

2LT Jimmie Kanaya

(Medical Services, 442nd Regimental Combat Team, 36th Infantry Division)

1920 - 2019

Jimmie Kanaya was a first-generation American, born to Japanese immigrants, in Clackamas, Oregon on 3 October 1920. His earliest memories concerned working with his parents and two siblings on a farm for many hours each day along with store deliveries of foods produced on the farm. These endeavors rewarded the family with sufficient foods which sustained them during the Depression.

After graduating from high school in 1940 and as a patriotic individual, he wanted to join the military, first approaching the Marine Corps, then the Navy, finally being accepted by the U.S. Army. His parents were divided about his enlistment: his father approved, but his mother had reservations; however, agreement was reached concerning his enlistment on 7 April 1941 at Vancouver Barracks, Washington State. Kanaya's initial assignment was Monterey, California, where he received a uniform, the first of many he would wear during his distinguished military career. His initial assignment was at Hamilton Air Force Base and then to Hoff General Hospital.

Initially, he was trained as an airplane mechanic, but was quickly transferred to the medic corps and received orders to Hoff General Hospital in Santa Barbara. Working in this environment was a new experience for Kanaya, but he soon mastered the duties which included patient care, earning him the rank of Corporal. He trained there until war was declared on December 7 when Executive Order 9066* was passed. Kanaya remembers this hospital experience as a positive experience and stated that the medical department was very tolerant. On their departure date, the commanding officer praised the Japanese-Americans who served as medical staff, gave them promotions, and was sorry to see such dedicated Japanese-Americans depart. His next steps: Ft. Leavenworth, then Camp Crowder, Missouri, a new Signal Corps training camp with a new hospital. His next promotion was to Sergeant and his responsibility: head of the Red Cross Building, support the Red Cross.



Sergeant First Class Jimmie Kanaya

* Executive Order 9066 affected all Japanese people. They were given about a week to settle their affairs and be moved by the US Government. Kanaya got a ten-day pass to catch a bus to assist with his family's relocation. Although he was present during these initial stages, he was disallowed, even in uniform, to accompany them to an assembly point at the Portland Oregon Stockyards. Therefore, he took a train to Kansas City where he spent the last few days of his leave. Kanaya's family was able to save and move some items and endured the encampment with few complaints. Fortunately, Kanaya was able to visit his family twice at Minidoka War Relocation Center in Idaho but felt like an outsider while walking through the camp because he was wearing his

uniform—perhaps it was viewed as a symbol of his allegiance to a country which had driven the residents from their homes. Perhaps it was because his uniform was the same worn by soldiers in guard stations with guns pointed toward the Japanese Americans.

During this time period, Kanaya learned that the organization of a Japanese-American Combat Regiment was being considered. Its purpose was to evaluate the loyalty of these men, even when their families were in internment camps. Kanaya volunteered and became the First Sergeant of the Medical Attachment, combined with others, to form F Company and Headquarters, 2nd Battalion, assigned to Camp Shelby, Mississippi, on 1 February 1943. This assignment became a mixed blessing as professional medical personnel who were to act as trainers became complacent; therefore, the NCOs were forced to teach procedures, etc. Issues developed which caused Kanaya to accept an assignment in the medical section of the Infantry Battalion. He was one of 5 sergeants assigned to a cadre to train medics supporting the 442 RCT.

THE PREPARATION FOR OVERSEAS MOVEMENT

Kanaya remembers assembling vehicles and equipment for departure from Camp Shelby, Mississippi to the port. The trip across the Atlantic to Europe took 30 days. German submarines were in the vicinity, but his convoy moved through the Straits of Gibraltar, stopped at Casablanca, Sicily and ended in Naples. Bivouacking north of Naples, they joined with the 100th Battalion just outside of Rome and became a full Regiment with the 100th Battalion as their 1st Battalion. First enemy contact was close to Civitavecchia, Italy, on the western flank of the 5th Army. The 442 RCT was not allowed to participate in the military victory march in Rome.



