

They Were Superb: The 442nd Japanese-American Unit in World War II and Self-Sacrifice

- **Compelling Question**
 - How can your sacrifices help others?
- **Virtue:** Self-Sacrifice
- **Definition** – Self-sacrifice is purposeful action exchanging personal loss for the good of others.
- **Lesson Overview**
 - In this lesson, students will learn about the self-sacrifice of the Japanese-American 442nd Regimental Combat Team who fought in World War II. They will also determine ways in which they can sacrifice to help others.
- **Objectives**
 - Students will examine the actions of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and their self-sacrifice.
 - Students will apply their knowledge of self-sacrifice to their own lives.
 - Students will determine ways in which they can sacrifice in order to help others.
- **Background**
 - Just weeks after the Imperial Japanese Navy bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt authorized the War Department (now the Department of Defense) to place Japanese-Americans in prison camps in the American Midwest for the duration of the war. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which directed the War Department to “prescribe military areas...from which any and all persons may be excluded.” Despite the assumption that native-born Japanese-Americans, or Nisei, as they called themselves, would choose to betray the United States in favor of a Japan that very few of them remembered, thousands of young men volunteered to serve the country that had condemned them.

In early 1943, the Director of the War Relocation Authority instituted a loyalty oath for all of the interned Japanese-Americans. After foreswearing any allegiance to the emperor of Japan and expressing a willingness to serve in the American armed forces, 3,000 soldiers were recruited into the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, a segregated all Japanese-American unit. These young men formed what was known as a Regimental Combat Team. It consisted of three battalions of infantry (the 100th, 2nd, and 3rd battalions), the 522nd Field Artillery Battalion, and the 232nd Combat Engineer Company. After volunteering while in the internment camps and passing some of the toughest training the Army had to offer, this combat team would not be sent to fight the Japanese Empire, but would instead fight the best units in the Wehrmacht (the German Army) and its elite units called the Waffen-SS. (SS is short for Schutzstaffel, or Guards Squadron, which were personally loyal to Hitler and were non-regular troops). Why did they do it?

Speaking for many of them, Tech Sergeant Abraham Ohama, said, "All of us can't stay in the [internment] camps until the end of the war. Some of us have to go to the front. Our record on the battlefield will determine when you will return and how you will be treated. I don't know if I'll make it back." Sergeant Ohama did not make it back. He was killed in action against the Germans in October of 1944.

- **Vocabulary**
 - Nisei
 - Condemned
 - Loyalty
 - Foreswearing
 - Allegiance
 - Segregated
 - Internment
 - Wehrmacht
 - Waffen-SS
 - Manzanar
 - Recruiters
 - Dedication
 - Simultaneous

- Platoons
- Sniper
- Battalion
- Bayonets
- Terrain
- Routed
- **Introduce Text**
 - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
 - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
 - What challenges are you facing?
 - What fears or concerns might you have?
 - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?
- **Observation Questions**
 - Who were the 442nd Regimental Combat Team? Why was their role in World War II significant?
 - What was the purpose of the 442nd?
 - What did the members of the 442nd stand to lose while serving their country? Why did they take part in the war?
- **Discussion Questions**
 - Discuss the following questions with your students.
 - What is the historical context of the narrative?
 - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
 - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
 - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
 - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
 - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
 - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
 - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
 - 442nd Regimental Combat Team Historical Society Website, ed. Peter Wakamatsu. <http://www.the442.org/home.html>
 - 100th Infantry Battalion Veterans Education Center. Ben H. Tamashiro, Chronicler. <http://www.100thbattalion.org/history/japanese-american-units/442nd-regimental-combat-team/>
 - Takeuchi, Burt, “442nd: Rescue of the Lost Battalion. Asian Nation, ed. C. N. Le. <http://www.asian-nation.org/442.shtml>
 - 100th Battalion, 442nd Infantry.” GlobalSecurity.org <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/agency/army/100-442in.htm>

Handout A: They Were Superb: The 442nd Japanese-American Unit in World War II and Self-Sacrifice

Background

Just weeks after the Imperial Japanese Navy bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt authorized the War Department (now the Department of Defense) to place Japanese-Americans in prison camps in the American Midwest for the duration of the war. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which directed the War Department to “prescribe military areas...from which any and all persons may be excluded.” Despite the assumption that native-born Japanese-Americans, or Nisei, as they called themselves, would choose to betray the United States in favor of a Japan that very few of them remembered, thousands of young men volunteered to serve the country that had condemned them.

In early 1943, the Director of the War Relocation Authority instituted a loyalty oath for all of the interned Japanese-Americans. After forswearing any allegiance to the emperor of Japan and expressing a willingness to serve in the American armed forces, 3,000 soldiers were recruited into the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, a segregated all Japanese-American unit. These young men formed what was known as a Regimental Combat Team. It consisted of three battalions of infantry (the 100th, 2nd, and 3rd battalions), the 522nd Field Artillery Battalion, and the 232nd Combat Engineer Company. After volunteering while in the internment camps and passing some of the toughest training the Army had to offer, this combat team would not be sent to fight the Japanese Empire, but would instead fight the best units in the Wehrmacht (the German Army) and its elite units called the Waffen-SS. (SS is short for Schutzstaffel, or Guards Squadron, which were personally loyal to Hitler and were non-regular troops). Why did they do it?

