American Samurai

By Duane Schultz

"THAT WAS THE FIRST TIME I THOUGHT I WAS GOING TO DIE," Sergeant Bill Hull said. Hull and his outfit—the 1st Battalion, 141st Regiment, 36th Infantry Division—had been cut off and surrounded in the Vosges Mountains of northeastern France, some 50 miles from the German border, for six days. Now the Germans were closing in for the kill.

It was October 30, 1944. The 36th Division had been transferred from fighting in Italy to take part in the August 15 invasion of southern France, after which they had moved north and east, pushing the Germans back to the natural barrier of the Vosges Mountains.

The GIs in the 1st Battalion were almost out of ammunition, food, and medical supplies. The dead, wrapped in shelter halves, were lined up behind the battalion aid station in a row that grew longer each day. Almost three dozen men were wounded and a dozen more were suffering from trench foot. The outfit could not hold out much longer.

That morning, the Germans had started their attack from three sides. Then Sergeant Hull heard some noise behind him. "Well, it's over," he said. "They're finally coming in from the rear."

Nearby, Sergeant Edward Guy also heard soldiers closing in. He strained to peer through the thick forest growth—then saw "this short, dark-skinned kid come up, wearing an American helmet several sizes too big." Guy raced down the hill, laughing and shouting. He grabbed the skinny soldier and hugged him. Sergeant Matsuji "Matt" Sakumoto of the U.S. 442nd Regimental Combat Team ignored the affectionate display and calmly asked, "Do you guys need any cigarettes?" Behind him came several more tired Japanese Americans of the 442nd, their objective finally achieved.

The 442nd, whose motto was "Go for Broke," had been fighting through rugged terrain for five days to break through a veteran German force and reach what came to be known as the "Lost Battalion." By the time Sakumoto offered up his Lucky Strikes and the rescue of the battalion's 211 men was complete, his unit had taken 814 casualties—and mounted what was surely the only American banzai charge of the war.

It was a steep price for any combat team to pay, but the rescue was only one of the unit's objectives: As a Japanese-American outfit, the 442nd's men were also determined to prove they were as loyal to their country as any other soldiers in the U.S. Army. "We're fighting two wars," said 24-year-old Lieutenant Sakai Takahashi. "One for American democracy and one against the prejudice toward us in America."

WHEN PEARL HARBOR was attacked by Japan on December 7, 1941, more than 5,000 Nisei —American-born Japanese Americans—serving in the American armed forces were immediately discharged. Young men of military age were classified either 4-F, unfit for service, or 4-C, enemy aliens. Japanese American families on the west coast of the United States were rounded up and transported to bleak internment camps,

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As the men of the Lost Battalion fought for their lives, a gutsy group of Japanese American GIs fought to save them

The decimated 442nd Regimental Combat Team assembles on November 12, 1944.

General Dahlquist assured the battalion they would meet only light resistance. He was wrong.

complete with barbed wire, guards, watchtowers, and searchlights.

Nisei living in Hawaii were not interned, most likely because they accounted for more than a third of the population; the island economy might have collapsed without them. In May of 1942, they were allowed to form an all-Japanese-American battalion; it was designated the 100th. In February 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt authorized an all–Japanese American force composed of men from the mainland United States as well as Hawaii. This became the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, to which the 100th was attached. At first, all of its officers and NCOs were Caucasian, but by the end of the war, many junior officers had been promoted from the Nisei ranks.

The 442nd was sent to Italy, where its men experienced their first taste of combat, and on October 14, 1944, the unit was transferred to France to join the 36th Division in the massive assault through the Vosges Mountains.

Combat medic Victor Izui remembered "the most Godawful terrain and weather in the dark, jungle-like Vosges forest; a series of unmaneuverable long, narrow ridges; cold rain and more cold rain; a well-camouflaged, well-dug-in, tenacious enemy we couldn't see; water-logged foxholes and soggy combat boots."

"Even today, whenever I go into any dark, shady forest," Lieutenant Susumu Ito said years later, "I get chills and goose bumps all over my body."

If the weather, terrain, and the enemy were not enough, the men of the 442nd also had to contend with the commanding officer of the 36th Division, Major General John E. Dahlquist. Known as an excellent administrator and planner in peacetime, though no expert in infantry tactics, the 48-year-old Dahlquist had been given command of the 36th Division less than three months before the onset of the fighting in the Vosges Mountains.

