



## HISTORY

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### THE 232nd COMBAT ENGINEER COMPANY

The 232nd Combat Engineer Company was unique. Unlike the other units in the 442nd that were primarily run by white officers, the engineers took their orders from other Japanese Americans. Captain Pershing Nakada and five Nisei first lieutenants ran the company.



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The combat engineers' role was to keep the lines of communication and transportation always open so that the infantry could advance quickly. They also assured the wounded could be evacuated and desperately needed supplies could arrive.

The Germans didn't make the work easy. For example, on October 15, 1944 near Bruyeres, France, the engineers were on the road that was the only supply and evacuation route for the infantry when they encountered a pile of logs and trees, a quarter-mile-long and heavily booby-trapped. When the engineers tried to clear the roadblock, the Germans fired from four machine gun nests. The engineers, assisted by riflemen from the 100th, silenced all four nests and then went back to work. For 8.5 hours, under periodic intense mortar and artillery fire, the engineers defused mines and hand-sawed the downed trees.

A few days later, near Biffontaine, France, when another engineer unit refused to clear a minefield because of heavy enemy fire, the 232nd cleared the field, allowing the grateful infantrymen to advance. From October 27-30, two platoons of engineers accompanied front-line infantrymen during the rescue of the "Lost Battalion." For four days the engineers endured enemy fire and the cold wet weather, but managed to clear more than 30 mines in the path of the advancing infantry.

Throughout the Vosges campaign the rugged terrain and wet weather made the 232nd's job of keeping the supply lines open even tougher. The few narrow logging roads that crossed the steep wooded hills were quickly turned to soggy bogs. The three platoons worked constantly in 12-hour shifts. They laid more than a mile of plank-board, dumped truckloads of gravel and built culverts across badly shelled roads.

From November 6-8, the engineers stopped their day-and-night work to become infantrymen and relieve the exhausted and decimated 100th Battalion A Company. The engineers also served as infantry riflemen in the Rome-Arno and the Gothic Line campaigns. For three days in mid-April 1945 on La Bandita Ridge near Gragnana, Italy, the engineers and C Company infantrymen fought a strong German counterattack. In this action, 10 C Company men, several engineers and Captain Nakada were wounded.

During the Gothic Line campaign, squads of engineers were frequently assigned to clear gaps through minefields and do other engineer work during infantry assaults. Meanwhile the rest of the 232nd worked to keep the supply lines open for the swift-moving infantry. Highway 1

between Massa and Carrara was an especially difficult spot. Not only did the Nisei face constant sniper fire, but the Germans had also buried pressure-sensitive mines deep under the road, beyond the range of detectors. Three bulldozers blew up, and their Nisei drivers were injured. Other Nisei, however, bravely took their seats on the dozers, while other engineers methodically hand-probed for the mines. The 232nd worked through the night and cleared the vital supply route by the next day.

In total, during less than one year of service, the 232nd built four bridges, 26 by-passes, six culverts, and 10 fills; hauled away more than a ton of dynamite from five un-blown bridges, strung more than 10,000 yards of barbed wire, and laid more than 4,200 anti-personnel mines. It also filled thousand of sandbags, built a mile of corduroy road under enemy fire, constructed mule sheds, and miles of mule trails, and pulled a two-man submarine from the sea at Menton, France.

In addition, the engineers removed more than 300 mines, including Schuh and "S" mines. The small wooden Schuh mines were impossible to detect with minesweepers, and they could maim or kill a soldier who stepped on them. The "S" mine or "Bouncing Betty" was triggered by a trip wire. The initial charge would send it up three feet in the air, where it would blow apart spreading shrapnel in a wide circle.

The engineer's "weapons" were bulldozers, saws, and minesweepers, while the infantrymen wielded rifles, machine guns, and bazookas. The engineers cleared roads, while the infantrymen cleared machine gun nests. Although combat was not their primary function, the engineers still faced enemy sniper, mortar and artillery fire, and the constant danger of booby traps and mines. Nearly 30 percent of the engineers were wounded and seven died because of their hazardous work keeping the supply lines open.

The 442nd could not have succeeded without the 232nd's support. The 232nd received two Presidential Unit Citations for its actions in the Vosges and the Gothic Line Campaigns.

The 232nd provided one additional accomplishment that earned the deep gratitude of the infantrymen - hot showers. The engineers devised an ingenious portable hot shower unit - built using an American jeep engine, a German electric dynamo, a fuel pump motor from an Italian self-propelled gun, a condenser from a beer factory, and shower heads salvaged from a demolished resort hotel. The unit was capable of producing 50 gallons of hot water a minute. Thanks to the engineers, the 442nd was the only regiment to enjoy hot showers in combat.

### **1399th ENGINEER CONSTRUCTION BATTALION**

The 1399th Engineer Construction Battalion was an all-Japanese American non-combat unit stationed in Oahu, Hawaii during World War II. When the ranks of the 442nd/100th/MIS were filled, Japanese Americans eager to answer the call to duty were honored to serve the non-combat 1399th Battalion. Thomas Takemoto was one such veteran dedicating two years to the 1399th, volunteering again after a medical discharge. Takemoto said, "We were not a little battalion. We were a construction outfit building for the war effort."

While Japanese Americans were being relocated off the coast of California, the commanding General of the Army in Hawaii, General Delos C. Emmons, realized that doing the same to the Nisei in Hawaii would devastate the economy of the islands. Activated April 26, 1944 at Schofield Barracks on Oahu, the "chow hounds" as the 1399th came to be known due to their hearty appetites, were uniquely constructed of four smaller non-combat battalions: 395th Prewar Quarter Master Battalion, 370th Engineer, 1536th Dump Truck Battalion, 1525th Base Equipment Company. Comprised of draftees from the April - August

1944 drafts, by November 1944 the 1399th peaked at 993 men. It became the only Nisei outfit to serve together in the Pacific Theater.

During the Philippines campaign General Douglas MacArthur felt it was necessary to use the 1399th for combat on the frontlines. Concerned that the Japanese American soldiers would be mistaken for the Japanese enemy, the War Department revoked his request stating the 1399th was essential for the defense of the Hawaiian archipelago. The 1399th fulfilled their duties constructing 54 defense projects in and around Oahu that included the million-gallon water tank in Wahiawa (still active), a flying fortress airfield in Kahuku, artillery emplacements, ammunition storage pits, jungle training villages, auxiliary mountain roads, recreation camps, water ways, as well as bridge repairs. Each construction project built by the 1399th was constructed efficiently and on time costing the War Department only \$2.5 million.

For fulfilling its duties in the Hawaiian defensive, the 1399th Engineer Construction Battalion was presented with the Meritorious Service award in October 1945. "For every man in the front there were men in the back, working as suppliers or medics. It takes all of us to win the war," added Takemoto. On May 31, 1946, the 1399th Engineer Construction Battalion was deactivated, with the ending of the war.

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