

Lawson Sakai

I first met Lawson Sakai during a bridge game in the summer of 2011. He impressed me with his soft and kind demeanor, his gentleness, and his easy sense of humor. He was so easy-going, it seemed he wouldn't hurt a fly. Only later did I learn the truth ...

Lawson's story began more than 80 years ago, right here in sunny California, when the doctor announced, "It's a boy!" Born of Japanese parents who emigrated to California, Lawson grew up during the Great Depression, when times were tough. But Lawson always took the high road, and tried to do the best he could with what he had.

And then, came that fateful day that changed Lawson's life, and everyone else's, too, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt gave his now memorable speech that began, "December 7, 1941, a day that shall live in infamy....." The Imperial Japanese Navy had just bombed Pearl Harbor, killing thousands of our military men and women, and destroying or severely damaging more than 80% of our Pacific naval fleet. We were at war!

Lawson did not hesitate - he gathered together with his family and friends and said, what he thought could be his final goodbyes. The next morning, Lawson was waiting in line at the recruiter's office to volunteer for the Navy. Finally, he heard the word he had been waiting for, "Next." Lawson stepped forward, gave his name and other pertinent information, but the recruiter looked up and asked, "What are you doing here?" A bit surprised, Lawson responded, "I am here to join the Navy and fight for my country." But the recruiter quickly snapped, "You're a Jap! You've been reclassified 4E, Enemy Alien. We don't want you. Move over, Jap! Next!"

Somewhat shocked, Lawson returned home to figure out what to do. But things only got worse. Lawson was "greeted" with an onslaught of racial slurs and epithets. These insults continued, day after day, with no end in sight. But the worst was yet to come...

Several weeks later, there was a knock on the door. It was the military police informing Lawson's family that they had just 24 hours to pack all their belongings. They were being relocated to an internment camp "for their own safety." The next day, a military convoy arrived at Lawson's house, and they packed everything they could carry onto the trucks and buses, and headed for an internment camp in the Central California desert. Everything not carried with them, was gone -- Lawson and his family never saw their home again -- they lost everything.

Hours later, they finally arrived at the internment camp in the California desert. Lawson and his family were ushered into a large compound, hastily built, with a tall barrier consisting of two tall fences encircling the camp, made of razor-wire. The quarters were rather Spartan, and the food somewhat boring, but at least they were "safe." Still, something was not right. Lawson surveyed the camp, and everything seemed in place. But, days later, he finally saw it.

There were guard towers, spaced equally around the perimeter wall, but the machine guns in the guard towers were not pointed outwards to defend the camp, but, rather, they were pointed toward the inside of the camp to quell any potential uprisings! And that is when Lawson fully realized the problem. This was a concentration camp! Lawson and his family were now stuck in prison, illegally deprived of their constitutionally guaranteed civil liberties. The war had come home.

Still, Lawson tried to take the high road, and he continued to do the best he could with what little he had. Each new day was as monotonous as the prior. Days became weeks, and weeks became months.

Finally, a year later, came a ray of hope. On February 1, 1943, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued a proclamation creating a new Battle Regiment, the Fighting 442, to be comprised of American citizens of Japanese ancestry, and to be stationed in the European Theater. Once again, Lawson chose the high road. He gathered together with his family and few remaining friends, and said his goodbyes -- for he truly believed he might never see them again. The next morning, Lawson was in line at the recruiter's office when he heard that word he was waiting for, "Next." Nervously, Lawson stepped forward, but this time he was accepted.

After spending several weeks in basic training at Fort Benning, GA, Lawson was in the first wave of men joining the 442 on the European battlefield. Lawson, and his Brothers-In-Arms, repeatedly attacked the Nazi army and constantly drove the Nazis back with a vigor and ferocity never seen before. Lawson and the men of the 442 were the center point of many battles -- all of them tough -- all of them glorious -- and all of them victorious. Lawson had many unusual moments during WW2, including the time he rescued a young Frenchman who was part of the French Resistance; later, that young Frenchman, Francois Mitterrand, grew up and became the President of France!

