

Wicked Cool Stories

Portraits, Interviews and Oral Histories
Andy Frazer

Lawson Sakai: Portraits of Japanese-American Internment Project

Keywords: Japanese-American Internment, Manzanar, 442nd Regimental Combat Team

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Wicked Cool Stories
Oral Histories

Interviewee: Lawson Sakai
Interviewer: Andy Frazer
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Biographical Note: In 1943 Lawson Sakai enlisted in the U.S. Army. Like most Japanese-American soldiers, he was assigned to the [442nd Regimental Combat Team](#). The 442nd Regiment was the most decorated unit for its size and length of service in the history of American warfare. Lawson Sakai is currently the president of the [Friends and Family of Nisei Veterans](#) organization, which supports and promotes former members of 442nd infantry.

Stop At Manzanaar

Lawson Sakai: What happened is that when we were told that we were in the safe zone on the east side of California, that we could move over there. And while we were there, my parents had said they were in contact with this church and they had heard that Governor Carr of Colorado had said that if Governor Warren in California “doesn’t want you, you’re welcome to come to my state in Colorado.” So they contacted this church in Colorado, and sure enough, they said, “We’ll take one family.” Somehow they selected us.

So sometime around April in 1942, we were told that we were no longer in a safe zone and we had to completely leave California and that everybody was going to be evacuated into some relocation camp, we didn’t know where. At that point, just before we had to move out, we received a card from the FBI giving us permission to leave. So we had friends at Manzanaar¹, so we decided we’ll go south to Bakersfield, and then we’ll drive over and go to Manzanaar and go visit our friends. So that’s what we did.

We got to the gate, I showed the soldier my pass, he let us in, we drive to the administration and we tell them, “We’d like to visit our friends. These are all our friends, would you kindly see if you could locate them and ask them to come so we can talk to them?” While we’re doing this, other people came to us and said, “You’re in this prison, so we suggest that you go back to the gate and see if the soldier will let you leave because if they don’t let you leave, you’ll be confined to this prison just like we are.” So we decided maybe we’d better

¹ [Manzanaar War Relocation Center](#), located near Lone Pine, CA.

not wait to visit our friends. We turned around, went to the gate, of course the same soldier's there because we'd been there less than half an hour. He opened the gate for us and we were on our way to Colorado.

Battle of Bruyeres France

The 442nd was fighting in Italy in 1944. And in August of 1944, we made the invasion of southern France and we were now with the 36th division. So it took a long time for the 36th division to get organized and move from Italy to make the invasion of France. So Normandy was in June, and we didn't invade until August. So by that time, the German forces in southern France had been mostly shipped to the Normandy region because of that huge invasion going on up there. So we didn't encounter very much resistance. There were some, we had a few battles, we had to battle our way on the beaches coming into France, but then there was a long stretch in which the Air Force took over, wiped out the German tanks and trucks and so forth, and we had pretty easy going... and we could take right on trucks and go up into the northern part of France.

So by October of 1944, we were up there about 15 miles in the German border, approaching a town called Bruyeres. And this is a very important city because the rail line from Germany to the eastern - to the western front ran right through Bruyeres and the Germans were protecting it at all costs because that was their lifeline to the western front. Well, we were assigned to capture that city and take over the railroad. We came in over the mountains, over the city of Bruyeres, and use of artillery, Air Force, whatever we had to get into that town. And it was a series of small hills that we had to conquer; the Germans were entrenched in every one of those. And it took us about 8 to 10 days, actually, to clear Bruyeres and the valley beyond where the railroad track was running. So it was about a 10-day battle, a long time to be in the front line. And finally we were taken off and able to get showers, a change of clothes, hot food, and just reorganized. About a day and a half, we got the call to gear up that we had to go up again.

Battle For The Lost Battalion

So we were told to gear up to go on the offense again, and the reason he told us was that part of the 36th division that had turned out to be the first battalion of the 141st regiment had become trapped. General Adolphus had been pushing his troops so far in advance because he wanted to be the first American general to cross the German border. So he was pushing his troops and now his first battalion had gotten isolated some five miles beyond the front lines. And then now they were completely surrounded by the Germans. They were without food, almost out of ammunition, they were without medical supplies, they had a hard time getting water. So the second and third battalions tried to rescue them, had not made any headway. Finally, ready to give them up, you can see that they were going to be a lost battalion completely when they told the 442nd, even though we pretty well decimated from the previous battle, "You have to go and try to reach them."

So it was a five-day battle and it was mostly hand-to-hand, face-to-face with the Germans. And it was started around October 25, 1944. And by the 26th or 27th we were making headway. I remember the 27th because I thought I was killed by a German. It turned out somehow he missed me and I survived.

The 28th, the next day, we were making offensive in the morning and the German barrage came in. Unlike Italy, in the Polish mountains' very heavily wooded forest, the artillery would be shot out the trees and the trees would make the bursts come straight down instead of a normal artillery, which would go straight ahead. So they were throwing 10, 15 shells at a time. "Bang! Bang! Bang!" one after the other into the trees. And they were just rained down on top of us. On the 28th, a large fragment, a piece of steel, hooked me in the back and slid around to the front. It was so painful; I can't explain how it hurt. It just - I'm pretty sure my body just folded up, just went into shock. And all I remember is, I told the medic when he came to me, "Just let me die," right there. I just couldn't move. I'm sure he filled me full of morphine because when I woke up I was on a hospital train going to the American hospital in Dijon for surgery.

Wife's Land Trust

In the case of my wife, her maiden name was Hirazaki and they lived in Gilroy. It just so happened that in the late 20's or so, her father was able to purchase a large ranch, a very barren piece of land in Gilroy, some 500 acres or so. But it was a piece of land that had never been cultivated, and part of it was a large swamp. So it was up to him to open up that swamp and get the land fixed so that they could raise crops.

The owner of the property liked the work that Mr. Hirazaki did so well, that he suggested that he buy the property from him and become his own landowner. Of course, the Alien Land Law of 1908 said that aliens, particularly Japanese, could not purchase property. So this became a problem. However, they solved it by using a form of trusteeship, being Mr. Hirazaki had four children, now in their teen ages, were born American citizens by birth. So they put the name of the ranch in the name of the four minor children but in a trusteeship. So that's how they were able to maintain property and control ownership.

So when the war came and they had to leave, they went to Colorado voluntarily. When they came back, they were still able to maintain and keep their own land. It's very fortunate that this situation turned out the way it did, because many people didn't have access to that type of arrangement in which they could they could set up a trusteeship or ownership so they lost the land that they had been buying, leasing or whatever. So, just a fortunate set of circumstances. But that's how they were able to hold their property.