A large, blustering man, Dahlquist treated everyone in a peremptory manner. He was commonly either scowling or brooding—but his most dangerous trait was a tendency to make deci-

A bevy of generals, including the 36th Division's John E. Dahlquist (in helmet, center) and George C. Marshall (right) are welcomed to Docelles, France, in early October, 1944.

TEXAS MILITARY FORCES MUSEUM

"Even today, whenever I go into any dark, shady forest, Susumu Ito (here in France in 1944) said, recalling the 442nd's mission into the forbidding Vosges Mountains, "I get chills and goose bumps all over my body."

sions on the spur of the moment, ignoring input from his staff or anyone else.

On October 15, the day after the Nisei joined the 36th Division, Dahlquist sent the 442nd to capture the town of Bruyères. He asserted the mission would be easy, that there were no German soldiers in the area. He was wrong. It took four days of savage fighting with heavy losses before the town was taken. Dahlquist ordered the men forward to the next town, Biffontaine, and the fighting continued for four more days. Finally, after eight days and nights of continuous combat, the Nisei were pulled back from the front for a sorely needed rest. It would not last long.

THAT SAME DAY, OCTOBER 23, Dahlquist ordered the 275 men of the 1st Battalion, 141st Regiment, 36th Division—soon to become the Lost Battalion—to advance. He assured them they would meet only light resistance from the enemy. He was wrong again, and the men were quickly surrounded.

"The Germans knew we were coming," forward artillery observer Lieutenant Erwin Blonder recently recalled. "They had us cut right off. It was cold, wet, foggy, and we had no food and very little water. We were in a heavy forest and the artillery shells exploding near the trees would create deadly shrapnel, so we had to dig in way, way deep and just hang on." Blonder had the only working radio. That night he sent a coded message: "No rations, no water, no communications with headquarters. Four litter cases."

Sergeant Bill Hull realized how bad their situation was when his battalion sent a 36-man patrol back to the division headquarters to bring up supplies, and only five returned. The rest had been captured or killed.

At 2:30 that afternoon, General Dahlquist visited the headquarters of the 442nd to announce that their brief rest break was cancelled. They were ordered back on the line; their objective was to break through to the 1st Battalion.

The Japanese American unit was four miles from the trapped battalion as the crow flies, but because of the dense forest with its hills and ravines, the distance was in reality closer to nine miles. German roadblocks had been thrown up on the few narrow, muddy trails. Mines had been laid in nearly every open patch of ground.

"It was pitch dark when we started out," Matt Sakumoto said. "Each man had to hold onto the backpack of the man in front because you couldn't see him even though he was walking just in front of you. And it was drizzling and the mud was ankle deep. The mud was so sticky, it was hard to take steps. Worse yet, it was so very cold; our fingers were so numb they were sore."

Sakumoto glanced up a hillside just as they were setting out and noticed an area where the trees had been cleared. He told his company commander that it looked like a perfect field of fire for a machine gun, but the officer insisted that the whole area had already been cleared of Germans. That was when they heard the sounds of German voices on the trail up ahead, followed by the noisy bursts of enemy machine guns. They made little headway that day.

The next morning, two of the 442nd's three battalions—the 100th and the 3rd—continued the attack under a furious artillery barrage. Not long after the fighting began, Dahlquist sent a blunt message to Lieutenant Colonel Alfred Pursall, commander of the 3rd Battalion, demanding to know why he had not yet reached their objective. But Pursall was occupied trying to keep his men alive while absorbing unceasing German infantry and artillery attacks.

Casualties mounted quickly throughout the day and the rescuers made little progress. The regimental commander, Colonel Charles Pence, was under pressure from Dahlquist to renew the attack at 6:30 the next morning, even though it was clear that the Germans were reinforcing their already strong defenses.

The following day—the operation's fourth—Dahlquist called Pursall early in the morning, demanding to know whether he had begun the attack.

"It's so dark you can't see your hand in front of your face," Pursall said. "I don't want to walk blindly into them."

"You've got to attack!" Dahlquist insisted.

Once there was sufficient daylight, the Nisei did. To the right,

COURTESY OF SUSUMU ITO

'Hope to see you soon,' came word from the rescuers. 'Bury the dead and mark well.'