Still, one significant battle stands out above the rest. The story of the Battle of Mt. Folgorito began in the fall of 1944, when then General Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces, called a meeting of his commanding generals and senior advisers. He determined that the Nazi army needed to be engaged on two separate fronts: Belgium (later became known as the Battle of the Bulge), and a string of mountaintop fortresses, located across northern Italy, known as the Baltic Line. General Eisenhower dispatched General Clark, one of his better generals, to destroy this Baltic Line.

General Clark, established his base camp, in a quaint, Italian town located at the base of Mt. Folgorito. After surveying the area, and collecting reconnaissance intel, General Clark determined that the key to breaking the Baltic line was to capture the Nazi fortress located atop Mt. Folgorito -- if that fortress fell, the others would become insignificant. General Clark gathered his forces together, devised an attack plan, and marched on the fortress. The fighting was fierce and bloody, but the Nazis remained in control.

Undaunted, General Clark re-assembled his advisors and devised a new strategy. He gathered his forces together and attacked again! But the Nazis persevered. Again, General Clark attacked, but the Nazi forces resisted again... and again... and again... One week became six weeks, and six weeks became six months... all with the same result – through March 1945, the Nazis remained in control.

Lawson's part in this story began about two weeks earlier, when the men of the 442 engaged yet another contingent of the Nazi army. The fighting was close-quartered and extremely fierce. Lawson and his brothers-in-arms had resorted to digging shallow trenches, which was their only source of protection. At one point, the fiercest part of that engagement, Lawson and his brothers-in-arms were pinned down in these shallow trenches for 10 days straight -- with bullets flying at them, literally inches over their heads.

At this point as he recounted his story, I was clearly enraptured with Lawson's story. And so, I responded, "I can't believe what you had to go through, with those bullets whizzing just inches over your head." To which Lawson replied, "Actually, there was no 'wizzing', there were just popping sounds, as I saw the bullets bury themselves in the dirt just inches from my face." In all the war movies and westerns I have ever seen, bullets always "whizzed," not "popped." Wisely, I said nothing more at the time, but just listened to the remainder of Lawson's story.

It was several weeks later that I finally put it all together. I remembered my high school physics class, where I learned that the speed of sound was approximately 760 mph, or just over 1000 feet per second. I also remembered that when any object, be it a plane, a meteor, a bullet, or whatever, goes faster than the speed of sound, the air builds up in front of that object because the air molecules cannot move fast enough to get out of the way from the speeding object. In essence, this generates a wave of high pressure sitting in front of the speeding object, as that object speeds through the air. As the object continues faster than the speed of sound, just over 1000 feet per second, that pressure wave gets translated into a very loud sound that we now recognize as a sonic boom. I also remembered from my own handling and study of fire arms, that military bullets usually travel somewhere between 1500 and 2500 feet per second – clearly faster than the speed of sound. And there it was! That "popping" sound that Lawson had heard, was a mini sonic boom, as each bullet passed inches over his head – pop, pop, pop, pop. Quite a scary situation.

On that fateful day, Lawson and his brothers in arms found themselves in an untenable situation. For more than 10 days, they exchanged fire with Nazis – soldiers they couldn't even see because the Nazis held the high ground. But the men of the 442 never wavered. Whatever was thrown at them, they threw back twice as much. And, slowly but surely, the men of the 442 pushed the enemy back, until that the men of the 442 actually held the strategic advantage.

Finally, after nearly 2 weeks of heavy fire, reinforcement troops arrived on the scene and relieved the valiant men of the 442. Very courageous, but clearly battle weary, the men

of the 442 were awarded 10 days of "R. and R." – rest and relaxation, in civilian talk. They were ordered to this nice, quiet village located in a pleasant valley ... at the base of Mount Folgorito.

As the men of the 442 marched into the village, General Clark saw them and immediately thought "Just what I need -- fresh troops." As the commanding colonel of the 442 entered General Clark's headquarters, the General told him, "Get your men re-provisioned and in battle formation at 1730 hours (That's 5:30 p.m. in civilian time) – they march on Mount Folgorito tonight." Of course, the colonel resisted, explaining that the men had just come out of a horrific battle and were battle weary and were on 10 days R&R leave. To which General Clark quickly replied, "As I said, Colonel, have your men in battle formation in the square at 1730 hrs -- they march on Mount Folgorito tonight! They can have all the R&R they want after the war is over. Dismissed!"

