

Go for Broke: 442nd Regimental Combat Team

By Tracy L. Barnett

Nisei unit fought with distinction—Japanese–American GIs recount stories of war

WATSONVILLE—Nobody has to tell Tom Goto he's a hero. Long ago, he gave away the official recognition of his bravery: a Purple Heart. He's not one to tell war stories. After 50 years, he still shakes his head quietly and says, "I don't need to remember those things. I'd rather forget."

Left for dead with a belly full of shrapnel in the Vosges Mountains of France, Goto says it's enough to just be alive. The self-effacing silence of Goto and his companion of the "Go For Broke" 100th/442nd Regimental Combat Team kept a generation of Japanese–American heroes in the shadows of U.S. history for decades. Scores of the former members of the most-decorated military unit in World War II came from Santa Cruz County, most from Watsonville.

It was members of the 442nd who shot the lock off the gate at Dachau; they fought their way through the Vosges Mountains to rescue the "Lost Battalion." They accomplished the deadly ambush of Italy's Gothic Line, climbing a cliff in silence and total darkness as some fell to their deaths without uttering so much as a whimper.

Until now, they've kept their history folded away in the closet along with their medals. But the time has come for their story to be told. "I think the ice has been broken, and it's OK to talk now," said Terri DeBono, a Monterey filmmaker who just completed a documentary on the 442nd, "Beyond Barbed Wire." The Film will cap off the Pacific Rim Film Festival with a Monday screening at the Fox Theater in Watsonville, follow by a reception for the veterans.

"They're so full of humility, self-effacing; they give credit to everyone else but themselves," said DeBono. "They'll tell you what their buddy did, but they won't tell you what they did."

DeBono and her partner Steve Rosen, who directed the film, befriended Monterey veteran Yokio Sumida and his wife, Mollie.

Yokio finally said, "If we don't tell this story, who will?"

We were just amazed at the story of these small men and what they were asked to do. They were put at the head of many of the battles and were so determined prove their loyalty.

They were fighting like mad men. ... I can't believe we don't know this story, that it slipped by the pages of history.

Some of the men went straight from the internment camps to the front lines. Others, like Santa Cruz native Henry Arao and Watsonville native Yoshio Fujita left their families behind in the camps to take on some of the War's most difficult and dangerous assignments.

Arao, who left behind his father, four brothers and two sisters in the Poston, Ariz. internment camp shrugs off the irony.

"We figured we wanted to show them that we were just as much an American as anyone else."

Etched into his memory is the sight of companion Sadao Minamari, who threw himself onto a grenade to save his squad from almost certain death. Arao was only about 100 feet away at the time. Minamari received a posthumous Medal of Honor, America's highest military decoration.

Arao doesn't like to talk about it, but his own Distinguished Service Cross and Purple Heart are locked away in a safe-deposit box. He received the honor for dashing out into a clearing to save the life of his wounded squad leader during the fateful rescue of the Lost Battalion.

In *"The Lost Battalions: Going for Broke in the Vosges"* by Soquel resident Franz Steidl, the Alamo Regiment (so named because of their San Antonio origin) had been cut off for six days in the fall of 1944 without food and water in the heavy forests of the Vosges Mountains of eastern France. The 442nd was sent into the rugged terrain to rescue the surrounded soldiers. A barrage of machine gun fire and mortars from the German troops on the hilltop rained down on the men, taking them out in droves.

"The worst was the tree bursts," said Goto, describing the explosions of mortars in the treetops that rained hot metal and splinters down on the men. "You can hear it whistling before it comes down, but by then it's too late."

The dense growth of the Vosges forest was legendary, lending a Vietnam-like quality to the nightmarish experience.

The big difference from Vietnam, however, was the bitter cold. Soldiers slept in the snow, were pelted by rain and impeded by fog so thick they could barely see their hands in front of their faces. Soldiers suffered from frostbite and trench foot so severe they could barely walk; some had to have their boots cut off when they finally made their way back.

"The daytime sun doesn't penetrate there; it's dark as hell," said Goto. "We said, 'Go for Broke,' but there was really no alternative. There was no place else to go."

The battalion was left with three times as many casualties as the number of men they rescued. More than 100 were killed in the four day charge.

