



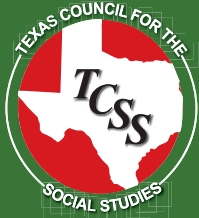
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THE TEXAS CONNECTION

Liberating the Lost Battalions

Below: Still resting where it fell 64 years ago, this P47 fighter drop tank, stuffed with supplies of ammunition, rations, medicine, and radio batteries instead of fuel, was dropped by the 405th Fighter Squadron to succor the Lost Battalion. It, and one other, were discovered and then recovered for the Texas Military Forces Museum in the Vosges Mountains of France by Gerome Villain, a French historian specializing in the history of the 36th Infantry Division which liberated his hometown during World War II. Photo used with permission from Texas Military Forces Museum – Camp Mabry, Austin, Texas



Sherri Colby, Ph.D.

The Lost Battalions of World War II left indelible memories for the U.S. veterans who survived to repeat their stories of capture, hardship, and eventual liberation. The Lost Battalion of the Pacific consisted of soldiers, sailors and Marines of the USS *Houston*, and members of the Second Battalion, 131st Field Artillery Regiment, 36th Division, of the Texas National Guard. Forced to work on the building of a railway from Burma to Bangkok, Thailand, they became known as the Lost Battalion because the Japanese hid their location for over a year. The Lost Battalion of the Vosges, consisting of Texans in the 1st Battalion of the famous 141st “Alamo” Regiment, became trapped in the Vosges Mountains of France until the Japanese-American 442nd Combat Regiment Team came to their rescue. Stories of these two different groups of brave men are of special interest to Texans and should be shared with students.

The Lost Battalion of the Pacific

In late 1941, the USS *Houston* embarked for the Far East and reached Pearl Harbor one week before the December 7th attack. The magnificent ship, once known as the Little White House in honor of President Franklin Roosevelt’s vacation travels, was 600 feet in length and contained nine 8-inch guns, each capable of shooting a projectile up to eighteen miles. The boat also held massive anti-aircraft batteries and .50 caliber machine guns. The men of the *Houston*, mostly from north-central Texas, sailed their vessel to Australia to join British, Dutch, and Australian troops. In early 1942, the *Houston*’s crew fought in the defense of Java in the Dutch East Indies, but their ship was ultimately destroyed in this effort. By March 1st, the majority of the crew and the ship’s captain were dead, and the Japanese had captured the remaining 372 survivors along with Americans, British, Dutch, and Australians from other units.

Otto Schwartz of the USS *Houston* described the ill-fated battle:

It became obvious that we were in trouble, and the ship started to lose speed...A torpedo hit the port side, and it knocked me off my feet. I was knocked unconscious...Shells were exploding all over the place. Pieces of teakwood deck were flying in the air. (LaForte and Marcello 1993, 4-5)

Schwartz lowered himself to the boat boom and began swimming against the violent waves created from explosions. He swam until the ship sank, the ocean darkened, and the eerie silence emerged, only to be interrupted by the sounds of machine guns, the shrieks of the dying, and the sounds of small motor craft. Men like Schwartz, who stayed alive and afloat, were picked up by the Japanese when they reached the shore. They were forced to march without food or water for a long distance to a work location. As Schwartz described:

Every time you looked like you were staggering or stopping, you got hit on the back of the legs with a rifle butt, or you got poked with a bayonet...I remember one point during the day, the asphalt highway would melt because of extreme heat. We had no footwear at all. (7-8)

Schwartz and the other captives loaded and pushed carts of military supplies inland. Eventually by May, the Japanese transported the POWs to Bicycle Camp, where they enjoyed the more peaceful time of their capture.

