

CHAPTER 1

ACTIVATION AND BASIC TRAINING

THE story of the 442d Combat Team begins in the early days of January 1943. At that time considerable agitation was taking place to permit loyal American citizens of Japanese ancestry to bear arms in the service of their country. There were still Japanese-Americans in the Army, hold-overs from the early draft, but with the outbreak of war they had been relegated to post exchange counters and other service command installations. They had been denied further training as combat troops and the right to bear arms. However, on January 22, 1943, the War Department directed by letter that a Japanese-American Combat Team should be activated on February 1, and should be composed of the 442d Infantry Regiment, the 522d Field Artillery Battalion and the 232d Engineer Combat Company.

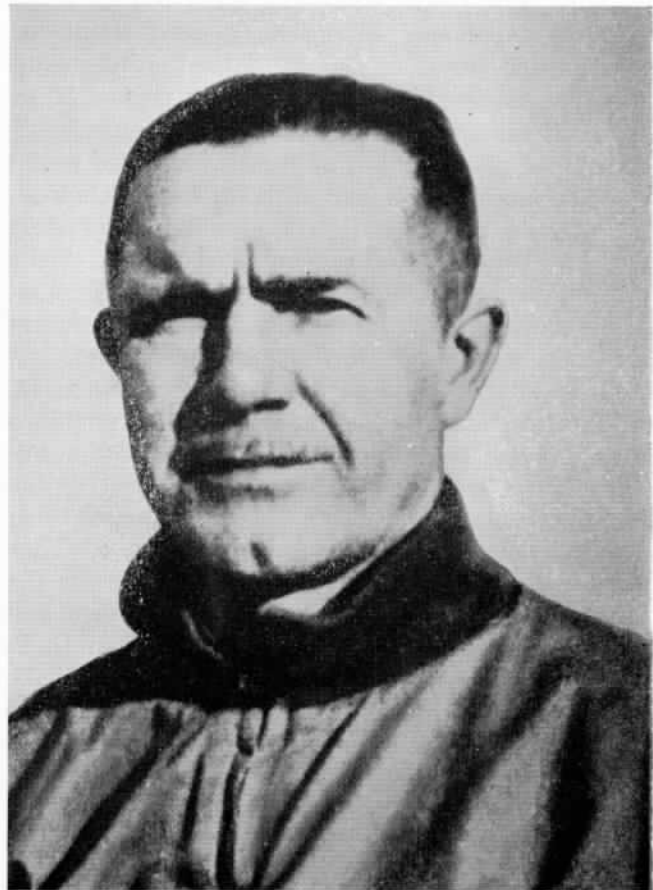
Of this step Franklin D. Roosevelt, President of the United States, said:

The proposal of the War Department to organize a combat team consisting of loyal American citizens of Japanese descent has my full approval. No loyal citizen of the United States should be denied the democratic right to exercise the responsibilities of his citizenship, regardless of his ancestry. The principle on which this country was founded and by which it has always been governed is that Americanism is a matter of the mind and heart; Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race or ancestry. A good American is one who is loyal to this country and to our creed of liberty and democracy. Every loyal American citizen should be given an opportunity to serve this country wherever his skills will make the greatest contribution—whether it be in the ranks of our armed forces, war production, agriculture, government service, or other work essential to the war effort.

In accordance with these orders the 442d Combat Team was activated February 1, 1943, by General Orders, Headquarters Third Army. Colonel Charles W. Pence took command, with Lieutenant Colonel Merritt B. Booth as executive officer. Lieutenant Colonel Keith K. Tatom commanded the 1st Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel James M. Hanley the 2d

Battalion, and Lieutenant Colonel Sherwood Dixon the 3d Battalion. Lieutenant Colonel Baya M. Harrison commanded the 522d Field Artillery, and Captain Pershing Nakada commanded the 232d Engineers.

From the 1st to the 15th of February the cadre, both officer and enlisted, arrived from every conceivable part of the United States. The men took one look at the section of Camp Shelby, Mississippi, they were to occupy, and set up a howl that rattled the windows in the Pentagon Building. The area was one of those temporary constructions that had been built at Shelby to house the overflow from one of the many divisions that had been there in 1942. To the unhappy eyes of the men who were to live there, the buildings looked like one huge draft sur-



Colonel Charles W. Pence, Combat Team Commander



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rounded by a few boards. The roofs leaked, doors hung on one hinge. In the kitchens the weight of long-unused stoves caused the floors to sag until they looked more like washboards than floors. When the rains came the ground took on the general consistency of glue and part of the area reverted to the swamp from which it had originally been reclaimed.

The cadre pitched in to work, spending part of its time on instruction and part on reconstruction of the area. Under the supervision of the officers the non-coms relearned the function and uses of infantry weapons, studied small-unit tactics, marched, ran compass courses through the dark forests at night, and brushed up on the thousand and one things that a recruit must know before he becomes a soldier. When training was over for the day they became carpenters, mechanics, chimney sweeps, ditch diggers, plumbers, and landscape gardeners. They worked hard to make the area presentable for the new men who were even then volunteering and being sworn in in Hawaii and relocation centers in the United States.

