Death in the Family

This story originally ran in The Street That Dreams Are Made, a book that celebrated the 100 year history of Aldersgate United Methodist Church in Palo Alto, CA., published in 2009. It has been modified for this publication and additional photographs were added to the end of the story.

- Brad Shirakawa, author, February 2018

At left: The Silver Star
A Death in the Family

The Rescue of the Lost Battalion

The 442nd RCT advances through the forest to rescue the Lost Battalion just four days before Fred was killed.

Photo courtesy of Jeff Hunt, Director of the Texas Military Forces Museum Camp Mabry, Texas.

Fred’s grave is located in Section C, Number 478 at the Golden Gate National Cemetery, San Bruno, Calif.
In the freezing rain of October 25, 1944, a Wednesday, Private First Class Fred Minoru Yamamoto probably ate his last hot meal. He also received clean clothes and two pairs of wool socks, by order of the Army Division Commander. His battalion had been resting in homes around the town of Belmont, France, and he may have even had the chance to shower.  

But the next day, 100 of the 6,000 Germans occupying the thick Forest Dominiale du Champ attacked with five machine guns, and the fierce fighting that constituted the “Rescue of the Lost Battalion” resumed.

On Saturday, Yamamoto, just 26, would be dead.

Fred was just another young Nisei* and member of the Page Mill Methodist church youth group, of Palo Alto, CA.

He had grown up on Ramona Street, the neighborhood where the church was originally founded (in 1909). He graduated from Palo Alto High School in June of 1936 and then finished two years of college. In August of 1941 he moved to Dos Palos to work for the Koda Rice Farm, where he stacked rice sacks, parted cantaloupe vines and complained about the mosquito bites. His monthly wage in September was $65.

In late November, good friends Mary Tawara, Taro Yamamura, Jack Sato, and Fred’s sister Mitsuye Yamamoto drove to Dos Palos, CA., in a nearly new 1940 Buick, a car he called “swelligent.” Three hours later, he was back in Palo Alto, probably for a brief respite from his job. “Gosh, home is really sweet home,” he wrote in his diary.

He noted the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, but on the 21st, he went to Sunday School and noticed a young lady named Michiko Yamada. “She’s a bit of all right,” he wrote of the 1940 San Jose High School graduate.

The war took its toll on Fred and the Ramona Street community. He wrote that “the government is putting its foot down and really bearing down on the many aliens. Many Japanese will be moved from restricted areas!” Yet the same day (February 21, 1942) that Palo Altans Seisuke Yoshida, Arthur Okado, and Ronald Tani were taken into custody by the FBI, Fred’s basketball team, the Hinode, beat team Nisei 30-19 and he scored eight points.

By now, Michiko had become the center of his life. On March 1, 1942, he went to see her in San Jose. “With daffodils in my hand, went to see Michiko in the afternoon,” as they took in the Rosicrucian Museum. A few weeks later, it was a Bach concert at San Jose State. Letter writing became the norm, and he wrote in his diary that he would “send her some air mail stamps, and my love.” Clearly, he was smitten.

But all was not well in his extended family. The Sato grocery stores where he sometimes worked were struggling, and preparations were being made to evacuate. The “swelligent” 1940 Buick that he had been so impressed with was sold for $880. It didn’t help that his stepfather, Kihachi Sato, had suffered through a series of strokes. On May 9, 1943, Kihachi died in Heart Mountain. “He was a good man!” Fred wrote that day.

Fred intended on marrying Michiko. But she told him she would not be engaged to him just yet and would wait for him. A December 1942 letter from her confirmed her feelings for him. “She loves me still…whoopie!” he wrote.

On Saturday, October 28, 1944, Fred’s K company had made all of 350 yards of headway against the stubborn resistance of German mortar fire and automatic weapons. The forest gave excellent cover to the enemy,

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1: HTTP://AJAWARVETS.ORG/CAMPAIGNS/CAMPAIGN_07_LOST_BATTALION.CFM
2: HTTP://WWW.HOMEOFHEROES.COM/MOH/NISEI/INDEX7_LOST_BN.HTML
*A Nisei is a second generation Japanese American
** Courtesy The California Room at the Martin Luther King Library, San Jose, Calif.
and it also made it hard for U.S. artillery to hit its targets without harming its own. Desperate to supply food to U.S. troops, Division Artillery filled shells with chocolate “D-ration” bars and fired them into the area occupied by the Lost Battalion, a strategy that was rarely successful.1

So when the opportunity to get more food, rations and ammunition arose, Fred volunteered along with 11 other men. He volunteered for just about any duty that came up, according to friend and 442 veteran Frank Shimada.

Pfc. Kenneth K. Inada, who was one of 12 men, wrote about Fred's last moments. “We were only about 200 yards from where we started, when a deadly artillery barrage came through the forest, lighting up brightly the whole area with a thunderous noise and nearly wiped out the entire ration detail.” Only four men survived, and Fred wasn't one of them.

Frank Shimada was in an Army hospital when Fred was killed. He asked around about his friend. “He got shrapnel in his neck, from what I understand,” said Frank, now 91.

Fred's natural desire to volunteer was evident early on. “When he joined the 442, his mother was against it,” Frank recalled with great clarity. “She said, 'If you go, you might be killed.'”

Fred replied, “So long as a person is born into this world, he must die once – what better way is there than to die for one's country?” His mother, who was not well at the time, gave her permission and didn't bring the subject up again. She knew he was not afraid to die.

