

The 442nd Infantry Regiment

During world war two there were segregated units within the military due to America's then racist views on non-white peoples. These units had more to prove than any other units in service and accomplished tasks that were extremely dangerous and suffered very high casualty rates because of that. One of the most prestigious of these units was the 442nd Infantry Regiment which was comprised of mostly Japanese American soldiers with the officers being mostly white. The 442nd Infantry Regiment is the most decorated unit in the history of American warfare for its size. The 442nd was arguably exploited and seen as expendable to some of the military commanders. The unit followed order and fought hard to prove their loyalty to America which was in question due to the attack on Pearl Harbor by Japan. Did the sacrifice of the soldiers of the 442nd Infantry Regiment prove their loyalty to the general population of the United States?

The first Japanese immigrants came to the United States in the late 1800s and early 1900s to escape the poverty that was being experienced by many in Japan. They mostly worked as farm hands, fishermen and operating small stores. Many Japanese immigrants came to America because they heard rumors of the vast wealth that could be gained there. Many Americans felt threatened by the large number of immigrants coming in from Asia. As a result of this, good work was hard to find for the Japanese immigrants. Laws were passed that prevented them

from becoming American citizens. Other laws were passed preventing non-citizens from owning land which effectively prevented Japanese immigrants from owning their own land. The Japanese immigrants worked through these hardships in hopes that their American born children wouldn't go through the same hardships. Their children grew up and went to school as Americans, graduated college in hopes of better lives. Most however were forced to return to working unpaid for their parents because they couldn't find jobs that wanted them. Thanks to the help of various organizations such as the Japanese American Citizens League, various religious groups, and the efforts of local communities the quality of life for many became better going through the 1930s. But on December 7th, 1941 those of Japanese ancestry in America would become the most hated people living in America.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor by Japan, many Japanese Americans knew that they would become the target of investigations and discrimination. Many families destroyed any possessions they owned including letters from family in Japan that could potentially be used to incriminate them of being a spy. There were some that wanted to join the military to prove their loyalty to the United States but the government had deemed those of Japanese ancestry as enemy aliens preventing them from joining. The Japanese military unit in Hawaii that was already active at the time that had served in world war one was deactivated. Then on February 19th, 1942 president Roosevelt was pressured into signing executive

order 9066 which allowed the military to designate military zones and the ability to relocate anyone they felt the need to within that zone. Roughly one hundred and twenty thousand people of Japanese ancestry were removed from their homes on the west coast and forced into internment camps. They faced large amounts of discrimination from the military and general population and the living conditions of the camps was horrible. After a few months the military wanted to recruit more troops and decided to allow Japanese Americans with citizenship to volunteer for military service, but they had to answer a loyalty questionnaire before doing so. The two major questions on the form asked if they would be loyal to the United States and renounce any loyalty to Japan, and the other asked if they were willing to serve in the United States military, which also effectively registered themselves to be drafted by answering yes to both questions. About a quarter of those that took the questionnaire answered no to at least 1 of the questions and many of those who did were imprisoned.

Those that volunteered for military service and were accepted were sent to train. While that happened the Japanese Americans in Hawaii that were in the military were reactivated and reformed into the 100th infantry battalion. The 100th infantry battalion later joined the 442nd infantry regiment as their 1st battalion. The Japanese Americans faced much discrimination during training for various reasons. There was a lot of skepticism of the loyalty of the Japanese American soldiers. The

soldier worked hard during their training and set many records. The 442nd Infantry regiment and 100th infantry battalion were comprised entirely of Japanese Americans except the officers which were white Americans.

