

2017

Honor before Glory: The Epic World War II Story of the Japanese-American GIs Who Rescued the Lost Battalion

Richard Norton

Scott McGaugh

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Norton, Richard and McGaugh, Scott (2017) "Honor before Glory: The Epic World War II Story of the Japanese-American GIs Who Rescued the Lost Battalion," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 70 : No. 4 , Article 20.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol70/iss4/20>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

dominate any discussion or assessment of ASW operations. For the reader seeking that type of detail, the book's extensive footnotes and bibliography are valuable sources for research on several types of technical information, tactics, and historical events.

Anti-submarine Warfare from 1943 stimulates the reader to think critically about the trends and inflection points in the lethal relationship between the submarine and ASW operations.

SEAN SULLIVAN



Honor before Glory: The Epic World War II Story of the Japanese-American GIs Who Rescued the Lost Battalion, by Scott McGaugh. Boston: Da Capo, 2016. 304 pages. \$25.99.

What is as stirring as a tale of a “lost battalion”? The story elements are simple. A hard-fighting group of American soldiers gets out in front of advancing troops and eventually is surrounded by the enemy. A prolonged fight ensues as the battalion fights for its life, while other U.S. and allied forces mount repeated attempts to find and then rescue the lost battalion.

Perhaps the most famous of all U.S. lost battalions was a force of slightly more than 550 men, primarily from the 308th Battalion of the 77th Division, during the Meuse-Argonne offensive of October 1918. Low on food, water, and other supplies, the battalion withstood repeated German attacks for six days. When finally “rescued,” the battalion had only 194 men. On relief of the 308th, the battalion's commander, a bespectacled major from Wisconsin named Charles Whittlesey, was promoted

immediately and soon after received the Congressional Medal of Honor.

In World War II, the title of “the lost battalion” was worn by the 1st Battalion, 141st Infantry Regiment of the Army's 36th Infantry Division. The 141st was a Texas National Guard outfit and, like the 308th twenty-six years earlier, it had its brush with fame during a wet and cold October in France. On October 23, 1944, the 141st was ordered to advance into the Vosges Mountains. Members of the 141st were assured that a “strong force” would follow them. The terrain was steep and heavily forested, with but a single logging road. The Germans, with their usual tenacity and competent generalship, conducted a tenacious defense over ground they knew well.

The battalion made good progress on the 23rd, advancing four miles along the logging road, and the advance continued the next day; the battalion reached its objective after covering six more miles. Shortly afterward the Germans conducted a heavy artillery bombardment. An effort was made to reinforce the battalion with light tanks and artillery, but it failed owing to the dense forest. By dusk, the 1st Battalion was surrounded—cut off from resupply, medical aid, and reinforcements. If not relieved, destruction by or surrender to the Germans appeared inevitable.

Major General John Dahlquist, commanding the 36th Division, set about organizing a relief. He chose the 442nd Regimental Combat Team to serve as his primary assault force. Although the 442nd troops had just been taken off the line for some well-deserved rest and resupply, their reputation as highly competent assault troops was a major factor in Dahlquist's decision.

Colonel Charles Pence, commanding the 442nd, was not surprised by the selection. Word of the 1st Battalion's difficulty had spread quickly, and Pence already had ordered planning to begin.

The men of the 442nd, although annoyed at having to leave their rest areas almost as soon as they arrived, got the job done. During five days of intense fighting the unit advanced, through terrible terrain and against good defenses. The 141st's situation remained precarious, with only intermittently successful airdrops and propaganda-leaflet shells used to resupply the troops. Senior leaders grew increasingly frustrated and personality clashes more frequent, especially when General Dahlquist, fearing he would be relieved for failure in command, became more and more micromanagerial in directing the rescue effort. On October 30, lead elements of the 442nd made contact with the surviving members of the 141st. According to one scholar, the 442nd lost fifty-four men killed in action and 156 wounded in reaching the lost battalion; 211 soldiers of the 1/141 were rescued.

If this were all there was to the story, it still would be worth the telling; however, there is more. The 442nd was a nisei outfit. Its ranks were filled with Japanese Americans from Hawaii and elsewhere in the United States. Many of the latter had left internment camps to fight for the country that had forced their families from their homes and placed them under armed guard and behind barbed wire. Yet the 442nd was the most decorated unit of its size in the U.S. Army. (Sadly, McGaugh reminds the reader, superior service would not be enough to protect at least some members of the 442nd from unyielding race prejudice even after the war.)

McGaugh—a former newsman, the author of more than half a dozen books, and the current marketing director of the Midway Museum—knows a good war story when he sees one. *Honor before Glory* is a battle study, a tale of shared hardship and forged bonds similar to Stephen Ambrose's *Band of Brothers*. The work also may be read as a broader story of nisei soldiers, who were subjected to pernicious racism, institutional bias, and belated attempts to right past wrongs.

With so many potential avenues to explore, it should not be a surprise that *Honor before Glory* sprawls. Although all the aforementioned elements are touched on, none are developed as fully as they might be. To some degree, there was nothing McGaugh could do about this. The problem with writing the next *Band of Brothers* is that there are not that many “brothers” left. Ambrose's book was published in 1992, McGaugh's in 2016; in the intervening twenty-four years, the survivors of the Second World War have continued to dwindle in numbers, and neither the 442nd nor the 141st has been spared in this regard. For a group memoir to be successful, there needs to be some undefined, yet real, critical mass of memories. The remaining voices of the 442nd continue to tell an exceptional story, but there were only fifty or so oral interviews from the men of the 442nd, and considerably fewer from their counterparts in the 141st. To his credit, McGaugh tried to find German voices to add to the story, but time has taken a toll on former enemies as well.

