



The real story. Japanese American History told by those who lived it.

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NEWS RELEASE
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Our Veterans Remembered In France

The small French towns of Bruyères and Biffontaine remain fairly obscure to most tourists visiting France even today. However, anyone familiar with the annals of World War II, would recognize these two towns as sites of some of the most gruesome combat campaigns between the Germans and the Americans. This area of France was known more commonly as Lorraine during World War II. Germany wanted control of this area during the war for its resources. The famed 442nd Regimental Combat Team and the 100th Battalion gained much of their notoriety for their heroics in this geographical area during the war. For many of the residents in these towns, the “different looking Americans” liberated them from the grasp of German troops. For this, the people of the region remain forever appreciative of the Americans – particularly our community’s veterans of Japanese ancestry.

Bruyères and Biffontaine invited Japanese American Living Legacy in 2009, to visit the Vosges Mountains and participate in the annual commemoration festivities honoring the 100th Battalion and 442nd RCT. It was the 65th anniversary of the liberation of Bruyères and Biffontaine in 2009. Susan Uyemura, CEO of Japanese American Living Legacy seized the opportunity to witness and participate in this wonderful event. Having learned of Susan Uyemura’s plans to attend the commemoration, the 442nd Clubhouse of Hawaii decided to send the original 442nd RCT flag to Bruyères and Biffontaine under the care of the current 100th/442nd Hawaiian National Guard. World War II veteran, Bill Thompson, asked Susan to represent the 442nd Regimental Combat Team in France. Japanese American Living Legacy, the 100th/442nd Veterans Association and the 442nd Clubhouse of Hawaii presented full-size replicas of the 442nd flag to the cities of Bruyères and Biffontaine.

Prior to her first visit to this region of France, Susan Uyemura had been corresponding, for about a year, with a French historian who specialized in the military events in the Vosges Mountains. Gerome Villain is a third generation Vosgian who has a tremendous interest in meeting and corresponding with Americans associated with the liberation of France. Gerome volunteered to be a guide and interpreter for Susan should she ever visit Vosges.

Gerome had gained wide recognition in this area of France for previously discovering two original “belly tanks” dropped by American airplanes in the Vosges Mountains during the rescue of the Texas Lost Battalion. Belly tanks are the rather large containers fitted on the “belly” of an airplane’s fuselage, usually installed for carrying extra fuel. However, during the war, the Americans attempted to “deliver” much needed food and ammunition to their ensnared troops by filling belly tanks with supplies and literally dropping the tanks near their soldiers; they would break open upon impact. The German troops soon realized what was in those tanks and fought the Americans vehemently for their possession. Gerome arranged to donate one of the tanks to the Texas Military Museum and the other to the city of Biffontaine. Gerome had studied the history of the liberation and knew more about the 100th Battalion and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team than many of the visitors to the region. He impressed Japanese American Living Legacy with his knowledge. As part of Gerome’s educational tour, he took JA Living Legacy into the Vosges forests where he pointed out original foxholes, clearly visible even after 65 years. He even shared some "fire water" with us to taste. Fire water was something the soldiers drank to stay warm, a type of home-brewed liquor made from potatoes. It was rumored that soldiers during the war could even use the fire water as fuel for their jeeps!

Gerome’s tour included a visit to the Epinal American Cemetery and Memorial. Gerome guided the group to where all of the Americans from the 100th Battalion and 442nd RCT are buried. Over 5,000 soldiers lay in rest there, including ten Nisei and two of their Caucasian officers from the 442nd RCT. We visited the graves and paid our respects. The Epinal American Cemetery and Memorial is considered “American soil” and is cared for by American staff from the American Battle Monuments Commission, an agency of our federal Executive Branch.

The commemoration festivities in Bruyères always impresses attendees! Uniformed fire department, policemen, French veterans, original citizens and local government officials came out to honor our veterans and the visiting National Guard troops. By chance, veteran Noel Okamoto of the 232nd Engineers, was visiting Bruyères that year and was honored as a special guest. Having the original flag return to Vosges 65 years later along with one of the famed 442nd RCT was considered a huge honor for the people of Vosges that year. Following a traditional Vosgian lunch made with potatoes and ham we went to the Biffontaine celebration. Biffontaine is the site where the rescue of the Texas Lost Battalion occurred. It was amazing to see these areas practically unchanged after 65 years. Another flag was sent to the mayor of Biffontaine and later presented there by Herve and Gerome.