In Bicycle Camp, Clark Taylor appreciated the more plentiful food, the opportunity to play volleyball and band instruments, and the kindness displayed by one Japanese captain who spoke English:

He had worked for GMC, General Motors...and had been to America many times. He told us, 'This war, like all wars, will come to an end one day. You're going to run into some good Japanese and some bad Japanese. Treat them on an individual basis... Those that you get along with, make friends with, because this war will be over one day and then we're going to want to be friends after it's over.' That speech always stuck in my mind. (LaForte and Marcello 1993, 70)

Like Taylor, the men adapted to the hard-



Photo used with permission from Texas Military Forces Museum – Camp Mabry, Austin, Texas

1st Lieutenant Marty Higgins, (left with beard), commander of the Lost Battalion, being congratulated shortly after the rescue of the Lost Battalion by 1st Lieutenant John Bryan Jr., Motor Officer of the 1st Battalion, 141st Infantry (center) and 2nd Lieutenant Charles Barry of the Medial Detachment, 141st Infantry. During the battle Bryan volunteered to assume the duties of the Battalion Intelligence (S2) and Operations (S3) officer who had been killed in action. He was awarded the Silver Star for his performance during the engagement.

ships of POW life, and in late 1942 and early 1943, the Japanese relocated most of the Texas soldiers to Death Railway, where they built a route from Burma to Bangkok.

The horrors of POW life involved moving massive tons of earth by hand, sweating in the harsh tropical climate, suffering brutal punishments from their captors, living on minimal food and water, and suffering mild and severe sicknesses and infections. After marching the torturous path from Bicycle Camp to Burma, Taylor also worked on Death Railway, where he endured dysentery, ten attacks of malaria, dry beriberi, scurvy, the slow loss of his eyesight, and weight loss of sixty-five pounds

The veterans from the USS *Houston* found courage in their shared identity as Texans, and they reported that their community bonds helped them to survive and to care for one another. Eventually in early 1945 the men of the *Houston* were transported to Nagasaki, Japan, where they witnessed the famous bombing of the city. James Gee rejoiced when parachutes of food and clothing filled the sky, "It [parachute] had Spam...To me I can still open a can of Spam

and think it's food for a king." (LaForte and Marcello 1993, 276)

"Go For Broke" and the "Alamo" Lost Battalion of the Vosges

In October 1944, the Allies fought desperate battles in eastern France in the Vosges Mountains to free the cities of Bruyeres and Biffontaine. After ten days of successful but tiring combat, the Japanese-American 442nd Regimental Combat Team rested from their labors, only to discover that the 141st Texas Regiment Team had become stranded in the mountains. In an effort to get Allied forces across the German border, the Allied general had ordered the "Alamo" Regiment—known for their intense Texas pride indicated by the T-patches they wore on the sleeves of the uniforms and their victorious attack in Salerno, Italy—to advance into the mountains four miles beyond the location of safe forces. The Texans warned that they would become isolated from the rest of the troops, but the general was determined to push into the German interior. Obeying orders, the Texans trudged through the

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Liberating the Lost Battalions

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mountainous forests past deep ravines and buried land mines. The wooded thickets, sharp slopes, and fallen logs posed serious difficulties by limiting visibility to a mere fifty feet, blocking communication lines, and enabling frequent encounters with hidden enemy soldiers. Sgt. Jack Wilson described the treacherous march:

This place was to be some of the worst combat that I been in—no place to get away from the tree bursts, heavy sniper-and-machine-gun fire. But we finally broke through and went three or four miles before we realized that we were cut off. I guess we tried to push too far fast, and the enemy closed the hole behind us. When we realized that we were cut off, we dug a circle at the top of the ridge. (Steidl 1997, 80)

The trapped regiment soon discovered that they were surrounded by German troops, locked in by land mines, and stranded on the top of a high mountainous ridge.