442nd Regimental
Combat Team



36th Infantry Division

After several engagements and moves he was with the 442nd from February 1943 to October 1944. The following citation was recommended, approved and awarded in a ceremony after the war for this action:

The President of the United States, authorized by Act of Congress July 9, 1918, takes pleasure in presenting the Silver Star to Staff Sergeant Jimmie Kanaya, United States Army, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action against the enemy while serving as a Medical Aidman with the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, attached to the 34th Infantry Division on July 5, 1944, in the vicinity of Castellina, Italy. When the Battalion to which Sergeant Kanaya was attached was subjected to an intense artillery and mortar barrage, nine men from one of the companies were seriously wounded. In spite of the concentrated machine gun fire, Sergeant Kanaya, with utter disregard for his own personal safety, crawled to the wounded soldiers and rapidly and effectively rendered first aid to them for a period of two and one-half hours

until every man had been properly cared for. The extreme courage and devotion to his comrades displayed by Sergeant Kanaya was exemplary and a credit to himself and his organization.

A week later, Kanaya was also recommended for the Bronze Star for his actions by acting alone and without cover to evacuate his mortally wounded platoon sergeant while his unit was taking an Italian town. In September of 1944 Kanaya received a battlefield commission as a Second Lieutenant from General Mark Clark.

ARNO RIVER

Kanaya stated that “medics followed the troops into the field.” He knew the units he picked would probably engage the enemy and he felt committed to assist those wounded or killed. Kanaya particularly remembers the troubling and dangerous situation at the Arno River in Italy. Both German and America troops were crossing the river at night, sometimes crisscrossing each other. In wartime situations, the retrieval of wounded and KIA soldiers sometimes requires the co-operations of both sides. Kanaya convinced the Regimental Commander and the Battalion Commander that the Germans had agreed on a time the next day to exchange bodies; the Germans kept their word as well and this action took place—even the chaplain joined the group. As a precaution, Kanaya put arm bands around all of the infantrymen and they carried the Red Cross flag. During this ironic situation, both GIs and Germans were seen conversing and trading pins and souvenirs—a memory many recalled later in life. A parallel situation often occurred when wounded Germans were located among American soldiers who also needed medical attention. According to Kanaya, “...for the most part the Germans respected American medics and they tried to reciprocate the best they could.” He knew that some violations occurred but active battle situations occur which require quick actions with no time to think them through.

France became a center of actions taken by Kanaya when the 100th Battalion (known as the “Purple Heart Battalion” for their heavy losses in Italy) and the 442nd* were in the Vosges Mountains in France. They were cut off and sought medical help which Kayana provided with the help of three other medics, assuming the battalion was close, only to find that they were around the mountain from his position. Finding seriously wounded men, the decision was made to transport the Americans using German prisoners as stretcher bearers, guarded by those with rifles. Since the Germans controlled the area, and the column was about 100 yards long, Kanaya was concerned that they would be stopped. “With the Red Cross flag up front, litters carried by German prisoners and guards with rifles were contrary to the Geneva convention, as you cannot mix weapons with the Red Cross flag.” The column was captured but Germans continued to let their soldiers carry the litters. (Meltesen, page 97)



2LT Jimmie Kanaya



WWII U.S. Medic arm band.

Fierce fighting to liberate the French towns of Bruyères and Biffontaine in the Vosges Mountains resulted in extraordinary numbers of wounded and deceased American soldiers.

Kanaya and other medics were again called in to aid the wounded and found that insufficient numbers of medics and stretcher bearers were available to care for the wounded as the battle

raged around them to save The Lost Battalion by the 442nd. In a twist of fate, Kanaya was captured one day before the rescue on 15 September 1944. Since American officers wore their rank under their collars, Kanaya was treated as enlisted until they discovered that he was an officer. Fortunately, as a newly promoted officer, he provided no useful information, so his talents as a medic were called upon. Ten days out on their way to Germany, he was put to work in a hospital O.R. (operating room) and slept in a very cold shelter. Having lost his original mess kit when he was captured, Kanaya soon located a replacement German mess kit which he used for the remainder of the war. Eventually they headed for Poland through Stuttgart and Berlin, leaving by train toward Poland in locked boxcars with no heat nor food, reaching Oflag 64 on 29 November 1944.



Kanaya German mess kit.

Kanaya remembered that the camp contained approximately 1,000 Army officers dating back to the North Africa Campaign. It was well run with strict but fair discipline meted out on all Kriegies (a new name learned) by the Senior American Officer, Colonel Goode. Descriptions of daily routines, food rations and meals, barracks assignments, tunnel building and work assignments duplicate the memories and writings of other Kriegies' accounts as Kanaya adopted his personal survivor mode including the statements of rules dictated by their German captors.