Honor before Glory also could use some improvement as a battle study, beginning with more and higher-quality maps and illustrations. For all its difficulty, the relief of the 1/141 was a small battle.

Although McGaugh provides a glossary of names and an order of battle, more is needed, including a detailed time line. McGaugh also would have been well served by including more information on German movements and actions. Of course, it may have been that the men of the 716th Volksgrenadier Division and other German units did not feel the same sense of urgency to capture the battalion as U.S. commanders felt to save it, and simply did less than U.S. forces. More information regarding the quality of German troops and the types of equipment each side carried would be welcome. However, again to be fair to McGaugh, given the passage of time, the loss of records, and the inherent difficulty of identifying exact locations on a seventy-year-old battleground, answering these challenges is not easy.

The story of the *nisei* is too big for this book, even when the focus is narrowed to only the *nisei* in the 442nd, but McGaugh makes the most of the opportunity. He reminds the reader that the *nisei* went through basic training in Louisiana and other southern locales where race prejudice was palpable. In discussions of the 442nd's exemplary combat record, a frequently encountered explanation is that the men of the 442nd felt they had something to prove—they wanted to lay down irrefutable evidence that they were as good as or better than any other U.S. soldiers.

McGaugh offers two alternate or supplementary explanations to this more common one. The first—and more disturbing—is that the 442nd gained more combat decorations and awards for heroism because it deliberately was used in dangerous situations and missions—and this was because the men, being

nisei, were seen as expendable. Some of the survivors of the 442nd voice this theory with conviction, but similar claims are likely to issue from any unit that had fought hard, then was pulled out of a rest area to fight some more. Having allowed this notion to see the light of day, McGaugh just leaves it, without refutation, confirmation, or even a personal opinion, requiring readers to make up their own minds. The other possible explanation is more intriguing. McGaugh suggests that the *nisei* may have fought so well *because they were nisei*. Concepts of honor and duty were part of their identity. Many owned and some wore the *senjinbari*, the “belt of 1,000 stitches” that female relatives made to protect their loved ones from harm. Perhaps the men of the 442nd fought so well because they had been brought up amid a blend of powerful social/civic expectations and community values that owed as much to Japan as to the United States. Unfortunately, having brought up this possible explanation for the demonstrated valor of the *nisei*, McGaugh again simply leaves the reader to individual speculation.

In the final portion of the book, McGaugh illuminates yet another way in which the *nisei* were undervalued by the nation they served. Dozens of *nisei* soldiers were nominated for the Medal of Honor during the war; only two of the awards were approved. In 1997, the Army reviewed the original nominations, and the review board subsequently recommended that twenty-two of the *nisei* soldiers be awarded the Medal of Honor, as their immediate commanders had intended. McGaugh provides descriptions of the combat actions of three of these men, and those accounts leave little doubt

that in these three cases, at the very least, the upgraded award was justified.

Being identified as “the lost battalion” rankled survivors of the 141st, who claimed they were neither lost nor rescued. The first claim is true: the battalion’s location was known from beginning to end. The second claim is harder to adjudicate. As the five days wore on, food, ammunition, medical supplies, and other necessities dwindled to dangerous levels, and the battalion was judged unable to effect its own extraction. McGaugh makes a compelling case that this was indeed a rescue.

At the end of the day, despite minor flaws, *Honor before Glory* is a book worth reading. The story of the nation’s nisei families and their soldier sons’ battle experiences remains well worth telling as an example of extraordinary patriotism and courage in the face of reprehensible actions taken out of pain, prejudice, and fear.

RICHARD J. NORTON



Routledge Handbook of Ethics and War: Just War Theory in the Twenty-First Century, ed. Fritz Allhoff, Nicholas G. Evans, and Adam Henschke. New York: Routledge, 2015. 418 pages. \$245.

In an anthology of provocative and insightful essays both comprehensive and diverse in nature, the editors of this work on just war theory make a significant contribution to the genre of applied ethics. Allhoff, Evans, and Henschke enlist professors, retired military officers, journalists, theologians, and computer scientists as essayists to examine the efficacy and applicability of the just war tradition vis-à-vis the latest developments in technology, culture,

and politics. Although the writing style is accessible to the novice who wants to understand better the essentials of just war theory, this collection of essays provides the scholar-warrior and professor with substantive research and the latest modifications to a theory that has been tried and trusted for millennia. The editors incorporate a wide range of theorists, including both those who reject the just war tradition as obsolete, given the evolution of warfare, and those who support just war criteria as reliable principles for the conduct of warfare in the twenty-first century.

In this exciting forum of ideas, opponents and proponents of just war theory introduce concepts worthy of serious consideration. While the book resembles a recent installment of the *Star Wars* movies in its probing of the morals of unmanned drones, lethal autonomous robots, cyberspace nonkinetics, and more, the writers call on the great philosophers of the past to help address the latest trends and projections of national security measures. Under the category “Theories of War,” contributors critique and defend the criteria to justify the commencement of war (*jus ad bellum*), the criteria by which war is conducted (*jus in bello*), and the criteria by which war is concluded with postconflict stabilization, reconstruction, and humanitarian assistance (*jus post bellum*). The editors do not stack the deck to bias the reader toward or against just war theory, and this illustrates the distinct virtue of this scholarly undertaking: its diversity of themes and perspectives.

Whether it is Jeff McMahan’s argument that the soldier has an epistemic responsibility to ascertain whether the war in which he or she fights is just, or Richard Werner’s psychological thesis that most