On this moonless and cloud covered night, the men of the 442 began their climb of Mount Folgorito. To say that the mission was dangerous would be a dramatic understatement. All of the regular trails up the mountain were heavily guarded and monitored by the Nazi army. At the slightest noise, the Nazis would turn on the floodlights and spray the suspected area with machine gun fire.

However, a local guide knew of a little-known, out-of-the-way, but rather dangerous trail up the mountain -- especially on this moonless and cloud covered night. In places, the trail was as much as a 60° angle to climb and as narrow as 12 inches with a vertical drop to the side. The men were forced to march in single file, and it was so dark that the only way they could stay in formation, was to keep one hand on the backpack of the soldier in front of them. And so, they proceeded up this dangerous trail, single file, in total darkness. And they dared not make a sound, because if the Nazis heard anything, they would turn on the floodlights and spray the entire area with machine gun bullets. At one point, one of the brothers in arms slipped and fell. But neither he, nor his brothers in arms, made any sound as that soldier fell more than 300 feet to his death -- and the men of the 442 marched on.

After many hours of laborious, but silent marching, the men of the 442 arrived at their preliminary objective – a small mound behind, and slightly above, the Nazi machine gun emplacements atop Mount Folgorito. And the men of the 442 crouched quietly, not daring to say even one word. They just waited in the cold, dark, damp night without making a sound.

Finally, the sun broke the horizon, and that was the signal the men of the 442 had been waiting for. They attacked the Nazi stronghold atop Mount Folgorito with a hailstorm of bullets and other fire. The fighting was fierce, and deadly. The vast majority of the Nazi soldiers were killed, wounded, or captured. A few remaining Nazis barely escaped with their lives.

The capture of Mount Folgorito by the men of the 442 was accomplished, not in six months, not in six weeks, not in six days, but in just 32 minutes – start to finish! This was an amazing victory by a dedicated and fierce regiment – the men of the 442.

The Battle of Mount Folgorito was but one of many similar engagements.

The men of the 442 established numerous records that still stand today. They were awarded more medals, citations, commendations and awards than any other unit in all of US military history – dating all the way back to July 4, 1776.

The Presidential Unit Citation is awarded to a military unit engaged in a major battle, together with numerous other units. When one unit shows courage, bravery, fierceness, and comradery above and beyond all other military units engaged in that campaign – that unit is awarded the Presidential Unit Citation – this award is highly prized and rarely given. The men of the 442, earned, not one, not two, but seven Presidential Unit Citations -- more than any other unit in all of US military history.

The Purple Heart is awarded when a soldier is a wounded or killed in action. The 4,500 men of the 442, earned over 10,000 purple hearts – more than any other unit in all of US military history. Lawson himself was awarded four purple hearts – the last one put him in the hospital for more than six months and nearly ended his life. Fortunately for him, and for us too, he survived to be with us today.

In total, the men of the 442, earned more than 18,000 medals, awards, and citations – more than any other unit in all of US military history. And they paid for it with their lives -- the men of the 442 also suffered more than a 30% casualty rate – more than any other unit and all of US military history.

In addition to his many other awards citations and medals, Lawson was also awarded the bronze Star – one of the most coveted awards in American military history.

Lawson's story is truly amazing and yet, there is more.

On a nice morning, early in November 2011, there was a knock on the door. Lawson was whisked away, but this time to Washington D.C., where he met with Vice President Biden, Speaker of the House Boehner, and other congressional leaders where he was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, to a standing ovation by a Joint Session of Congress. The Congressional Gold Medal is the highest honor given by our country to anyone not currently on active military duty – the very first Congressional Gold Medal was awarded to George Washington in 1776!

Still taking the high road, Lawson donated his medal to the Smithsonian Museum where it is currently on tour to selected cities in the United States until June 2014, at which time Lawson's Congressional Gold Medal will return to the Smithsonian Museum where it will be displayed in perpetuity.

Now THAT is the story of a true war hero and National Treasure.