



Wings of Valor: The Medal of Honor for Anacortes resident

James Kazuo Okubo was born in Anacortes on May 30, 1920. As World War II began, Japanese Americans like Okubo were incarcerated due to unfounded fears stoked by the attacks on Pearl Harbor. When an opportunity arose for Japanese Americans to enlist in the Army, Okubo enlisted in the Army. Okubo was assigned to the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, a segregated unit made up entirely of Japanese Americans who had volunteered from the internment camps scattered across the U.S. The 442nd Regimental Combat Team was one of the most storied regiments in U.S. history and years after his death, Okubo received the Medal of Honor for his heroics.

Cpl. James K. Okubo



At the outset of World War II, James was displaced from his studies at Washington College of Education, uprooted from his home, and relocated to an internment camp.

James was assigned to the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, which trained at Camp Shelby, Mississippi, before deploying to Italy in June 1944, where its soldiers joined in combat with the 100th Infantry Battalion — the first Japanese-American Army unit to be activated in the war. They proved to be such good fighters that they were sent to France to continue the push to Germany.

By fall 1944, Okubo's unit was sent to the Vosges Mountains to help rescue what became known as the "Lost Battalion," a group of about 200 soldiers who had been cut off from their division in a forest near Biffontaine, France.

On Oct. 28, Okubo's company came under strong enemy fire from behind mine fields and roadblocks. His fellow soldiers were being wounded left and right, so Okubo crawled 150 yards to within 40 yards of the enemy lines to try to carry them back. He exposed himself several times to do this and, at one point,

two grenades were thrown at him. Despite a constant barrage of enemy small arms and machine gun fire, he was able to treat 17 men for their injuries. The following day, as the attacks continued, he was able to aid eight more.

A week later, on Nov. 4, Okubo, exposed to machine gun fire, dashed 75 yards to evacuate and treat a seriously wounded soldier who was in a burning tank.

For his bravery during that tumultuous time, Okubo was considered for the Medal of Honor. However, he was awarded the Silver Star, the third highest military medal for valor.

By the end of World War II, the 442nd RCT had earned more than 18,000 individual medals, making it one of the most decorated units in military history.

In 1996, legislators called for a review of the service records of Asian-American service members from World War II who had earned the Distinguished Service Cross. They wanted to determine if any of those men had been passed over for the Medal of Honor due to discriminatory practices towards Japanese-American soldiers.



On June 21, 2000, 33 years after his death, Okubo's widow accepted the Medal of Honor on his behalf from President Bill Clinton during a ceremony at the White House. Twenty-one other Japanese Americans who had been passed over for the nation's highest honor during their service days also received the medal.

In June 2019, Okubo also received a posthumous honorary degree from the school where he began his college career, Western Washington University.