

## Texas Vets Reunite with Japanese-American Rescuers

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HOUSTON — Even though it was 65 years ago, Al Tortolano clearly recalls the one thought, the only thought, that ran through his mind as his military unit was surrounded by German soldiers during World War II.

"About the only thing you could think of was family. Will I ever see my family again?" remembered the 88-year-old Tortolano, part of what was dubbed the "Lost Battalion."

It was October 1944 and Tortolano was part of the 1st Battalion, 141st Regiment, 36th Infantry Division — a Texas military unit that was surrounded by German soldiers in northern France's Vosges Mountains.

The prayers of Tortolano and the other members of the 1st Battalion were answered by the Army's 442nd Regimental Combat Team, a unit made up almost entirely of Japanese-Americans. The 442nd broke through the German ranks and was able to free the 1st Battalion.

The epic and bloody rescue, which lasted several days, became one of World War II's most famed battles. The 442nd suffered 814 casualties as it rescued 217 men.

"I still can't thank my fellow veterans enough for what they did," said Tortolano, who stood next to his wife Alice, who also expressed her gratitude to the 442nd.

Tortolano was among 40 members from both units who gathered in Houston on Sunday, marking the 65th anniversary of the rescue at a fundraising gala hosted by the National Japanese American Memorial Foundation. Although the units had reunited once before, this was the largest meeting of surviving members of the two groups.



Ret. Pfc Al Tortolano, 88, of Santa Clara, left, and Ret. Pfc George Sakato, 88, of Denver, Colo. chat before a news conference honoring them on Sunday, Nov. 1, 2009, in Houston. A gala was held on Sunday to reunite veterans of the "Lost Battalion" on the 65th anniversary of the World War II battle. The 1st Battalion, 141st Regiment, 36th Infantry Division, a Texas military unit that was surrounded by German soldiers in northern France's Vosges Mountains was rescued by the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, a unit made up almost entirely of Japanese-Americans, that broke through the German ranks. "I still can't thank my fellow veterans enough for what they did," said Tortolano. Although the units had reunited once before, this was the largest meeting of surviving members of the two groups. (AP Photo/Sharon Steinmann)

Jimmie Kanaya, a veteran of the 442nd — whose members after WWII were proclaimed "Honorary Texans" by Gov. John Connolly — said there is permanent a bond of brotherhood between the men of both units.

"We feel like we are part of each other. We became one," said the 89-year-old, who lives in Gig Harbor, Wash.

The bond was apparent as the more able-bodied veterans helped those in wheelchairs or using canes stand up on stage at Sunday's event. During the reunion, the men hugged one another and exchanged stories of the war and of their lives since then.

Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the veterans of the 442nd are "men of the noblest heart and the greatest courage."

The 442nd became the most decorated unit in U.S. military history, he said.

"Their courage, valor, dedication are values we hold dear as a country — and to do this in what clearly was one of our darkest hours," Mullen said, referencing that many of the 442nd's members had families who were held in internment camps by the U.S. government while they served in the military.

Kanaya said he found it ironic that men who wore the same uniform he did were guarding his parents and sister at an internment camp in Idaho.

"We had to prove we were loyal Americans," Kanaya said. "We were caught between a rock and a hard place. We just had to give it our all."

Tortolano, who lives in Santa Clara, Calif., said he is even more grateful for what the 442nd did considering the discrimination they faced.

"They were sent into some battles other (units) wouldn't go to," he said. "In some ways they were treated as second-class citizens. But they proved they were true Americans."