"We were charging uphill all the time, and they [the Germans] were just sitting on the hill waiting for us with machine guns," said Arao "They had the hills loaded with mines. If you walked in the wrong spot, you'd get your leg blown off—and a lot of men did. We actually didn't have a chance."

Arao, who became leader of his squad of 17 when his own squad leader was hit by a mortar burst has also been silent about the ordeal for 50 years. Finally, with great deal of urging, he's begun to talk.

"I went into that deal with 17 men and only four made it out," he said. "It just seems like it wouldn't be right to talk too much about it. I lost a lot of good people, but I was lucky enough to come home."

Japanese–American soldiers during WWII had to fight two battles: one against the Nazis, the other against discrimination. As then-President Harry S. Truman put it, they won both.

Yoshio Fujita served as a scout and a communications man during the war, stringing miles of wire along the rough terrain to connect the telephones the troops used. He doesn't talk much about the internment camp where his family stayed, sleeping in converted horse stalls. But when he thinks of the unfair treatment his fellow Japanese Americans confronted, his eye tear with the rage of injustice.

The signs were everywhere, even in his hometown of Watsonville: "No Japs Allowed." He finally decided he couldn't take anymore. One day, before he was shipped overseas, he went into a restaurant to confront the owner:

"How come you've got that sign up?" he demanded of the first person he saw, a waiter.

"Can't you read? It means what it says," retorted the man.

"I can read," Fujita responded evenly. "But I'm going to go over protect your hide, and you'd better take that damned thing down or you're not going to have any windows and doors left in this place. I'm going to tear them all down."

Fujita served in the 522nd Field Artillery unit of the 442nd, the unit that opened the gates at Dachau, freeing the Nazi concentration camp victims. He never saw the camp, because he was one of the ones sent ahead, but he heard the stories. He confronted a well-dressed Jew on the streets before the rescue and asked him how he came to be free.

"I'm not like those stupid ones in the camp who opposed Hitler," said the man, as Fujita recalls it. "I work with the Nazis, and I'm fat and happy and I smoke good cigars."

Fujita's eyes tear again with disbelief. "I don't understand how he could live with himself," he said.

The 100th/442nd Regimental Combat Team was 4,500 strong, but members received 18,143 individual decorations for bravery, including nearly 10,000 Purple Hearts. Thirty-eight members of the team came from Santa Cruz County, of a total of nearly 100 Santa Cruz County residents who served during World War II.

Nearly 20 of them served in military intelligence, using their linguistic skills to penetrate enemy lines, break secret codes, translate documents and perform a variety of other tasks. Two were the brothers of retired Watsonville High School history teacher Mas Hashimoto, who served out the war in the internment camps.

Hashimoto said he has been trying to get local vets to tell their story for years. He doesn't mince words when he speaks of the treatment of the Nisei, the first-generation American-born children of Japanese parents, during the war. The 442nd was used as cannon fodder, he believes, time and time again being sent into situations deemed too dangerous for white soldiers.

"They were expendable," said Hashimoto. "At first no one wanted the Japanese Americans. Again and again, they got the dirty jobs."

Hashimoto tells the story of Merle's Marauders, the Nisei troops who parachuted into the jungles of Burma. Fourteen Nisei linguists were among them.

"They were the ones who not only captured Japanese documents and translated them, they endured unbelievable casualties; of 2,000 guys, only about 200 survived. They went through hundreds and hundreds of miles of jungle and went beyond what anyone could be expected to endure."

His brother, Tadashi Hashimoto on detached service to the Marine Corps, served in the Pacific Islands and Japan. Serving in the islands was especially difficult for Japanese-Americans, who were fired on by both sides: the Japanese, who saw their American uniforms, and the Americans, who saw their Japanese features.

"He was good at interrogating the prisoners, at getting them loosen up and talk about their commanders and regiment," said Hashimoto. "He didn't wear a helmet, because he didn't want to be shot by his Marine buddies. And at night he was to stay in the tent and come out only in daylight; otherwise, he'd be shot."

To DeBono, the men of the 442 have marked a unique place in history.

"These are not war stories; to me it's the story of the human spirit," she said, "We're talking about matters of the heart here."

Sources

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