The region's steep, forested terrain—and stiff resistance from the Germans—made the rescue mission a slow and dangerous one for the infantrymen of the 442nd.

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the 100th Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Gordon Singles, discovered that the Germans had withdrawn during the night, but only as far as the next ridgeline. By the end of the day, Singles's battalion had advanced a few hundred yards and had paid a terrible price. Yet it could have been worse: At one point, Dahlquist ordered the artillery to concentrate their fire on a particular set of coordinates. But, as artilleryman Don Shimazu said, if they "had fired as ordered we would have hit the lost battalion and probably wiped them out."

Private Henry Nakada was in a foxhole firing at a German sniper. At the moment the sniper stopped returning fire, Nakada heard someone shouting behind him. He turned around and saw a furious General Dahlquist, who often prowled the lines among his battalion commanders. "Why aren't you up out of your foxhole?" Then Dahlquist strode toward Lieutenant Richard Hayashi, who was firing at the enemy from behind a tree. Dahlquist booted him in the rear and ordered him to move out.

Soon after, Colonel Singles's aide handed him the field telephone and said it was a call from Dahlquist. Singles yanked the wire out, knowing that if he talked to him at that moment, he was likely to say something that would get him court-martialed.

Lieutenant James Boodry of the 442nd huddled with Lieutenant Bill Pye to plan their next move. A shell burst directly above them. Boodry was killed, the top of his head split open. Pye, with shrapnel wounds in his hands and arms, started toward the enemy. "If I have to get it," he thought, "I'd rather get it now." Shortly he was sprawled on the ground unable to move, one leg shattered by a German shell.

Twelve men volunteered for a mission to the rear to bring up food and ammunition. As they moved out through the forest, a German shell exploded overhead, leaving two dead and the others wounded. When Private George Shigematsu regained consciousness, he heard someone laughing aloud. The sound annoyed him and he wondered who could possibly be laughing under these circumstances. Then he realized that *he* was making the noise; the explosion had torn a hole in his chest. Blood and air were bubbling from his lungs.

AS THE DAYS PASSED, the soldiers of the Lost Battalion continued to maintain their position, repelling repeated enemy attacks from all directions. The men kept their heads down and counted their dwindling supply of ammunition and food, aware that their situation was becoming increasingly dire. Nevertheless, as Lieutenant Blonder recalled, "we were not going to give up. The Germans demanded surrender several times, but that was not an option. We were going to hang in there or die."

The battalion was spread over an area approximately 300 by 350 yards on the barren crest of a steep, heavily wooded hill. The men had dug deep foxholes and covered them with small branches and tree limbs. Lieutenant Martin Higgins had assumed command and ordered every man to empty his pack so they could pool their supplies. There wasn't much to go around.

"We were always wet and hungry," Sergeant Arthur Rogers said. "That was all we talked about—food." Sergeant William Bandoric recalled, "We talked about chocolate cakes and bacon and eggs and everything that our mothers and wives used to make for us back home. I remember once we spent a whole afternoon just talking about flapjacks."

Water was also scarce. The only source was a muddy hole that was brown, dirty, and stagnant. The Germans used it too, which meant the GIs had to crawl to the water hole only at night. They had

to keep using it even after an enemy soldier was shot dead and his body lay in the pond for several hours. It was all they had.

Throughout the siege, Lieutenant Blonder kept sending messages. "Out of food and water," he radioed on the 26th, "and critically low on ammunition. Medical supplies next to nothing; wounded need attention."

The army attempted to resupply the men of the Lost Battalion by air. Beginning on the 27th—the fourth day of their ordeal—when weather permitted, they fired 105mm shells filled with chocolate bars. But the shells embedded themselves too deeply in the earth to retrieve. At the same time, they loaded the fuel drop tanks of P-47 fighter planes with food and other goods. Some of the tanks landed behind German lines. ("The food falling into our laps was most welcome," one German soldier commented. "Even toilet paper was included.")

On the 28th, headquarters sent word that troops were fighting their way toward the trapped Americans: "Friends progressing satisfactorily. Hope to see you soon. Bury the dead and mark well."

AT 8 A.M. ON SUNDAY, OCTOBER 29, Colonel Singles received his first message of the day from General Dahlquist. "Keep them going," the general insisted, "and don't let them stop. There's a battalion about to die up there and we've got to reach them." Singles replied with a simple "Yes, sir" and continued to press the attack that had been under way since dawn. They were within a mile of reaching the Lost Battalion now, but the German resistance remained stiff.