The Allies responded by sending the *Nisei* (Japanese-American) troops of the 442nd deep into the Vosges. By October 29th, the Lost Battalion's situation became even more ominous; they had thwarted five enemy assaults and were left with no place to bury their dead soldiers. Insufficient food, water, medical supplies, and ammunition intensified the situation. Jack Wilson explained:

We were real low on supplies, so we pooled all of our food. We had one radio on which we called once a day, and they tried to get some (supplies) in us. The first was to shoot smoke shells loaded with D-bars (hard chocolate) to us. But we took some casualties from these, so we radioed to stop the shelling. The next try, they dive-bombed us with spare gas tanks from P-47s. Most of these fell outside the perimeter... (Steidl 1997)

Typically these tanks were for carrying extra fuel, but these had been specially adapted to carry supplies instead: food, ammunition, radio batteries, and medical supplies. The supplies “delivered” in these

The Lost Battalion of the Pacific consisted of soldiers, sailors and Marines of the USS Houston, and members of the Second Battalion, 131st Field Artillery Regiment, 36th Division, of the Texas National Guard.

“belly tanks” kept the Texans going until the Japanese-American troops could trudge nearly four miles to reach their fellow Americans. The cold rain, darkness, steep hills, sloping ravines, and scattered land mines slowed their travels.

As they neared the narrow ridge where the Texans waited, the Germans began to fire incessantly at the advancing *Nisei*. After four days of fighting, the *Nisei* realized that the only way to breach the German forces involved charging up an exposed hill lined with steep drops on both sides. The companies who followed the order to “Go For Broke” described “the push towards the ‘Lost Battalion’ as a blur of slogging through dark woods, rain, mud, machine-gun fire, and tree bursts.” (Steidl 1997, 107) George Miyashiro recalled, “When we made the charge, it was up a steep hill—‘suicide hill’ some called it. German tracers were coming straight down at us. That’s when I got hit in the foot. Captain Byrne asked me if I needed a litter, but I told him, ‘No, I’m just going to take a hand grenade with me,’ and hobbled back to the aid station.” (169)

Despite heavy casualties, the *Nisei* successfully disarmed several German machine gun nests and strongholds. Eventually, they reached the men of Lost Battalion who huddled in foxholes. Suguru Takahashi described, “The Germans had pulled back, and everything was quiet that morning. When we got to the ‘Lost Battalion,’ they were deep in holes with logs on top. Some had tears in their eyes when they saw us. We left them rations and moved on.” (Steidl 1997, 168)

The *Nisei* continued to push another nine days into the mountains and suffered even greater casualties. Several privates, Barney Hajiro, George Sakato, and Joe Nishimoto, received Medals of Honor for their heroism in battle. But when they returned home to the United States, many faced the difficulties of racial prejudice in California

and other regions. Regarding the fighting *Nisei*, Lt. Col. James Hanley wrote in a letter to a friend in March of 1945: “I wish I could tell you the number of Japanese Americans who have died in this unit alone. I wish I could tell you the number of wounded we have had, the sightless eyes, missing limbs, and broken mind...I wish the boys in the ‘Lost Battalion’ could tell you what they think of the Japanese Americans... I’ll show you where ‘some good Japanese Americans’ are buried.” (Steidl 1997, 173-174)

In 1946, President Truman awarded the 442nd Regiment with an award and personal citation when he said, “You have fought not only the enemy, but you fought prejudice—and you won.” (Steidl 1997, 171)

Information about these events is available through images and oral histories. It would be appropriate to share these stories with students in 7th grade Texas history, and in high school U.S. history; specific student expectations for these two courses of study follow. The images included with this article have been made available by Jeff Hunt, Executive Director of the Texas Military Forces Museum. More images related to these stories may also be downloaded from the TCSS website, www.tcss.org, Publications, Lost Battalions Images links.

Grade 7 TEKS

7D: Analyze the political, economic, and social impact of major wars, including World War I and World War II, on the history of Texas;

21A: Differentiate between, locate, and use primary and secondary sources such as computer software, databases, media and news services, biographies, interviews, and artifacts to acquire information about Texas;

21D: Identify points of view from the historical context surrounding an event and the frame of reference that influenced the participants.