Speaking for many of them, Tech Sergeant Abraham Ohama, said, "All of us can't stay in the [internment] camps until the end of the war. Some of us have to go to the front. Our record on the battlefield will determine when you will return and how you will be treated. I don't know if I'll make it back." Sergeant Ohama did not make it back. He was killed in action against the Germans in October of 1944.

Narrative

When the U.S. Army went to Japanese internment camps like Manzanar, they knew they were asking much of people who had little reason to sacrifice for the United States. The recruiters said,

“You may object that this—your life here—is not freedom. The circumstances were not of your own choosing, though it is true that the majority of you and your families accepted the restrictions placed upon your life with little complaint and without deviating from loyalty to the United States.”

These Japanese-American soldiers paved the way for a larger regiment when they formed the 100th Infantry Battalion. By February 1943, their dedication and skill convinced the Army to begin training the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, while the 100th Battalion was sent to Italy to join the 34th “Red Bull” Division’s drive on Rome. It did not take long for them to prove their worth.

In January 1944, the 100th was ordered to assault the dreaded German Gustav Line defenses at Monte Cassino. Through perilous minefields, flooded roads, and walls manned by snipers, they advanced. While they made one of the only successful advances of the battle, the 1,432 men of the 100th Battalion were reduced to 571 active-duty soldiers, earning it the nickname, “The Purple Heart Battalion,” after the medal given to U.S. soldiers wounded in combat. Among the dead was Hatsuyo Hayashida, whose wife had given birth to their only son a month before.

By the summer of 1944, the rest of the 442nd RCT was ready for battle. Their chosen motto was “Go for Broke.” The first test of the whole regiment came against an SS battalion occupying the small town of Belvedere, Italy. While 2nd and 3rd Battalions occupied the German infantry and artillery, 100th Battalion seized a hill overlooked by the Germans and launched simultaneous assaults on the flanks and rear of the enemy. Throughout the battle, men like Jack Wakamatsu risked their lives:

“During his company's movement to better defensive positions, Sergeant Wakamatsu directed by radio the withdrawal of three platoons and several litter cases... He then directed their rearward movement, despite concentrated sniper fire, until they safely reached the company lines.”

Overwhelmed by the 442nd's fighting spirit, the SS battalion collapsed. For their actions at Belvedere, the 442nd received its first Presidential Unit Citation, an award for the bravery of the entire regiment. But the greatest test of the willingness of the men of the 442nd to lay down their lives was still to come.

In October 1944, the 442nd had been moved to France, to take part in the last assault on Germany through the dense forests of the Vosges Mountains. Hitler had ordered the Wehrmacht to fight to the last man in defense of German soil. Ahead of them, other German soldiers had surrounded the men of the 141st Infantry Regiment and were closing in for the kill. To save their fellow Americans, the 442nd accepted the assignment of breaking through to them, in what would become known as the Rescue of the Lost Battalion.

In the forests of the steep slopes of the Vosges, death waited behind every tree and hedge. The 3rd and 100th Battalions moved forward at a crawl, picking off enemy machine-gun nests one by one, enduring counterattacks on their left flank supported by a Panzer Mark IV heavy tank that took three hours to destroy.

For two days, the Nisei dueled the Germans, but the steep terrain meant that they could not take the German positions even when supported by their own tanks and artillery. The Lost Battalion could only be saved by blood. Down the line came an order rarely given in World War II. An order that meant the ultimate effort: Fix bayonets. On that October day, the I, J, and K companies of the 442nd rose from their positions and charged the German guns. For every man cut down by enemy fire, another took his place. Thirty minutes later, the last Germans scattered, routed by the bravery of the three companies, none of which had more than 20 men left unwounded. The next day, the 211 surviving men of the Lost Battalion were rescued. The 442nd had taken over 800 casualties, including 184 killed, to save their countrymen.

At a ceremony honoring Staff Sergeant Kazuo Masuda, who laid down his life in Italy, General Joseph Stilwell said: "The Nisei bought an awful big hunk of America with their blood...We cannot allow a single injustice to be done to the Nisei without defeating the purpose for which we fought...Who, after all, is the real American? The real American is the man who calls it a fair exchange to lay down his life in order that American ideals may go on living. And judging by such a test, Sergeant Masuda was a better American than any of us here today."

An Army captain at the same rally said, "Blood that has soaked into the sands of a beach is all of one color. America stands unique in the world, the only country not founded on race, but on a way—an ideal. Not in spite of, but because of our polyglot background, we have had all the strength in the world." That captain was future President Ronald Reagan.

The Nisei of the 442nd represent self-sacrifice in the most profound sense. They gave their sweat, their blood, and their lives for a country that they loved better than that country loved them, and have deserved all the honor ever paid by a nation to its soldiers. In the words of their commanding General Mark Clark: "They were superb."