

JOURNEY TO BRUYÈRES

U. S. Congressman Ed Case

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I thought I understood the incredible story of the Nisei veterans of the 100th Infantry Battalion, 442nd Regimental Combat Team, and Military Intelligence Service, who served overseas in the European and Asia-Pacific theaters, and the 1399th Engineer Construction Battalion, who served at home in Hawaii. But nothing I knew truly prepared me for my visit to France with my wife Audrey from Oct. 19 to 21, representing the U.S. Congress at the 75th anniversary commemoration of the 100th/442nd's liberation of Bruyères and its sister towns and the rescue of the Texas "Lost Battalion" in the Vosges Mountains of northeastern France.

Growing up in Hilo, I had but the faintest inkling of their achievements in the Second World War and upon returning home. It was only when I read U.S. Senator Daniel Inouye's autobiography, "Journey to Washington," a gift from my parents on my 18th birthday, that I began to understand.

After college, I went to work in Washington, D.C., for U.S. Representative (later Senator) Spark Matsunaga, a proud veteran of the 100th who had fought bravely in Italy. Through his doors on Capitol Hill, at 442 Cannon House Office Building, came many Nisei veterans and their families — men who truly inspired me, like Dr. Kenneth Otagaki, also with the One Puka Puka, who had persevered through grievous wounds in Italy to contribute so much to postwar Hawaii.

None of them talked much about the war and discrimination and internment back home. Eager to know more, I would work late with Matsunaga, hoping to further engage him. But he would mostly just respond briefly that war was tragic and internment was a dark chapter for America and then move on.

As I continued my formative years, I came to appreciate more the true contributions of the 100th, 442nd, MIS and 1399th, not only to the war but also to ending injustice and leading new and better chapters back home. They inspired me to my own commitment to public service, as they did for many others.

Later, I married Audrey (Nakamura), whose own family was, in many ways, a microcosm of the Japanese American experience. Her mother's parents had emigrated from Fukuoka and raised their family in the coffee fields of Kona. Her uncle, Private First Class Yoshio (Michael) Hirata, had served bravely with the 100th in Italy. Her father's parents had emigrated from Hiroshima and Okayama and raised their family in Waikiki. Her uncle, Private First Class Sadao Hikida, had also served courageously in the 100th/442nd through some of the most difficult fighting of the war in the Vosges Mountains while his oldest brother, Isamu (Samuel), and his family were interned at Tule Lake and Heart Mountain, and his next brother, Saburo (James), was ministering to the Japanese American community in Hilo as an Episcopal priest. Like their comrades, Audrey's uncles never talked much about their war years and carried their pride in their contributions then and to modern Hawaii quietly and humbly.

In France, three generations later, our first impression of the Vosges and its towns was of steep, rugged and fully wooded low mountains and hills with well-kept farming communities throughout its river valleys and among its hills. Bruyères especially is a beautiful and peaceful town of some 3,000, surrounded by hills.

It is hard today to imagine what Bruyères and its sister Vosges towns like Biffontaine endured during the war. Just 25 or so miles from the Rhine River and Germany, they suffered through a brutal German occupation for four years. The Vosges form a natural barrier between France and Germany and the Germans knew that if the Allies were able to cross the Vosges, they would move swiftly into, and through, Germany itself. The Germans heavily fortified the hilltops and towns of the Vosges and sent in their best troops with orders to defend without withdrawal.

The 442nd, by then having had incorporated the 100th, went into the line against them in the fall of '44. What they achieved in the next weeks and months at great cost became legend. Fighting go-for-broke up every hill, door-to-door through every town, against the fiercest resistance, they pushed the Germans off the hills and out of the towns, far back into the Vosges and broke the German defense. Then, just when they had done so much, they were called back to fight through enemy lines to rescue the surrounded Texans.

Audrey's uncle, PFC Hikida, described the Vosges offensive in his war memoirs:

"Fighting in the misty, dripping wet forest was tough. The Germans were well entrenched and camouflaged. They had an advantage over us because we had to climb up and down the hills to try and flush them out. Many times they spotted us before we contacted them and we were caught in a blaze of machine gun and small arms fire. We had to watch out for snipers, mines, booby traps, machine guns, artillery, tanks, and shell fragments as they burst. The enemy shells would hit the top of the pine trees and explode, sending down hundreds of knife-like steel and wood fragments. That caused a lot of casualties among the men.