When the 442nd and 100th were deployed they quickly proved themselves to be very capable and determined. These soldiers wanted to prove their loyalty to the United States. One of their most highly regarded accomplishments was their victory in the Vosges Mountains. The German forces were heavily entrenched on several hills and were ordered to fight at all costs because this was the final defense line separating the allied forces from reaching Germany. During this engagement, General Dahlquist gave very questionable commands to the 442nd and 100th. He ordered the 100th infantry battalion to secure the farm town of Biffontaine which was militarily insignificant. The 100th was cut off from the 442nd as a result of this and were forced into constant combat for 2 days. The general also ordered lieutenant Allan Ohata to lead his men up a hill to engage a German troop that was heavily dug in and well supplied. The lieutenant refused the order regardless of the threats of court-martial and demotion, seeing it as a suicide mission. Dahlquist also ordered the 442nd to rescue a part of the 36th division that had been cut off by German forces. The rescuing of the lost battalion had the 442nd up against some of the fiercest fighting it had seen throughout the war. It took the

442nd 5 days of intense fighting before they reached the lost battalion and rescued the 211 soldiers, at the cost of 800 of their own. The orders of General Dahlquist to the Japanese American troops was highly criticized by the officers of the 442nd and 100th. They argued that the General saw the Japanese American as expendable. On November 12th, 1944 General Dahlquist ordered the entire 442nd to formation for an award ceremony. Only a small handful of the 442nd was able to attend the event due to the heavy casualties they faced.

The last major battle that the 442nd participated in during world war two was the Gothic Line. The allied forces had been locked in a stalemate with the German forces for the past 5 months. The terrain was very rugged, there were thousands of interlaced lines of machineguns placed by the Germans throughout the mountains, and they were entrenched in positions that were drilled into the rock of the mountain. On April 3rd, 1945 the 442nd used the cover of night to move into position to flank the German forces and on the morning of April 4th launched their attack. Within an hour the 442nd managed to take a few key points and crack the Gothic Line, a feat that the allied troops hadn't been able to do in 5 months. Thanks to the help of the soldiers of the 442nd and 100th the allied forces were able to fully secure the Gothic Line by the end of April.

The Japanese American soldiers of the 442nd infantry regiment received over 18,143 awards for their efforts during world war two. This includes 9,486 purple hearts which has earned them the nickname “purple heart battalion”. Two soldiers of the 442nd were awarded the medal of honor during world war two, and 19 more had a previous award upgraded to a medal of honor in June of 2000. The soldiers that the 442nd fought alongside recognized the effort and sacrifice that they had made erasing any doubt and hatred they may have had towards Japanese Americans. The white officers of the 442nd would verbally confront any soldiers, even higher-ranking officers, that dared to discriminate any of the soldiers in the 442nd in their presence. Thanks to their sacrifices and commendations during the war many anti-Japanese critic’s minds were changed and this helped easing the restrictions of those in the internment camps and helped with quickening the end of their internment. The efforts of the 442nd would also later help push congress into allowing Hawaii to become the 50th state of the United States.

Even after the sacrifices of the 442nd during world war two. Japanese American troops returning home were faced with the same discrimination from the general population as when they had joined the military to prove their loyalty. Many businesses refused to serve anyone with Japanese ancestry. The painful memories of the attack on Pearl Harbor would sit in the minds of many Americans for a long time resulting in resentment of those with Japanese ancestry. While there were

those that recognized the efforts of the soldiers of the 442nd to prove their loyalty to the United States, most would hold their resentment for many years. After the war ended, those that moved back to the west coast were met with discrimination, but they strived to regain the trust of the white American populace. While not entirely obvious, the efforts of the 442nd infantry regiment and the 100th infantry battalion were a key factor in the efforts of the Japanese American community to end the discrimination towards them.

Lydon, S. (1997). *The Japanese in the Monterey Bay Region: A brief history.*

Capitola, CA: Capitola Book.

Fugita, Stephen and David O'Brien. 1991. *Japanese American Ethnicity: The*

Persistence of Community. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Kurashige, Lon. 2002. *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict. A History of*

Ethnic Identity and Festival, 1934-1990. Berkeley: University of California

Press.

442nd REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM. (n.d.). Retrieved from

<http://www.the442.org/>

Asahina, R. (2007). *Just Americans: How Japanese Americans won a war at home*

and abroad: The story of the 100th Battalion/442d Regimental Combat Team

in World War II. New York: Gotham Books.