At 9:45, Dahlquist showed up at the front line of Singles's 100th Battalion with his sharply dressed aide, 27-year-old Lieutenant Wells Lewis. Dahlquist asked for a map. As Lewis got up to spread out the map for the general, a machine gun opened fire. Lewis fell forward, splattering the general with blood. Dahlquist was stunned. He stared blankly at Singles. "I was near enough to catch his body before it fell," Dahlquist later wrote the lieutenant's father, the famous American writer Sinclair Lewis. "He was dead before I laid him on the ground. I was present at the services, and it was as though my own son was being buried."

Still dazed, Dahlquist wandered off by himself, but he soon shook it off and refocused on the attack. He went on to the 3rd Battalion to urge Colonel Pursall to keep pushing on. One of Pursall's soldiers, Rudy Tokiwa, overheard them arguing:

"Why aren't you moving forward?" Dahlquist snapped.

"If you think it's that simple," Pursall said, "I'd like you to come with me for a look."

"He led the general through the forest," Tokiwa recalled, "still arguing as they went." But colonels do not win arguments with generals, and soon the order came: fix bayonets and charge. Uphill the 3rd Battalion went over a narrow ridge with steep drops on both sides to confront the well-concealed German position.

The men called it "the banzai charge."

No one is quite certain who jumpstarted the charge—whether it was just a few men who led the way or a more spontaneous and angry uprising of men who were fed up with the operation and determined to end it, one way or another.

Some remembered that Colonel Pursall led men up the ridge, firing his .45 at the Germans. "He was telling everybody to charge,"

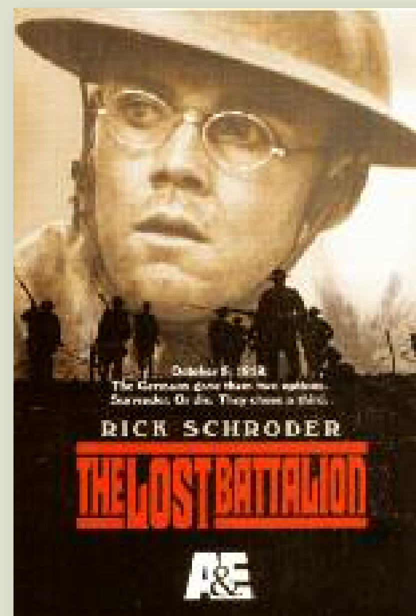
Other Lost Battalions

Several other units share the moniker "Lost Battalion" with the ill-fated 1st Battalion of the 36th Infantry Division's 141st Regiment.

The best known hails from World War I. On October 2, 1918, 554 American soldiers of the 77th Division's 307th and 308th Infantry Regiments were cut off by the Germans in the Argonne Forest, coincidentally not far from where the 1st Battalion would become trapped 26 years later. When the Germans withdrew on October 7, only 194 Doughboys were still standing. Seven Medals of Honor were awarded to the participants.

During the Second Sino-Japanese War's Battle for Shanghai in 1937, 414 Chinese survivors of the National Revolutionary Army's 800-man 1st Battalion, 554th Regiment, holed up in a warehouse to cover their division's retreat on October 26. After beating back repeated assaults for six days, the 376 survivors slipped away and were interned in the foreign-held section of Shanghai. They fell into Japanese hands in 1941; only about 100 of them survived the war.

World War II had a second Lost Battalion, tragically also from the 36th Infantry Division. After Pearl Harbor, the 2nd Battalion, 131st Field Artillery Regiment was shipped to Java. Following the Dutch surrender on March 8, 1942, most of the 371 surviving Americans were sent to work on the Burma-Siam "Death Railway," where 133 succumbed to starvation, disease, and brutality. An additional 30 died elsewhere. *—Jon Guttman*



Two films (released in 1919 and, above, 2001) tell the story of the First World War's Lost Battalion.

WEIDER ARCHIVES

Lost Battalion survivors file down a French road on October 31, 1944, ready for rest after their six-day ordeal. Their rescuers remained in combat for another nine days.

Francis Tsuzuki said. Sergeant Joe Shimamura also saw Pursall head the charge: "There he was up front. I guess he's going to die with the rest of us." Shimamura picked up his light machine gun and charged, screaming in English, Hawaiian, and Japanese. Others yelled "Bitches! Sons of bitches die!" They tossed hand grenades and fired at anything that moved.

