

WWII REUNION SAVIORS STILL

The 'Lost Battalion' was surrounded by Nazis and near certain death – until the men of the 442nd appeared. Now, they meet again. VETS: 442nd fought discrimination, too

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Even 65 years later, Astro Tortolano thinks almost daily of his struggle to survive in the Vosges Mountains of northern France in October 1944.

Surrounded by German soldiers after stumbling into a trap, Tortolano and about 280 men in the 1st Battalion of the Texas 141st Infantry Regiment of the 36th Infantry Division rationed food and bullets. They fended off Nazi assaults. They thought all hope of surviving was lost.

Six days into the crisis, different soldiers - members of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team - broke through enemy lines and led Tortolano and the surviving 211 members of the 1st battalion to safety.

"I'll be forever thankful," the now 88-year-old said. "I've never forgotten how they saved us."

Tortolano and 39 members of the 442nd and 141st reunited at Houston's Hyatt Regency Hotel Sunday for a special dinner hosted by the National Japanese American Memorial Foundation to honor them.

The aging veterans, many in their late 80s and 90s, flew in from all over the country this weekend for a possible last meeting between the "Lost Battalion" and their saviors - men in the now legendary 442nd, made up of Asian-Americans, mostly of Japanese descent.

When they met each other, they embraced and swapped stories of old times. And on Sunday, together possibly one last time, they remembered all that they had been through in 1944.

The majority of soldiers in the 442nd were known as Nisei, sons of Japanese immigrants in the United States.

Even with relatives being forced into relocation camps around the U.S., roughly 4,000 men initially agreed to fill the 442nd's ranks in 1943. The 442nd was united by a common bond: At a time of deep discrimination against Japanese-Americans, its members wanted to prove that they were Americans through and through.

"We were proud to do this," said George Sakato, 88, a California native who joined the military when he was 20. "We wanted to serve our country."

Shipped overseas after a few weeks of training, the 442nd saw some of the war's fiercest fighting. Members were sent to North Africa and saw intense battles in Italy. There, they developed their fearsome reputation as a respected fighting force.

Before long they were ordered to France. Having absorbed other Nisei from a sister battalion, that is where the 442nd encountered the Lost Battalion.

On Oct. 24, 1944, the 141st's first battalion was pursuing Germans through northern French forests near the German border and became surrounded.

Adolf Hitler ordered his forces to not let the Americans escape.

The 442nd was called in to rescue their 280 comrades, many of whom were from Texas, although soldiers had also been recruited from elsewhere across the country.

"We were shooting machine guns and mortars," said Kenneth Takehara, 86, a member of the 442nd who has lived in Houston since the 1970s. "It was like hell."

The men of the 442nd fought valiantly. Sakato, at one point, led his fellow soldiers in a rush that dislodged enemy soldiers. In a few minutes he single-handedly killed 12, wounded two and took 34 prisoners.

He remembers the concussion from a mortar later sending him flying. Sakato was taken injured to a military hospital.

Though the 442nd broke through and led 211 surviving members of the Lost Battalion to safety, they paid a heavy price. More than 100 soldiers were killed and nearly 1,000 injured.

By the end of the war hundreds of members of the 442nd had been killed but they still faced discrimination at home. It wasn't until 2000 that Sakato and several of his colleagues received the Medal of Honor - the nation's highest military honor - for their courage in battle.

Their reputation for bravery had been earned with blood.

"It was almost as if they were called in because they really had what it took to rescue the Lost Battalion," said Abbie Salyers Grubb, a historian and adjunct professor at Lone Star College. "They were really known for their courage."

Authorities called out all the stops for the meeting this weekend.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Mike Mullen, former cabinet secretary Norman Mineta and former congressman Jim Wright made the trip to Houston.

At the hotel Sunday the veterans were treated like rock stars.

They laughed as they took pictures with Mullen. They stood proudly on a large stage, some in red, white and blue caps, as 500 well-wishers cheered them during a gala in their honor.

"I feel so great," said a beaming Tortolano. "I'm getting a chance to thank these people."