"On October 19th the combat outfit and 100th Battalion moved forward. Our goal was Bruyères. There were four hills above Bruyères that had to be cleared before the town could be secured. It continued to be rough going from the day we contacted the Jerries at Bruyères, Belmont and Biffontaine. We had to continuously fight hard, as we climbed up and down the wooded hills, crossed open terrain and dodged artillery shells."

We walked the same streets and hills, felt the same cold, wet fall mountain weather as had the 442nd. I looked up and saw the same four heavily wooded hills surrounding Bruyères that PFC Hikida had described, except I thought not of their still beauty but of the bravery and sacrifice that had been required to take them despite such injustice.

I imagined what the people of Bruyères and the Vosges had thought then, seeing these Japanese American troops fighting so hard through their hills and valleys and towns. It must have been so unexpected, so foreign. Yet, there they were, fighting and dying to free them.

In remarks at the commemoration ceremonies hosted by Bruyères Mayor Yves Bonjean and joined by Honolulu Mayor Kirk Caldwell, I said:

“In many ways, they were just like any other American GI. But they were different. They were loyal Americans. But after Pearl Harbor, their own country had questioned their loyalty. Refused them entry into the military. Seized their property, interned them and their families and friends in camps. It was one of the worst travesties by Americans against Americans in our history. Yet, despite all that they suffered, they wanted nothing more than to fight: to defend our country and our values, to prove their loyalty once and for all.”

After a moving morning mass and a parade through the streets of Bruyères, we all, Americans and French, laid wreaths of remembrance in the town square. We were then driven in World War II-restored jeeps into the hills above Bruyères, where the fighting had been the fiercest.

At Helledraye, in the middle of the forest, is a simple monument to the 442nd on a steep slope amidst tall trees. A light rain fell as the sun tried to show through the mist. It was impossibly tranquil; yet, if you closed your eyes, you saw and heard the din of battle as the 442nd moved up that hill under the worst conditions to take the German gun emplacements on top.

There, we again remembered the 100th/442nd. The children of Bruyères placed a wreath of folded paper cranes on the monument that the mayor of Hiroshima had given to Mayor Caldwell to bring there. The Rev. Jay Shinseki of the Monterey Peninsula Buddhist Temple conducted a Buddhist ceremony, the *keisu* (bell) rang out and the smell of incense wafted through the trees. Emotion overcame all that such peace came at such cost.

Our day ended at Épinal American Cemetery, close to Bruyères, the final resting place for over 5,000 Americans who fell in the war. Among them are 13 100th/442nd soldiers, including two from Hawaii — PFC Yoshio Tengwan was from Lahaina, Maui, and Staff Sergeant Tomosu Hirahara was from Honolulu. They were lost on the same day, October 15, 1944, the very beginning of the liberation of Bruyères.

When the war ended, there was some disagreement in SSgt. Hirahara's family about whether to bury his body at Épinal or bring him home to Hawaii. After much discussion within his family and with officials from Bruyères, the Hirahara family decided that Épinal was where Tomosu would want to rest. The townspeople promised his family that Tomosu and his comrades would always be cared for. And they have kept that promise.

As I laid wreaths and placed U.S. House of Representatives challenge coins at the graves of PFC Tengwan and SSgt Hirahara, I reflected on all Audrey and I had felt throughout what had been a deeply emotional day.

We had gained a deeper understanding of just what they had faced in the Vosges and back home — and just how hard they had driven themselves and why. Deep sorrow at such tragic loss, but triumph in what they achieved both there and in the generations to come.

Gratitude for both their sacrifice and their inspiration, which had touched Audrey and me and so many others of all races and faiths and homelands so directly. Gratitude to the citizens of Bruyères and the Vosges, and France, for understanding and embracing all this and for keeping their memories alive.

But, perhaps most of all, a deep humility at living for a moment in the essence of the universal human spirit . . . for the real lesson of Bruyères is that we are all ultimately in this world and life together, that we all must — and can — persevere through the worst of our human instincts and actions to achieve the best of our humanity.