



HISTORY

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442nd REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM

The motto of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team was "go for broke." It's a gambling term that means risking everything on one great effort to win big. The soldiers of the 442nd needed to win big. They were Nisei - American-born sons of Japanese immigrants. They fought two wars: the Germans in Europe and the prejudice in America.



The motto was invented by the high-rolling Nisei soldiers who came from the Hawaiian Islands. The Hawaii-born Nisei, also known as "Buddhaheads," made up about two-thirds of the regiment. The remaining third were Nisei from the mainland. In April 1943, the islanders and mainlanders arrived for training at Camp Shelby, Mississippi. Immediately, they fought with each other because of different perspectives based on where they grew up.

The Buddhaheads represented the largest ethnic group in a small island community. When Pearl Harbor was attacked, the Nisei, like everyone else on the island, responded to the emergency. No one rejected them as they pitched in to aid the wounded, give blood and bury the dead. On the day of the bombing and for six weeks after, the Nisei cadets in the University of Hawaii's ROTC guarded vulnerable areas against enemy attacks.

But on January 19, 1942, the Army discharged all the Japanese Americans in the ROTC - and changed their draft status to 4C - "enemy alien." The Nisei cadets felt such despair that the very bottom of their existence fell out. But community leaders convinced the demoralized students to turn the other cheek. One hundred and seventy students petitioned the military governor: "Hawaii is our home; the United States our country. We know but one loyalty and that is to the Stars and Stripes. We wish to do our part as loyal Americans in every way possible, and we hereby offer ourselves for whatever service you may see fit to use us."

The students gave up their books, and their chance for the education that would lift them up from their menial plantation jobs. Instead, the "Varsity Victory Volunteers" picked up shovels and hammers. From January to December 1942, they built barracks, dug ditches, quarried rock and surfaced roads. When Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy visited the islands, military and community leaders made sure he saw the VVV hard at work breaking rocks.

Apparently that made an impression. The Varsity Victory Volunteers finally got their chance to fight. On January 28, 1943 the War Department announced that it was forming an all-Nisei combat team and called for 1,500 volunteers from Hawaii. Ten thousand men

volunteered, including men from the Varsity Victory Volunteers.

Meanwhile, on the mainland, the War Department tried to recruit 3,000 soldiers. But only 1,182 enlisted. Given how America had treated the Nisei, it was very admirable that this many men volunteered. More than 110,000 persons of Japanese ancestry (including 60 percent who were American citizens) were forcibly "relocated" from their homes, businesses and farms in the western states. They were incarcerated in crowded, tarpaper barracks, in the desolate wind-swept desert. Even behind the barbed wire of the U.S. concentration camps (President Truman's term), even though their country had failed to protect their rights, these American-born Japanese men wanted to give up their lives to fight for their homeland, America.

Back in Hawaii, the entire Japanese community was not interned (with the exception of about 1,000 suspects that the FBI arrested and incarcerated). So the Buddhaheads couldn't understand the "whipped-dog" complex that the mainlanders had in relation to Caucasians.

The Buddhaheads thought the mainlanders were sullen and snobby, and not confident and friendly. Soon misunderstandings, fueled by alcohol, turned into fistfights. In fact, that was how mainlanders got the name "Katonk." It was the sound their heads made when they hit the floor. The Katonks were fairer skinned, and spoke perfect English. The Buddhaheads were darker skinned and spoke Pidgin - a strange mixture of Hawaiian, Japanese, Portuguese, Chinese and broken English.

Money was another big divider between the groups. The Buddhaheads gambled heavily and spent freely using the cash sent by their generous parents who still worked in Hawaii. They thought the Katonks were cheap. They didn't realize that the Katonks sent most of their meager Army pay to their families imprisoned in the camps. The Katonks didn't talk about their painful incarceration.

The friction between the two groups was so bad that the military high command considered disbanding the 442nd. They thought the men could never fight overseas as a unit.

The Army decided to send a group of Buddhaheads to visit the camps in Arkansas. The men thought Camp Jerome and Camp Rowher were little towns with Japanese families. But when the trucks rolled past the barbed wire fence, past the guard towers armed with machine guns pointed at the camp residents, past the rough barracks where whole families crowded in small compartments with no privacy - suddenly the Buddhaheads understood. Word of the camps spread quickly, and the Buddhaheads gained a whole new respect for the Katonks. Immediately the men in the 442nd became united - like a clenched fist.

From May 1943 through February 1944 the men trained for combat. The men excelled at maneuvers and learned to operate as a team. In March, Chief of Staff General George Marshall inspected the regiment. In April the regiment packed up, and on May 1, 1944 the men boarded ships destined for Europe.

The 442nd Regimental Combat Team included the 522nd Field Artillery Battalion, 232nd Combat Engineer Company, 206th Army Ground Force Band, Antitank Company, Cannon Company, Service Company, medical detachment, headquarters companies, and two infantry battalions. The 1st Infantry Battalion remained in the States to train new recruits. The 2nd and 3rd Battalions would join the legendary 100th Battalion, which was already fighting in Italy.

The 442nd Regimental Combat Team was the most decorated unit for its size and length of service, in the entire history of the U.S. Military.

The 4,000 men who initially came in April 1943 had to be replaced nearly 3.5 times. In total, about 14,000 men served, ultimately earning 9,486 Purple Hearts , 21 Medals of Honor and an unprecedented eight Presidential Unit Citations.

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