Kanaya left Oflag 64 on 21 January 1945. The Russians were closing in and they could hear their artillery. Each man had a Red Cross parcel and an overcoat. Initially, he teamed up with medical corps officers pulling a sled carrying the boxes parcels. Eventually, they became separated and Kanaya decided to stay at the front of the column—his best chance of survival as those who became disabled at the back had to be hospitalized or disappeared. Herded into unheated, often dirty barns at night, around 400 POWs did not reappear the next day. The remaining group continued into Germany, facing life and death situations each day, but they were determined to stay together and survive. At one point they realized that the march had lasted about 400 miles. News reached them that Roosevelt had died but Kanaya and others thought it was propaganda until the Germans announced it. The surviving columns were then put on a train to Hammelburg, there joined by the 1,000 men captured at the Battle of the Bulge.

Kanaya felt that lessons learned while living through the Depression helped him to endure his POW experiences, especially the long march to Hammelburg. Over 1,000 officers dropped out eventually for reasons of illness, etc. which left around 426 survivors. Although he lost 40 pounds (he never got used to feeling hungry and still carries that memory) and suffered discomforts daily, the endurance he acquired from working and living on a functioning farm strengthened his resolve to survive the march and the war.

In March an American force drove 50 miles behind German lines near Frankfurt to rescue American personnel in the Hammelburg XIII-B POW camp. The task force contained one company of tanks, one company of infantry and a company for support. Breaking through the gate, they were surprised to learn that 1,000 prisoners were present and had to relay the message that not all could be rescued. Around 9 PM as the departure was initiated, Kanaya mounted a truck to service the wounded in a column of tanks, trucks, halftracks and jeeps—about ¼ mile long. Roadblocks stopped their progress as the Germans had sealed off the area. Fearing the worst, Kanaya and others returned to the Hammelburg barracks as did members of the task force who survived. In retrospect, Kanaya learned that Patton wished he had sent more infantry but the Corps Commander deemed it too risky. Patton regretted the failed mission which included freeing his son-in-law, Colonel John K. Waters. Reflecting on this action, Kanaya replied, “They were able to keep their sanity because they knew the war was going for them yet concerned because the Russians were coming near.”

From Hammelburg, camp members were sent to Nuremberg (5A or 7A) and joined prisoners from many places. Fortunately, each man received a Red Cross parcel, a much needed and appreciated gift. Rumors were rampant, concerning one that they would be taken to the Alps to be used as bargaining chips. Told to “fall in” their column was strafed by American planes and Kanaya ran into the woods, buried some items and retrieved them five years later. Surviving several days among the canopy of trees on depleting food sources, Kanaya returned to the Nuremberg camp and worked in the dispensary. American bombers bombed the town and the camp during the day which terrified the American Air Force officers who had also become POWs. (Meltesen, page 270)



Top of Kanaya cigarette case.

This camp also contained 20,000 Russian prisoners—very little discipline was present among them. Fifty died every day but this was not reported so survivors could share their rations. Fortunately, Kanaya was a respected American and one made him a cigarette box which was gifted on 17



Bottom of Kanaya cigarette case.

April 1945. At one point for reasons unknown, Germans came through and selected 25 American officers; they were never heard from again.

On 26 April, American tanks from the 45th Infantry Division crashed through the gate and the Nuremberg camp was liberated. General chaos and cheering were felt and heard throughout the camp, accompanied by a great deal of looting. Kanaya attempted an escape across a river where the Germans could not cross and had two days of freedom before returning to the camp for one week after liberation.

Finally onboard a C-47, the plane landed at Camp Lucky Strike (one of the transfer and recuperation camps in France where they received uniforms and money). Kanaya remembers that Eisenhower appeared at the camp to welcome them and pass the message that transportation issues would delay their departure to the U.S.

Onboard the *Marine Eagle* and heading home at last, he and his shipmates slept, ate, and shared stories, including rumors that all souvenirs would be confiscated, so many items were thrown over the side. This was a false rumor as no searches were conducted when the ship docked in the U.S. port.