U.S. History TEKS

6A: Identify reasons for U.S. involvement in World War II, including the growth of dictatorships and the attack on Pearl Harbor;

6B: Analyze major issues and events of World War II such as fighting the war on multiple fronts, the internment of Japanese-Americans, the Holocaust, the battle of Midway, the invasion of Normandy, and the development of and Harry Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb;

21C: Analyze how the contributions of people of various racial, ethnic, and religious groups have helped to shape the national identity;

24C: Explain and apply different methods that historians use to interpret the past, including the use of primary and secondary sources, points of view, frames of reference, and historical context;

24D: Use the process of historical inquiry to research, interpret, and use multiple sources of evidence;

24G: Support a point of view on a social studies issue or event.

Classroom Resources

The oral histories and personal narratives of the veterans of the Lost Battalions and the Japanese Americans of the 442nd are available for students to explore. Suggested resources include:

1. The *Texas Military Forces Museum* contains online diaries, letters, and pictures of both Lost Battalions. Recently, the museum acquired a newly discovered belly tank from the battle in the Vosges. This website contains a wealth of good teaching resource materials for all military engagements in which Texans have participated. Teachers are encouraged to download and use these resources.
2. *Building Death Railway*, edited by La Forte and Marcello, contains oral histories of the survivors.
3. The *Go For Broke Foundation* contains an online video oral history collection of the Japanese-American veterans.
4. *Lost Battalion Railway of Death* is Kyle Thompson's personal narrative of his time working on the Death Railway.

The stories of the veterans offer rich, personal insights into the liberations of the Lost Battalions for students to explore and enjoy.

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Burma, 1942-1945. Wilmington, DE: A Scholarly Resources Imprint, Inc.

Steidl, Franz. 1997. *Lost battalions: Going for broke in the Vosges, Autumn 1944*. Novato, CA: Presidio Press.

Thompson, Kyle. 1994. *Lost battalion railway of death*. New York: iBooks.

Websites

Go For Broke Educational Foundation: www.goforbroke.org/. In 1989, Japanese American World War II veterans established the 100th/442nd/MIS WWII Memorial Foundation, now the Go For Broke National Education Center, to raise funds for the building of the Go For Broke Monument. Today it is a tribute to "the U.S. Constitution and unwavering patriotism of the segregated Japanese American units." It is an important center for teachers and students to access information about the heroic actions of these patriotic citizens.

Texas Military Forces Museum: www.texasmilitaryforcesmuseum.org/. This Texas museum is located at Camp Mabry in Austin, Texas. In 1986, a project was started to establish a museum and archival collection, dedicated to the men and women who have served in the military forces of Texas. The collection starts with the Texas war for independence and contains exhibits, weaponry, and archival records. Teachers and students can learn much at this site about the role of Texans in major military actions since 1823.

The Price of Freedom-Americans at War: <http://americanhistory.si.edu/militaryhistory/exhibition/flash.html>. This important site from the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History allows teachers and students to enter the museum's collection of the nation's military history resources, beginning with a timeline of that history. After entering via this link, click on the war or military action of interest for exciting primary sources, images, documents, posters, artifacts, weapons, "home front" items, and teaching suggestions. This should be a bookmark for all lovers and teachers of history.

Dr. Sherri Colby is Assistant Professor of Secondary Education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Texas A&M-Commerce University in Commerce, Texas. She is a former high school teacher, and her expertise is in social studies education. She has taught English and United States history.

It's a Good Habit to Develop

Visit the TCSS Website Often!

By now you have no doubt bookmarked the TCSS website, www.tcss.org. Perhaps your first visit to the site was prompted by your desire to participate in the online survey on the TEKS refinement process. This one issue alone should take you back to this site on a regular basis since this will be the best way to get the most up-to-the minute information about the curriculum refinement developments.

There is a great deal of information coming out of Austin and Washington that can have an impact on what you are doing every day in social studies education. For news and announcements, you should check this site frequently. For professional development opportunities and great resources, the web gives a more timely way to distribute information than our journal can provide coming out every four months.

It's a good habit to develop, truly. Check your organization's website often. And feel free to let us hear from you via the Contacts page from the site. A real person will respond to your inquiries and comments. Stay in touch!