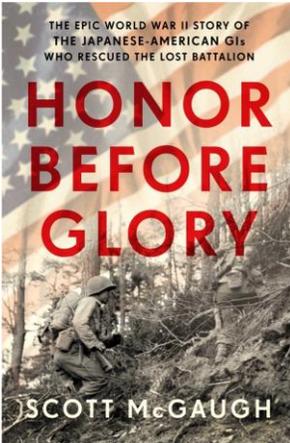


Excerpt from Honor Before Glory

By Scott McGaugh

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America incarcerated more than 100,000 Japanese American citizens in desolate internment camps in the months following the Pearl Harbor attack. A year later, their sons were asked to volunteer from behind barbed wire for World War II combat in a segregated army. They overwhelmed the army's recruitment goals to form the 442nd Regimental Combat Team.

Historian and New York Times bestselling author Scott McGaugh examines their remarkable and unprecedented legacy in Honor Before Glory (Da Capo Press). Often assigned impossible missions where others had failed, here the 442nd is on a weeklong combat rescue mission to reach a battalion surrounded by Germans on an isolated ridge in the Vosges Mountains of eastern France in October 1944.

“Keep them moving and don’t let them stop. There’s a battalion about to die up there and we’ve got to reach them.”

“Yes, sir,” the field commander answered crisply.

General John Dahlquist’s exchange with Lieutenant Colonel Gordon Singles revealed how dire Dahlquist considered Martin Higgins’s [surrounded battalion’s commanding officer] position to be on October 29. The third-generation West Point graduate, who looked younger than his age, knew better than to argue with Dahlquist. Apparently, Dahlquist didn’t think the previous day’s air and resupply missions to the 1/141 [1st Battalion, 141st Infantry Regiment, 36th Division] had bought the surrounded men much time. At the start of the fifth day of the rescue mission, Dahlquist wanted a full-court press, now that the 100th and 3rd Battalions [of the 442nd] were nearly a mile from Higgins’s men.

Both battalions had been stymied by a major logging-road roadblock and adjoining minefields at Col de la Croisette [forest roadblock]. The two battalions were abreast, with the 3rd on the north side of the road [the only access route] and the 100th to the south. Both remained vulnerable to German artillery from across the valley to the south. German artillery units knew the exact location of the 3rd and 100th, and the battalions’ excruciatingly slow advance made them nearly stationary targets. Jim Okubo and the other medics had faced casualties within minutes of jumping off shortly after daybreak. On the northern flank, George Sakato, Kelly Kuwayama, and others in the 2nd Battalion [442nd] waited for Kats Miho’s artillery battery to stop shelling Hill 617. The hour was approaching for the major attack on Hill 617 that Hanley had carefully staged. Lieutenant Colonel James Hanley finally had his companies in position.

A few minutes after contacting Singles, Dahlquist called Lieutenant Colonel Alfred Pursall's 3rd Battalion headquarters. For two hours, Pursall had been preoccupied by his men weaving their way through another German minefield. They had advanced only about 250 yards against enemy opposition. Pursall also needed tank support. A tank with a bulldozing blade on the front could clear the stacks of German-felled trees that blocked the road. Another tank or two could support the ground troops as well. The dense forest limited the American tanks' mobility. They generally stayed on or close to the logging road and had to get close to the enemy to be effective against heavily fortified German tanks.

Dahlquist pressed home his sense of urgency with each of his 442nd battalion commanders. He repeated the same order to Pursall by radio. "Let's keep them moving. Even against opposition. Get through to them. That battalion is about to die and we've got to reach them."

The interrogation reports from prisoners taken in recent days confirmed that a well-entrenched German force still separated Higgins's men from the rescuers. At least three companies of the Germans' 936th Grenadier Regiment—upwards of 200 men—and German artillery remained in the Americans' path. New reports from the 36th Division's intelligence section indicated a column of 250 Germans had been spotted marching toward the ridge. They were beyond American artillery range. Dahlquist and all three 442nd battalion commanders needed to know the status of the German positions in the forest as well as the location and progress of any approaching enemy reinforcements.

The 36th Division had a Strategic Services Section (SSS) team assigned to it from the day it had landed in southern France. It was a team of secret agents. It had infiltrated German lines during the advance toward the Vosges, coordinating French Resistance activities and recruiting residents as spies. Local employees of the Bureau of Water, Forests, Roads, and Bridges were especially helpful to the agents in mapping German-held territory and identifying targets for American artillery units.

The day before, three SSS agents had tried to slip through German lines and reach Higgins. The mission failed when they were caught by the Germans. The agents had hidden their incriminating radio equipment but now were on their way to German prisoner-of-war camps, where they would remain until the end of the war.

Lieutenant Colonel Hanley's 2nd Battalion was finally ready to ambush the Germans holding Hill 617 on the left flank of the rescue mission. The hill gave the Germans a commanding view of the valley to the north, where Companies E and F had tried to cross in hopes of ambushing the enemy. Frightening losses from enemy mortars had forced both companies to mount trucks at night and swing farther to the north before turning south toward Hill 617. To the west, Company G had attempted to draw the Germans' attention, but the result had been several days of casualties and almost no progress.

But now Hanley was ready. After a failed attempt at dawn, two Company G platoons attacked Hill 617, advancing up a narrow creek bed shortly before noon. Elevated German positions on both sides rendered the creek a killing zone. Bloodied, both platoons pulled back. It had been a diversion. George Sakato, Kenji Ego, and the rest of Companies E and F then attacked from the north. Company G simultaneously attacked again in force, against an estimated two hundred German soldiers on the west side of the hill. Enemy artillery pummeled the American battalion on both sides of the hill. Progress was measured by the distance between trees. The price was measured by the increasing number of casualties as the Americans slowly advanced uphill over the course of several hours' fighting.