George Sakato's best friend was hit and died in his arms. Sakato ran straight up the hill charging at the enemy until he was wounded so many times he could not go on. Lawson Sakai saw him fall. Others quickly joined the charge. "That's what happens," Sakai said. "They see one guy charging, then you have five or six guys going, and others join with them."

Other soldiers recalled that Private Barney Hajiro was the first man to head out, racing up the hill about 100 yards ahead of the rest of his company. The Germans concentrated their fire on him but to everyone's amazement, Hajiro was unhurt. He singlehandedly knocked out two machine-gun nests and killed two snipers (an action, along with his earlier acts of courage, that earned him the Distinguished Service Cross, upgraded to the Medal of Honor in 2000).

Many men were hit and went down. Some regained their footing and struggled up the hill toward the enemy; others died where they fell.

Private Jim Tazoi was wounded when he charged a German machine gun but he too kept going. He killed two German soldiers before a grenade explosion brought him down. When Tazoi came to, he saw a medic leaning over him, examining the intestines that were protruding from his stomach.

Bodies were everywhere. "Oh, God," Francis Tsuzuki recalled. "So many of our guys wounded or killed. The Germans too." As they neared the top of the ridge, Tsuzuki nearly stumbled across a dying German officer in a foxhole. A medic reached down to offer help, but the man shook his head, knowing he was near death. Tsuzuki recalled: "He looked up at me and smiled. '*Nein, nein.*' He actually smiled at me. I can't forget that."

By 3:45 that afternoon the banzai charge was over. The survivors of the 442nd had reached the crest of the ridge, but they still had not reached the Lost Battalion. Now they faced a strongly reinforced roadblock. The advance was over for the day. It was time to dig in for a possible counterattack, to get the wounded back to the aid station and count their horrendous losses.

THE ATTACK RESUMED at 9 the next morning, October 30, and over the next several hours, yard by yard, the 442nd made its way to the 36th Division's 1st Battalion, where Matt Sakumoto would casually ask Edward Guy if they needed cigarettes.

The 442nd saved the 211 remaining men of the Lost Battalion, who had held out on the hilltop for six days. The Japanese American combat team had done its job and now all who remained alive and unwounded—weary, exhausted, and

The 442nd also won a personal battle, proving the Japanese Americans' loyalty beyond question.

pushed almost beyond humanity—needed a rest. General Dahlquist, however, had other ideas. When he received word that the mission had been accomplished, he ordered the 442nd to move on and take the next hill. The unit would remain in combat for nine more days.

When the 442nd Regimental Combat Team was finally relieved, it had lost more than half its strength. One company of 186 men that had begun the fight to rescue the Lost Battalion had 17 left. Another company of 185 was down to 8.

At two o'clock on the afternoon of November 12, Dahlquist ordered the 442nd to assemble for a ceremony to honor their accomplishments. When he saw how few men had massed in formation, he confronted the executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Virgil Miller: "You disobeyed my orders. I told you to have the whole regiment."

"General," Miller replied, "this is the regiment. The rest are either dead or in the hospital."

That night Dahlquist wrote to his wife, complaining that it was so cold during the ceremony that his "fingers had turned numb from pinning so many medals on the men."

Indeed, through a series of costly battles—first in Italy, then in France—the 442nd Regimental Combat Team would become the most highly decorated unit of its size and length of service in the history of the U.S. Army, receiving an unprecedented 8 Presidential Unit Citations, 21 Medals of Honor, and 9,486 Purple Hearts.

The 4,000 men of the team who first went into action in 1943 had to be replaced three and a half times to make up for those who were killed, wounded, and missing in action.

They helped win Japanese Americans' own personal battle as well, proving that their loyalty to the United States was beyond question. On July 15, 1946, the survivors of the 442nd marched down Constitution Avenue in Washington, D.C., becoming the first military unit returning from the war to be reviewed by President Harry S. Truman. "You fought not only the enemy," President Truman told them that day, "you fought prejudice, and you have won." ✯

President Harry S. Truman reviews the 442nd Regimental Combat Team—the first of the war's units to receive this honor—in a July 15, 1946, ceremony in Washington, D.C.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES (BOTH)