This year’s commemoration was no less a celebration. With a population of less than 500, Biffontaine is easy to pass through without too much recognition. But if you look closely, you will see that some of the farmhouses display the French flag right next to the American flag. Biffontaine was occupied for over four years by the Germans during World War II. With the German border less than 15 miles away, it is easy to see how the Germans were able to takeover this area and control Biffontaine with little resistance,

leaving little hope of rescue for its inhabitants. While France fought the Germans on the home front, Biffontaine was left to German reign until October of 1944. The 442nd Regimental Combat Team combined with the 100th Battalion to fight one of the bloodiest battles they had faced. This battle would later be known to many as the "Rescue of the Lost Battalion."

Today, Biffontaine has changed little. Its beautiful mountainsides and deep forests remain relatively untouched by the decades passed. Tucked deeply in the mountainside is a monument maintained by the people of Biffontaine. It proudly displays, *"Ici, Sont Tombes Heroiquement pour la liberation de notre sol les valeureux combattants Americains de la 36 Texas division. 100th Battalion Infantry Hawaii 442nd Regiment de Ligne 1st Battalion D'Infanterie du 141 Regiment de Combat. October 1944."* The rough translation is "Here, we honor our heroes for the liberation of our soil and the courageous combat engaged by the Americans of the 36 Texas Division, 100th Battalion and the 442nd Regiment Combat Team. October 1944." Every year on October 23, the residents gather to once again remember and honor their liberators.

This year as a special treat for commemoration participants, three of our community's veterans attended: Mitsuo Honda (232nd Engineers), Rikio Tsuda (100th Battalion, B Company) and Yuko Nakahira (442nd, Anti-Tank Division) along with their respective families. Accompanying our veterans and participating in regional commemorations for a third year in a row, was the 100th/442nd National Guard from Hawaii led by Major Horikawa and Lt. Colonel Yazawa. Other special guests were Major General Lee, Dr. Yazawa (Lt. Colonel Yazawa's father), Susan Uyemura from Japanese American Living Legacy and her mother Barbara Shoho. Mayor of Biffontaine, Denis Henry welcomed the out of town guests and honored them at the ceremony and hosted a champagne toast outside of the Mayor's office, just in front of the church where a plaque recognized Captain Young O. Kim for his bravery and medic M. Chinen for his dedication to his men.

Rikio Tsuda remembered the battle that took place and was happy to meet the people of Biffontaine. Each of the veterans and guests were treated to a special sit down traditional "French" lunch in the Mayor's hall named "Salle Hawaii" (Hawaii Room). The Mayor presented each guest with a commemorative coin of the city. After lunch, we walked down the street where the Mayor had put up a display of some of the soldiers' items retrieved from the forests along with souvenirs, books, and plaques that reside permanently in the Mayor's hall.

The following day everyone met in the town of Bruyères. We began the day with a mass at the famous church where the 442nd RCT had rested after liberating the city (Notre Dame de L'Assomption). Church bells rang loudly. Slowly, but surely, residents from all over the city came to the church to participate in this mass. The church choir played "Aloha Oe" and the sermon repeatedly praised and thanked the veterans in attendance for their participation in the liberation over 67 years ago. Mass was followed by a parade through the city and an exhibit at the Bruyères mayoral hall. Each of the veterans was

presented with a commemorative coin of the city and all of the guests received posters of the town. Lunch followed for the VIP guests.

JA Living Legacy, CEO, Uyemura said, “The experience is truly amazing. It is very clear the people of this region take this commemoration very seriously and are truly indebted to our veterans.” For more event photos, please visit Japanese American Living Legacy's Facebook page.

Japanese American Living Legacy is a nonprofit (501c3) organization based out of California State University, Fullerton. All of the board of directors, staff and advisors are volunteers. For more information on Japanese American Living Legacy, please visit their website at www.jalivinglegacy.org or call them at (657) 278-4483.

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