Medic Kelly Kuwayama had a unique view of the battle, peering over a boulder or from behind a tree. The intellectual Princeton graduate knew how to dissect a battlefield. Scan the scattered open areas where a man was more likely to be shot as he advanced. Watch for movement because when soldiers were moving, they were more vulnerable. Unconsciously run his hands around his belt, making sure medical-supply packs had not fallen off somehow. Look for stands of trees, mounds of rocks, and foxholes that might offer shelter if a man fell wounded and Kuwayama had to drag him to safety. The shorter the distance, the better. A medic couldn't be searching the forest for a safe haven *after* he had reached a wounded soldier. Listen, especially between the mortar detonations. Men would call for help, most likely for buddies who had been wounded.

“Medic!”

Kuwayama saw a rifleman laying in the open, motionless. German mortars were landing dangerously close to the defenseless soldier. Kuwayama ran across bare ground, oblivious to the shrapnel and bullets splitting the air around him. The thud against his head must have felt like a heavyweight's punch. Blood from the shrapnel gash nearly blinded the medic. He paused, dragged a shirtsleeve across his eyes, and then resumed his dash toward the wounded man. The first thing he did was to check the man's eyeballs. If they didn't move, Kelly would know he was dead. Not this time. They moved. He administered rapid-fire triage before dragging the man thirty yards across open ground and through wicked enemy fire. Litter bearers were nearby, ready for the wounded soldier. Kuwayama needed immediate treatment, too.

Companies E and F finally reached the top of Hill 617, but it was clear the German units in the area were not defeated. Veteran combat soldiers had learned that a cleared enemy was not necessarily a vanquished enemy in the Vosges. Now the Germans had to drive the Americans off the hill. Trees exploded and the forest floor quivered as Company E's George Sakato dove into a German foxhole. A soldier from Company F joined him. George thought he recognized the man, despite the grime and exhaustion that coated his face.

“Hey, you're Mas Ikeda from Mesa, Arizona,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“What have you heard about home?”

In the middle of the raging battle, they shared tidbits of life a world away, where families endured barbed wire and armed guards. Caucasian America called it internment. Many Japanese Americans called it incarceration where their sons had volunteered to fight America’s war.

The artillery attack finally paused, and Ikeda left Sakato in search of more ammunition. Then Sakato spotted the lead elements of the enemy’s infantry counterattack. The onetime sickly boy named after a samurai had become a battle veteran whom replacement troops relied upon. Could the 2/442 [2nd Battalion, 442nd] hold the hill? A German approached Sakato, grenade in hand. Sakato grabbed a German Luger he had found days earlier and killed the German. Now he had only a few seconds to fill his Thompson submachine-gun clips. He had taped two together, giving him a forty-round capacity. As he did, Germans passed him on their way back up the hill. No one noticed the five-foot-four American in the bottom of the foxhole.

Not far away, Saburo Tanamachi led a squad through the trees. He had grown up on a family farm in Texas. He had run the business side of the farm, planning crop rotations and supervising crop deliveries to market. He had promised his sister, Yuri Nakayama, that he “would bring home Hitler’s moustache.” He and his squad faced four machine-gun nests and twelve German riflemen. An enemy squad advanced toward him.

Oh my God, Sakato thought before he yelled, “Watch out for the machine guns! They’re taking the hill back!”

Tanamachi inexplicably stood. “Where?”

The answer was a German machine-gun burst that ripped into Tanamachi. Sakato ran to his friend, who had fallen into a foxhole. Sakato held his friend, blood soaking both uniforms.

“Why’d you stand up?”

Tanamachi gurgled in reply. Seconds later he died, limp in Sakato’s arms. Sakato cried in the middle of battle. They had shared a Waldorf-Astoria room in New York City when on leave, carefree and happy, looking out the window for a few hours when they discovered they had no money after paying for the room. Now they had shared death. His friend’s blood coated Sakato’s hands. Tears blurred the battlefield for a few seconds before they evaporated in rage.

“You son of a bitch,” Sakato yelled as he, too, rose to his feet, in full view of the enemy. He could hardly have frightened the Germans. Sakato, the smallest and sickliest of five brothers, zigzagged toward the enemy, firing his Tommy gun from his hip, spraying the forest as Germans fell on one side and then the other.

His suicide charge so unnerved the Germans that several raised hands and white handkerchiefs fluttered. Sakato had nearly single-handedly halted the counterattack and taken prisoners. He had killed twelve Germans, wounded two others, and taken four prisoners. But he had lost a friend. Sakato had only thirteen days’ battlefield

experience when he mounted his charge up the hill. As a replacement soldier, he had halted a flanking attack by the enemy, taking charge when his squad leader had been killed.

The previous day, Tanamachi had told Sakato that he felt sick to his stomach. Sakato had told him to report to an aid station. Tanamachi refused, picked up a grenade launcher, and reported to his assembly area. Once the 2/442 had secured Hill 617, Sakato walked back to Tanamachi's body, soaked with blood and mud. Tanamachi's blood on Sakato's hands had crusted and then been rubbed off by his still-warm submachine gun. Sakato removed Tanamachi's lucky 1921 silver dollar that he had carried in his pocket. After the war, Sakato gave the silver dollar to Tanamachi's mother.

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Despite a horrific number of casualties, the 442nd rescued 211 Americans on this mission and ultimately became the most-decorated unit of its size in World War II. Its members earned more than 18,000 awards—more than one per man—for valor. More than 50 years passed before some members of the 442nd received Medals of Honor for their actions on this mission.