast of Folgorito. The Italian partisans guided them through the mountainous terrain. The next day, the Battalions hid.

When darkness fell, the 100th moved toward Florida hill undetected. Meanwhile, the 3rd Battalion climbed toward the saddle between Folgorito and Carchio. For eight hours, I and L Company men plus M Company machine-gunners scaled the 60-degree incline. Laden with packs and ammunition, they crawled up the steep slippery shale-encrusted slopes. One man fell 300 feet, but didn't utter a sound. The success of the entire operation hinged on silence and secrecy.

By dawn on April 5, they reached the top, and were looking into the backs of the German emplacements. Suddenly, bam! The Germans were surprised with a wake-up call. The *Nisei* killed and captured enemy soldiers and quickly seized gun positions.

The 3rd Battalion attacked across the mountaintops, moving westward. L Company drove off a sharp counterattack and reached the base of Folgorito. I Company drove the enemy into the recesses of Carchio.

At the same time, the 100th Battalion attacked eastward - squeezing the German defenses between the two battalions. The 100th's A Company faced minefields and heavy grenade and machine gun fire. [Sadao Munemori](#), an A Company private, made a frontal, one-man attack through heavy fire and took out two machine gun nests. As Munemori returned to take cover in a crater with two squad members, a grenade bounced off his helmet. The live grenade rolled toward his helpless squad members. Without hesitation, he dove on the grenade and smothered the blast with his own body. By his swift and supremely heroic actions, he saved the lives of two men at the cost of his own.

In 32 minutes, the *Nisei* had driven the enemy from their entrenchments but now the Germans were awake. They pounded K Company and the mortar platoon of M Company with heavy mortar fire, killing three *Nisei* and wounding 40 more.

The battle for the ridges raged on. Allied mortar and artillery fire failed to dent the well-constructed emplacements. The 442nd had to filter through heavy fire to hand-grenade range and destroy the fiercely defended bunkers one by one. The *Nisei* also faced a new threat - Shu mines. These hard-to-detect mines caused more than half of 100th Battalion's casualties.

By the night of April 6, the 100th and 3rd Battalions had closed in from opposite directions and seized Cerreto. The 2nd Battalion's F Company took Carchio. The *Nisei* had also seized hills Georgia, Ohio 1, 2, 3 and Folgorito.

On April 7, the 2nd Battalion pushed toward the wide rolling top of Belvedere. Veteran troops from the formidable Kesselring Machine Gun Battalion battered the attackers. The crack Nazi Battalion wasn't giving up ground. F Company [Technical Sergeant Yukio Okutsu](#) broke the deadlock. Okutsu single-handedly knocked out three machine gun nests. At the third, he captured four men. By nightfall, the last of the ridges were in the 442nd's hands.

In four days, April 4 - 8, the 442nd advanced more than 2.5 miles. The [232nd Engineer Combat Company](#) worked night and day to support the swift-moving infantry. The 232nd cleared debris, built bridges and defused 200 mines - all under dangerous enemy fire. For three days in mid-April, the engineers stopped bulldozing and minesweeping and became infantrymen on La Bandita Ridge. Together with C Company, they fought a strong German counterattack. In this action, 10 C Company men, several engineers and Captain Pershing Nakada, Commander of the Engineer Company, were wounded.

From April 9 - 18, the *Nisei* continued to push northeast, climbing up and down the 3,000-foot peaks, fighting Germans and taking towns until they arrived south of Aulla. The Nazis were bitterly defending the high ground at Mount Nebbione and the Aulla road junction as it was the last remaining German escape route into the Po Valley.

On April 21, the 442nd attacked. 3rd Battalion's K Company battled to seize the town of Tendola. K Company [Private Joe Hayashi](#), an acting squad leader, single-handedly silenced three machine gun nests. As he pursued more Germans, he was killed by machine pistol fire.

Meanwhile, on a fortified ridge called Colle Musatello, [Lieutenant Daniel Inouye](#) of 2nd Battalion's E Company took out two machine gun nests. Wounded in the stomach, he dragged himself toward a third nest. He pulled a grenade pin and was about to throw it when his right arm was shattered by gunfire. He reached for the live grenade with his good left

hand and threw it, destroying the machine gun nest. He then shot the surviving German gunners using his Tommy gun, while his right arm flapped uselessly against his side. Again, German gunfire wounded Inouye, but all through the fight he refused help and urged his men to charge the hill.

Two days later the 2nd Battalion men pushed toward the village of Pariana but met stiff resistance from the Bersagliere, a crack Italian mountain unit made up of diehard Fascists. E and G Companies spread out, attacking frontally as well as east and west and eventually killed four Fascists and took 135 as prisoners.

Finally, on April 25, Aulla fell - thanks to a 442nd pincer movement where the 2nd Battalion drove up from the west and a special task force of B and F Companies led by Major Mitsuyoshi Fukuda poured in from the east.

The Germans who had fought so skillfully and bitterly from Salerno to the Po were finished. They surrendered by the hundreds. Less than two weeks later, on May 7, 1945, Germany surrendered.

From the Po Valley campaign, 101 Nisei soldiers died; 874 were wounded with 462 of those wounded in hospitals. [Private Munemori](#) was posthumously awarded a [Medal of Honor](#) - the only Nisei at the time to receive the nation's highest military honor. More than 56 years later President Bill Clinton awarded Medals of Honor to [Inouye](#), [Okutsu](#) and [Hayashi](#) (posthumously).

For their actions in the Apennines, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and the 232nd Combat Engineer Company were awarded a [Presidential Unit Citation](#). Signed by Chief of Staff Dwight Eisenhower, the man who had at first refused the 100th Battalion, it read in part:

*“. . . In four days, the attack destroyed positions which had withstood the efforts of friendly troops for five months. . . [The Combat Team] accomplished its mission of creating a diversion. . . which served as feint for the subsequent breakthrough of the Fifth Army forces into Bologna and the Po Valley. The successful accomplishment of this mission turned a diversionary action into a full scale and victorious offensive, which played an important part in the final destruction of the German armies in Italy. . .”*