Troop trains carried the men to Camp Kilmer in New Jersey---800 in his group---and after a recovery period, many trains were boarded, headed for hometowns across the country. Kanaya departed his train in Chicago and noted that one arriving from the Pacific Theatre contained Marines with a slogan on the side of the train which read, "Stick with Mac, and you'll never get back". Kanaya remembers meeting MacArthur later in Japan and respected him. Kanaya's parents were now free citizens and were managing a hotel in the vicinity, so he visited for two weeks before being given a 30-day pass. Joining friends in Miami Beach, his next stop was a Charleston, South Carolina hospital—a Medical Replacement Center. There Jimmie Kanaya received his Silver Star and a Bronze Star.

The war ended in September and a military government school opened at the University of Virginia—the purpose to assist in the occupation of Japan. On board ship they were told their destination was Korea. He stayed for six months and while in Korea, he was given the opportunity to take and pass an extensive examination which would result in a regular army commission. He was granted one in June of 1946—a distinction among Japanese- Americans military personnel---and was accepted into the Medical Field Service.



1LT Kanaya after WWII.

Jimmie Kanaya retired as COL in the U.S. Army, his last assignment before retirement in 1974 as Deputy Commandant, Medical Training Center at Fort Sam Houston.

Kanaya received both an undergraduate and a graduate degree while still in the Army by attending night and weekend schools and during extended leave periods. He attended 17 colleges and universities to collect enough credits for five degrees.

The 442nd Regimental Combat Team received the Congressional Gold Medal in 2010. This medal recognized thousands of Japanese-American soldiers who served in WWII even when



Kanaya is 3rd from the left in the red garrison hat.

their families were kept in internment camps across the Western part of the U.S. Secretary Eric Shinseki of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Senator Daniel Inouye -- himself a member of the 442nd -- and several other Members of Congress joined President Obama as he signed Congressional Senate Bill 1055 on 5 October 2010 in the presence of Kanaya and 6 other WWII Nisei veterans. The 442nd was the most decorated unit in United States military history for its size and length of service, receiving 7 Presidential Unit Citations, 21 Medals of Honor, 29 Distinguished Service Crosses, 560 Silver Stars, 4,000 Bronze Stars, 22 Legion of Merit Medals, 15 Soldier's Medal, and over 4,000 Purple Hearts during WWII. Having fought in three wars, (WWII, Korea, Viet Nam) Jimmie felt the Congressional Gold Medal was his greatest honor. As President Truman noted, he was one of those who not only fought for his country, but also fought prejudice.



Veteran Jimmie Kanaya

Colonel Kanaya and wife, Lynn, spent retirement years attending military functions, such as Guests of the Third Reich: American POWs in Europe and From Barbed Wire to Battlefields: Japanese American Experiences in WWII, exhibits and the opening of the Boeing Pavilion at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans, Louisiana. They also attended the 70th Reunion of the 442 RCT in Honolulu in 2014. This event was held in conjunction with the Smithsonian Display of the Congressional Gold Medal at the Bishop Museum. Seventy veterans attended the reunion at the Hilton Hotel with over 250 family members and friends in attendance. In addition, a picnic and reception, attended by more than 200 people, included a Remembrance Service at Fort DeRussy's 100th Battalion clubhouse.

COL Kanaya passed away on 7 November 2019 and was buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery on June 30, 2021. He was survived by his wife, Lynn, and many family members.

His awards, medals, and citations include the following:

Legion of Merit, Silver Star, Bronze Star with two Oak Leaf Clusters, Purple Heart, Presidential Unit Citations, POW Medal, Commendation Medal, Distinguished Unit Citation, Vietnam Unit Citation, 12 other theatre and service ribbons for 33½ years of military service, Army Medical Department Recognition Medallion for Faithful Service, Knight of the French Legion of Honor by the French Government on June 5, 2004 on the 60th Anniversary of the Liberation of France and Europe, Ambassador of Peace (Korea).



COL Kanaya at retirement.

SOURCES

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Jimmie Kanaya

U.S. Army – 442 ND C.R.T.
WORLD WAR II – KOREA – VIETNAM
Brick #2120 Wall Location Column 16 Row 25

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Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers in collaboration
with Jimmie's widow, Lynn Kanaya