Once he was on the battlefield, Fred did his share. On Friday, October 27, he single-handedly killed two Germans and wounded several others. The next day, he killed a machine gunner and his two supporting riflemen, before he was mortally wounded.*

It's a picture that's hard to imagine, of this Palo Alto High School graduate, and member of Page Mill Church. In fact, Yamamoto was one of several church members who enlisted in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team; it's just that he was the only one who didn't come back.

“I'm betting on America and I'm not going to sit back and let someone else do the fighting for me,” friend Hideo Furukawa recalled Fred saying. It's a good thing Fred's fighting spirit was high, too, because he died never knowing that his orders were to rescue a group of 270 Texans trapped by the Germans. That knowledge was not released to any of the Nisei fighting in the Vosges Mountains until the day after he died.3

*These details of Fred's last two days come from a single source, the citation (supplied by Carol Okuda) that came with his Silver Star. According to 442 veteran Jim Yamashita, “Citations are not written on the spot and only come about by experiences related by the awardee's comrades. And if the writer was like me, he had no clue as to what day of the week when you are on the front line.” So it was not possible to confirm these details, despite researching multiple sources and persons.

1: HTTP://AJAWARVETS.ORG/CAMPAIGNS/CAMPAIGN_07_LOST_BATTALION.CFM
3: HTTP://WWW.HOMEOFHEROES.COM/MOH/NISEI/index7_lost_bn.html
A poem that Fred greatly admired; written by Sgt. Hugh Brodie of the Royal Australian Air Force and published in Time Magazine.

On Sunday the 29th, a group of eight men led by Sgt. Tak Senzaki broke through to rescue the 141st Texas Regiment “T-Patchers” as they were sometimes called. For the entire month of October, the Nisei suffered 814 casualties (including 114 dead) and the “Rescue of the Lost Battalion” would be forever remembered as one of the greatest and saddest moments in U.S. military history.

Fred’s friends got together in 1945 and presented a book memorial to Palo Alto High School to honor him. A gold star was added to the school flag to remember him, too. For his gallantry in action, he was posthumously awarded the Silver Star, which was received by his mother, Yumi Sato.

It’s not hard to imagine what Fred was thinking as he drew his last breath. He wrote it down in a poem (seen above) he had copied from a Time Magazine article.

“When death is drawing through the sky, almighty God who also died, teach me the way that I should die.”

But what of the young woman Fred loved? What happened to Michiko?

There’s little doubt she must have been devastated by the news of his death. She had planned on moving to New York in 1944 and would have met Fred’s ship there if he had returned from the war.

Michiko said she would wait for Fred, but the fortunes of love and war are hard to know, especially some 65 years later.

Fortunately, her life moved forward. She married Harold Calvin Todd in June 1948, in a ceremony held in Detroit.

Fred was apparently a man of convictions who loved life, but gave it up for a cause larger than himself. He represented the best that the Japanese Americans and Page Mill Church could offer.

Amen.
Michiko Yamada stands directly above Fred's photo at his memorial service, probably held at Heart Mountain on November 19, 1944.
3 Killed, 5 Wounded in France

Nisei First to Reach 'Lost Battalion'
Fred Yamamoto Fought to 'Prepare for Peace'

FRIDAY, Dec. 26, 1944

Heart Mountain, Wyoming

Nisei Second Lieutenant Fred Yamamoto, of Heart Mountain, Wyoming, was killed in action on the first day of the drive to liberate the prisoners of war in France.

Yamamoto was a member of the 452nd Infantry, 116th Infantry Division, which was under the command of General George Marshall. The division was part of the Allied forces that were advancing through France towards the end of World War II.

Yamamoto was born in 1921 in San Jose, California. He was the son of Japanese immigrants and had been raised in a farming community in the United States.

Yamamoto joined the Army in 1942 and was sent to Heart Mountain for training. He was later assigned to the 452nd Infantry and was shipped overseas to Europe.

On the day of Yamamoto's death, the division was engaging German forces near the town of Falaise. Yamamoto was killed in action while leading his platoon.

Yamamoto's death was mourned by his family and friends, and he was posthumously awarded the Silver Star for his bravery.

Barber Sabotages Democracy

PONTIAC—There is some doubt in the mind of Pvt. Harry Woodward, 29, a member of the famed 30th Infantry Division, whether he is fighting for all Americans during the two years he was overseas.

Woodward said that he was fighting for the United States, but also for the rights of black people in the United States. He said that he had been told that the Tuskegee Airmen were fighting for the same cause.

Woodward added that he had been told that the Tuskegee Airmen were fighting for the same cause.

The Tuskegee Airmen were a group of African American pilots who were trained during World War II.

In the end, Woodward said that he was fighting for all Americans and that he was proud to be part of the 30th Infantry Division.

$50,000 Tract Goes to State In California Property Suit

SAN DIEGO—A new $50,000 tract of land was purchased by the state of California in San Diego. The tract was purchased for a new state prison.

The state of California has been trying to expand its prison system for several years. The new tract will be used to build a new prison facility.

The state of California has been facing a severe prison population crisis. The state has been trying to find ways to expand its prison system to accommodate the growing population.
The Page Mill Church Epworth League 1934

Many of Fred's friends are pictured here, including Tom Saito, Jack Sato, Hideo and Tosh Furukawa, Riyo and Kiyo Sato, Harry Takamoto, Grace Yoshida and Soyo Okazawa.
The research into Fred Yamamoto's life was greatly aided by Pam Hashimoto, who allowed the author access to Yamamoto's diary. The paper scraps are the author's notes. The typewritten document at right is Hashimoto's summary.