This work went on until April 13, when 2,686 brand new enlisted men from the Territory of Hawaii, cream of almost 10,000 men who had volunteered for service there, arrived at Camp Shelby to learn to fight for their country. They arrived at their new home on trucks, convoy after convoy of khaki-clad youngsters, shivering in one of the unseasonable cold snaps that infest Mississippi in April.

During the days it took to process their records and assign them to companies and batteries, the new GIs spent most of their time sitting around their hutment stoves. They wrapped themselves in overcoats, blankets, and the warmest clothes they had, and wondered what on earth was going to happen next. When the cold finally broke, what a change! The area was jammed with brown, grinning little men running happily around in the warm sun and very little else. Nobody was wearing shoes, and very few of the men were wearing anything but a pair of rolled-up khaki shorts.

When the men arrived, they were loaded with money, most of which had been earned on construction jobs while the country was bolstering its Pearl Harbor defenses. When their officers found out about the staggering sums some of the men carried, they urged them to bank it or invest it in War Bonds. And invest it they did, to the tune of \$101,500. Meanwhile, additional new men were arriving in small groups from different parts of the United States, some coming in before basic training started on May 10.

Basic training was hectic for these new soldiers, as it is for every new soldier. Heads buzzed with military courtesy and discipline, close-order drill, manual of arms, and the nomenclature and functioning of all the weapons that make the present-day infantryman a walking arsenal. Slowly they learned to hit the ground, to take advantage of every fold in the earth and every bush for cover and concealment, to work as squads and sections. Muscles hardened, backs straightened, and civilians became men who lived war and thought war. Relations with civilians and other soldiers were not always easy. Most of the men on the post and the inhabitants of nearby towns accepted the Nisei for what they were and for the job they had undertaken without a second thought. But there were the inevitable few who screamed to the high heavens about the "damned Japs." As surely as one of them opened his mouth he found a hard brown fist in it, for the one thing these men would not tolerate was to be called "Japs." They lived as Americans, thought as Americans; they had traveled thousands of miles to learn to fight for their country, and now they asked only to be treated as equals.

Next door to the infantry, the 522d Field Artillery and the 232d Engineers were learning the same things, the fundamentals of soldiering. But they were learning, too, to ply their trades. The redlegs

spent long, weary hours with their 105mm howitzers going into action and out of action till they were blue in the face; learning to serve the piece; learning the fundamentals of fuze and trajectory, observation and range. The engineers played dangerous games with high explosives, building bridges and blowing them up, building roads where there had been no roads before, operating their powerful machines.

Weather was not always kind to the Combat Team. During the days that qualification courses were being fired on the rifle ranges rain poured down in sheets, obscuring the targets and soaking men and guns so thoroughly as to impair the functioning of both. In spite of this the regiment qualified ninety-seven per cent of its men and officers on the small-arms ranges.

First of the high-ranking officers to inspect the fledgling Combat Team was Lieutenant General Ben Lear. General Lear was not pleased with what he saw. However, his inspection had come on June 1, some twenty days after the beginning of basic training, so no one was unduly alarmed, but the men and officers redoubled their efforts to whip the unit into shape. On the 20th of June, Lieutenant Colonel Booth departed for an assignment with the War Department and Lieutenant Colonel Virgil R. Miller was appointed executive officer.

On July 7 a new company was added to the Combat Team. Company S, as it was designated, was made up of Japanese-Americans from the Military Intelligence Service Language School at Camp Savage, Minnesota. These young men had been brushing up on their Japanese, and had now joined the Combat Team to brush up on the fundamentals of warfare before they left for the Pacific to act as interrogators, translators, and interpreters in units fighting there.

August 23 saw the end of basic training for the majority of the Combat Team, although small groups of new men continued to come in from relocation centers. These men were assigned to companies but they took most of their training with a recruit detachment. This unit had been set up especially to bring late arrivals up to the proficiency of the rest of the unit by feeding them their basic in concentrated doses. Third Army testing teams worked from August 23 to 28 to determine the results of basic training in the Combat Team. After a strenuous week of speed marches and small-unit problems under a boiling sun, quizzes on everything from military courtesy to the nomenclature of the gas



Inspectors searched for thumbprints on salt shakers

mask, and microscopic inspections of kitchens, barracks, and supply rooms, the unit rated "Excellent" in physical fitness and "Very Satisfactory" in all other departments.

One inspector, for reasons known only to himself, spent a great deal of time searching carefully for thumbprints on salt and pepper shakers. Another, in giving the men theoretical situations to meet, always asked them what they would do if they were commanding a squad and German paratroopers started landing on West Drill Field (about 800 yards from where the quiz was given). One soldier (who shall be nameless) snapped to rigid attention and replied, "Sir, I t'ink I lay off the stuff for awhile." This soldier was most unpopular with his company commander for some time thereafter.

