

## Why we honor the AJA soldiers

The annual Joint Memorial Service honors the Americans of Japanese Ancestry (AJAs) who served in World War II. The Nisei Veterans Legacy sponsors the annual Joint Memorial Service which is held on the last Sunday of September. The end of September is chosen because it is when the first AJA soldier died in battle.

After Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, AJAs were mistrusted and declared "enemy aliens." On the West Coast, 120,000 people of Japanese descent – most of them Americans by birth – were forced from their homes and sent to internment camps in the country's interior.

Despite the suspicion and the bigotry, more than 20,000 AJAs from Hawaii and the Mainland volunteered and served honorably and heroically in the racially segregated U.S. Army units. The Navy and Marines would not take them.

When the war began, residents of Japanese descent made up 37 percent of Hawaii's population. By war's end, AJAs made up 63 percent of the territory's military war dead.

After the war, President Harry Truman told the 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team (RCT) on the White House lawn, "You fought not only the enemy, but you fought prejudice, and you have won. Keep up that fight, and we will continue to win—to make this great Republic stand for just what the Constitution says it stands for: the welfare of all the people all the time." Two years later, Truman ordered an end to racial segregation in the military.

For Hawaii, the AJA soldiers served and sacrificed much to win equal treatment for all people in the islands and helped Hawaii become a state in 1959.

The story of the World War II Americans of Japanese ancestry centers on four units:

### 1) 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion

The 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion was formed in June 1942, consisting of about 1,400 AJAs who had already been drafted or enlisted before the war along with some Caucasian officers. After the war began, the AJAs serving in Hawaii were removed from their units and sent to the mainland where they were formally designated the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion.

On the mainland, the 100<sup>th</sup> Battalion spent more than a year in training, impressing many observers and leading the War Department to authorize creation of a larger unit, the 442<sup>nd</sup> RCT in early 1943.

Meanwhile, the 100<sup>th</sup> was sent to North Africa and then to Italy, where it entered combat in September 1943, as part of the 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. The "One Puka Puka" soon became known as the "Purple Heart Battalion" because of the high casualties it sustained while earning the respect of friend and foe. In June 1944, the 442<sup>nd</sup> RCT joined the 100<sup>th</sup> Battalion in Italy and incorporated the 100<sup>th</sup> as one of its three infantry battalions. The 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion earned three Presidential Unit Citations during World War II.

### 2) 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team

The 442<sup>nd</sup> RCT remains the most decorated combat unit in the history of the U.S. Army, for its size and length of service. It was formed in February 1943 with 4,500 volunteers. About two-thirds were from Hawaii, the rest from the mainland.

After training in Mississippi, the 442<sup>nd</sup> joined the 100<sup>th</sup> and was sent to Italy in 1944. The 442<sup>nd</sup> fought in eight major campaigns in Italy, France and Germany. In the fall of 1944, in the Vosges Mountains in eastern France, the unit fought its most famous battle, the Rescue of the Lost Battalion. The 442<sup>nd</sup> saved 211 men of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 141<sup>st</sup> Regiment who had been cut off and surrounded by the enemy. The 442<sup>nd</sup> suffered more than 800 casualties during this battle.

Near the war's end, the 522<sup>nd</sup> Field Artillery Battalion, an arm of the 442<sup>nd</sup> RCT, was reassigned to the Seventh Army's push into Germany. The 522<sup>nd</sup> discovered at least one sub-camp of the Dachau concentration camp complex that led to the liberation of Jewish prisoners there. Also the 522<sup>nd</sup> freed thousands of Jewish prisoners when it intercepted the Dachau Death March.

Ultimately, more than 14,000 men served in the 442<sup>nd</sup> RCT in World War II, earning eight presidential citations, including the three awarded to the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion.