

FROM THE 442nd TO THE 100th

The first group of replacements from the 442nd joined the 100th in March 1944 near Benevento, Italy, where the unit was bivouacked after having been pulled off the lines at Cassino. Mitsugu Jio, Kaoru Kajiwara, and I from our squad (1st Platoon, L Company, 442nd Infantry) had volunteered and, still together, were assigned to A Company of the 100th. It was one year from the time we had enlisted and I was nineteen years old.

We had just completed our basic training in Camp Shelby, Mississippi, and were awaiting maneuvers when the call for volunteers to replace the 100th's casualties overseas came. Why we volunteered I cannot recall, but it was probably a combination of boredom and ignorance.

After some leave time, which allowed us to visit nearby Washington, D.C., we shipped out of Newport News, Virginia, along with several hundred others. The troop ship was alone crossing the Atlantic, and while concerned, we never really worried about a submarine attack. It was ten days before we landed at Casablanca and boarded 40-and-8 box cars for the trip across North Africa to the vicinity of the port of Oran.

Textbook images of North Africa quickly disappeared. There were vast green fields instead of desert. The people we encountered were dressed in dirty and ragged clothes instead of beautiful, flowing robes. Some wore U.S. Army blankets, laundry bags, et cetera, converted to clothing. Some of our stuff left hanging overnight near the open doors of our box cars was stolen. Toilets at the station stops were small, smelly, and dirty. Souvenir vendors hawked curved daggers. Tangerines and other fruits could be purchased. Overall there was an air of poverty.

A barbed wire fence surrounded the tent camp in which we were housed. MP's patrolled the perimeter, we learned, to keep out thieves and prostitutes, some of whom usually managed to get in, anyway.

In broad daylight I saw a group of MP's apprehending some of these intruders, many of whom took refuge in a gang latrine. The MP's drove their weapons carrier vehicle (like a large jeep) against both doors of the latrine to trap those intruders within. The MP's then hauled their captives out one by one and beat each with their clubs. It was brutal, but we were given to understand that this was the only "language" these Arabs understood.

While I empathized somewhat with the MP's and their unpleasant task, I couldn't help but feel uneasy about such treatment being meted out to natives and wondered if someday somehow there would be consequences for our country.

We departed Africa for Naples, Italy, via a British troop ship on which I pulled KP duty. If meals served on American ships were a 10, I would rate the British meals a 1.

When we, the first replacement group (There would subsequently be several other replacement groups) finally joined the 100th, those of us assigned to A Company were welcomed in a short talk by its captain, Mitsuyoshi Fukuda. Although I do not recall what he told us, I do recall a conversation that went something like this when we first met some of the 100th's originals.

"How they wen' choose you guys to come as replacements?"

"Oh, we volunteered."

"What? You volunteered? Stupid! How stupid! How dumb can you get? What you think this?" Not exactly the kind of reception we were expecting; reality was beginning to set in.

Weatherwise it was still a bit chilly, but at least it wasn't raining. In the days following there were a few familiarization exercises. Lined up on the side of a good-sized gully, we practiced throwing live grenades. I had never thrown a real grenade in training and it was a little scary at first. Some grenades tossed by those farther up the slope rolled down towards those of us further below before exploding. We were behind a ridge, however, and the grenades, close as they were, exploded on the other side so there was no real danger as long as you hugged the ground.

Machine gunners firing with tracer bullets at some haystacks in the field set them on fire. We pulled back as others went up the same slope to do their grenade throwing. Standing back a couple of hundred yards or so, you could hear grenade fragments whizzing through the air around us. As the squad leader was addressing us, I couldn't help but think,

"These guys are sure casual about it all," and then -

"Whap!"

A grenade fragment, its force spent, landed right on the squad leader's helmet.

"Ah, yah!" was all he said, checked his helmet (no damage), and continued with what he had been telling us..

Back in camp, I recall, also, that one of the old-timers showed us his German Walther P38 pistol. The P38, along with the Luger and Browning P35 pistols, were the most prized of war souvenirs.