There was still time for fun, and time for the men to make a great name for themselves in athletics. A regimental swimming team went to New Orleans the 24th of August and came home with enough gold medals and watches to last a lifetime, plus the Southern AAU team championship. A little later on the regimental baseball team took the Camp Shelby post championship against the best the 69th Division and a great many smaller units could offer. Some of the men created minor sensations on South-



The GIs showed the late "Afrika Korps" how to work an M1

ern sport pages by finishing well up among the leaders in more than one golf tournament, playing barefooted. They were also great hands at barefoot football, which either strengthens the toes or fractures them.

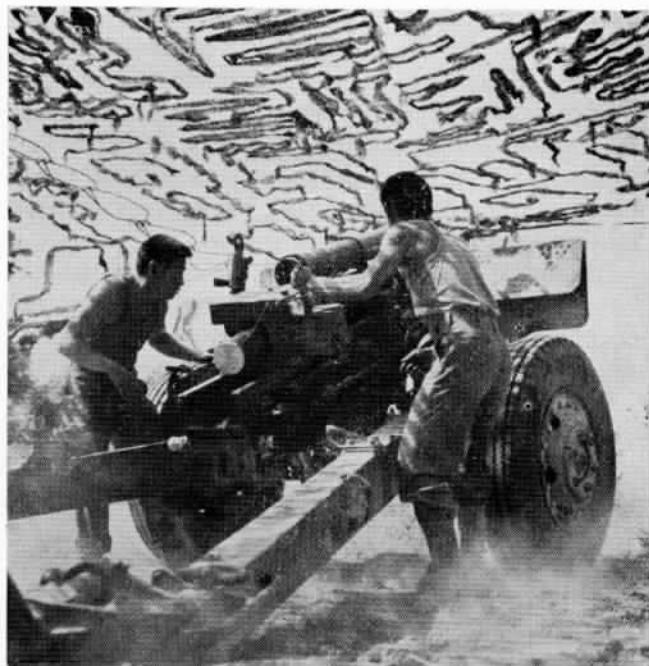
For those who confined their athletics to elbow exercises New Orleans was handy for three-day passes. After basic training the men took furloughs to New York, Chicago, Washington, Baltimore and points north, east, south, and west. Some of the Nisei headed west to try to settle family affairs which had become confused in the evacuation, but the results were disappointing.

No story of the 442d Combat Team would be complete without some mention of Earl Finch, self-appointed godfather of every man in the unit. Early in the war Mr. Finch began entertaining servicemen from Camp Shelby and the nearby Gulf ports on his cattle ranch near Hattiesburg, Mississippi. When the Combat Team first arrived at Camp Shelby, he met two or three of the men and casually invited them to have dinner with him. From that beginning grew a deep and abiding friendship. The men liked Earl Finch and he liked them. He entertained hundreds of Nisei soldiers on his ranch. He arranged dances and entertainment for them, gave them parties at the best hotels in New Orleans. He helped

them arrange for furloughs in all parts of the United States. When the 442d Combat Team went overseas and the wounded began coming back, Earl Finch traveled thousands of miles to different hospitals to see them; when they were out on convalescent furloughs, he got groups of them together for parties. As the Relocation Centers closed, Mr. Finch helped many of the former members of the Combat Team to get their families settled. He has given unsparingly of himself, his time and his money to Japanese-American soldiers everywhere and they are deeply grateful.

Just as the regiment started into unit training, some of the lessons bought and paid for in men and equipment in North Africa were being translated into changes in Tables of Organization in the States. A Cannon Company made up of six light, truck-drawn, 105mm howitzers was activated. These stubby, powerful little guns gave the regimental commander his own artillery which he could use when the 522d was firing another mission or needed additional support. It could also shoot through the 522d's Fire Direction Center as an extra firing battery. Captain Edwin R. Shorey took command of the company and began to train it.

Meanwhile orders had come in for the Regiment to furnish guards for 500 Germans, late of the *Afrika Korps*, who were going to harvest the Ala-



Gun crews learned dexterity that paid off in Italy and France

bama peanut crop. Some men wondered audibly whether the Combat Team had been activated just so some Krauts could go to Alabama and pick peanuts. However, it turned out to be a necessary and not wholly undesirable job. The oils were vitally needed in the war effort, and the men had a chance to break the monotony of the training routine. They learned a little about soldiering from watching the prisoners, too, for these Jerries had been Hitler's pride and joy, the best of the spit-and-polish soldiers.

But they were still *Wehrmacht*; you couldn't convince them that one of these days their buddies weren't going to come swinging in and turn them loose from their wire cages.

By the middle of October the job was done, the

men had said goodbye to their new friends in Alabama and started home in long convoys of trucks piled high with men and equipment.

On October 21 Mr. John J. McCloy, Assistant Secretary of War, and Colonel William P. Scobey, his executive officer, both of whom had been instrumental in securing the activation of the Combat Team, made a tour of the area. Both men expressed great pleasure at the progress the men had made in training and predicted a great future for them in battle. This comment heartened the men immeasurably, for they had been hoping for some assurance that they would eventually have a chance to prove themselves somewhere other than in the "Battle of Hattiesburg."