

“Oh god,” Saburo lamented. “Another hill to capture!”

“Yeah, man, it seems like all we do is fight uphill,” Kitaro shrugged. “Just once, I’d like to be on top and have those Krauts come up at us.”

They had been jousting with the Germans since the middle of October as they were maneuvered into the Rhone Valley and positioned to take four hills in the Vosges Mountains the Germans held controlling the town of Bruyeres. The terrain was very different than what they had been used to in Italy. The hills were irregular and steep in some places, and the forest thick and foggy during the days and pitch-black dark at night. For five days, the 100th Battalion of the 442nd fought seesaw battles with the Germans for those four hills. The struggle shrank the fighting strength of the 100th by over a hundred men. Saburo and Kitaro were still upright and able to fight, though they were getting so weary they could barely stand.

“Look at that place, swarming with Germans,” Saburo observed from the heights overlooking Biffontaine. Dropping his pack and plopping himself down, Kitaro lit up a cigarette, and nodding his head towards the town below, he said with relief, “Glad, we don’t have to dislodge those Krauts. Let some other 442nd guys do it. We’ve earned a rest taking these hills.”

Early the next morning, they were jostled out of their snug foxholes when Sergeant Kohashi shouted, “Saddle up, men, we’re on the move.”

“Oh, gosh, sarge, can’t we just stay here a little bit longer and watch the Germans get chased out of the town? We are in such a good position—a regular bird’s eye view.” Kitaro pleaded.

“Come on, private, who do you think is going to eliminate those Germans?” The sergeant said as he continued to rouse the men to activity.

“Oh shit!” Saburo nearly shouted. “You mean we’re going to do it?”

“Well, Mrs. Roosevelt isn’t here to do it, so I guess we’ll just have to.”

“Aren’t there some other units who need unit citations and to bump up their purple heart average?” Saburo whined.

“Look, soldier, ours is not to reason why, but ours is to...”

At that point, half a dozen other fellows chimed in simultaneously, “do and die.”

“That’s what I am afraid of, Sarge. You realize, of course, that recent statistics prove that the death rate in this unit is one per person.” Kitaro said with a touch of black humor.

Carefully descending from the hills, they had bled red for, they entered the town and engaged its defenders in house-to-house fighting for two days. Though some firefights were intense, an increasing number of Germans soldiers sought the mutual life-saving approach by surrendering. In the two weeks that the 100th had engaged the Germans, they had captured an odd assortment of prisoners.

Saburo arrived at a holding pen with what he referred to as “volunteers for peace.” “Hell, the German army must be getting desperate,” Saburo said, waving to the rag-tag lot of prisoners in the pen. “There are Poles and Yugoslavs over there,” pointing to one corner of the pen. “And over there, it seems like there are a couple of Somalis and even three East Indians from something called the Freies Indien Regiment. Where the hell is Somaliland anyway?”

“Don’t know,” one fellow called out. “Maybe somewhere near India?”

“Yeah, it’s weird,” said the sergeant taking custody of the prisoners. “Many of them don’t speak much German, and who the hell around here speaks Somali?”

“I don’t imagine they will be able to organize an escape,” quipped one of the MP guards.

“I don’t think they will want to. Did you see what their field rations were? At least now they can have some hot meals, coffee, and cigarettes.”

“Right,” said another guard. “Maybe that’s why they surrendered in the first place.”

As the dust settled on Bellefontaine, the ambulatory members of the 100th threw themselves into “resting” with abandon. They were promised a long rest, but experience had taught them that that could be changed at the drop of a hat. And much to their chagrin, two days later, they were reassembled and sent into battle.

General John E. Dahlquist sent them up the steep incline of the thick pine forest ahead of them. They were not told the true nature of their mission—just to take the top of the hill. They moved out at 3:00 am on October 27th into thick fog, rain, and snow that made the going slippery and muddy. Visibility was so poor that they had to hold on to the pack of the man in front of them so they would not get separated or lost.

“You go first,” Kitaro said to Saburo. “After all, you are invisible.”

“But if I go first and I am invisible, doesn’t that mean that they will see you,” Saburo said, half-joking.

“Ok, then we’ll flip for it,” Kitaro said, retrieving an Italian coin from his pocket that he was keeping for good luck.

Saburo called heads and tails it was.

“Ah, what the hell,” Kitaro said. “I’ll take the lead for a while, then when the shooting starts, we can switch.”

It was not long before the shooting started, and they both fell off to either side to take cover. The difficult terrain, combined with artillery and, at times, withering fire, stalled their progress. The whole company barely inched its way forward, having to pause as they encountered mines and other bobby traps. It was difficult to know how effective or ineffective their return fire was. After the first whole day, they had managed to crawl barely 30 yards up the slope.

Saburo and Kitaro dug in after the first day as deeply as they could. They caught only cat naps, for everyone was afraid of possible German counterattacks. They could hear sounds like the Germans were moving around in the dark and concluded that they were probably repositioning themselves for the inevitable renewal of the onslaught the next morning.

Sure enough, around 5:00 a.m., the NCOs passed around and got everyone ready for another push. Having wolfed down parts of the C-rations he carried, Saburo felt uneasy about the whole mission. They were literally stabbing in the dark, and equally in dark as to why. Fewer troops began the crawl than the day before. It did seem, though, that the fire was a little less intense as well. Maybe the German ranks were thinning as well.

After two more days, basically the same, their lieutenant finally circulated around and told them what they were trying to do. It seems that some 275 members of the ‘Alamo Regiment’ of the Texas National Guard had advanced too far and fast into the German defenses and gotten surrounded when their flanks collapsed. They were besieged, running out of water, food, and medical supplies, and threatened with annihilation. Earlier rescue attempts for the “Lost Battalion” had failed but had enveloped a few German positions in the process. Each side fought to rescue their men and eliminate their enemies, and the 442nd was assigned the task of relieving the “T-patchers.”

Upon hearing the explanation, Saburo could only remember all the times he and Eiji had played the rescuing cavalry in their childhood heroic imaginations. The fact that they were trying to save Texans seemed ironically right to Saburo. He strapped on his web belt, complete with a couple of grandees, extra ammunition, and a field bandage, and turned to Kitaro.

“C’mon partner,” in an affected Texas accent. “Let’s go rescue that wagon train of T-patchers. I’ll take the lead today.” As they set out, Kitaro heard Saburo starting to say something he did not understand. He thought it might have been Chinese.

“Beitan shidai tongzhi Zhe

Baohu women cong

Womende weilai” Saburo softly whispered.

“What’s that?” Kitaro asked.

“Oh, something I learned from my best friend Eiji's father, Morio: “It is a little prayer to be protected from whatever misfortune might be lurking in the hours and days before us.”

“Think it will work?” Kitaro asked.

Saburo turned around and smiled at Kitaro. Pounding his chest and right arm with his free left hand, he boasted, “You don’t think I have been ‘invisible’ by accident, do you?”

They had finally crept far enough that they could see the edge of the hillcrest behind the German bunkers. The heroism of their buddies continued to manifest itself.

Faced with insurmountable obstacles and hopelessly pinned down, the only remaining officer of the advance company, recklessly stood up, beckoned to his sergeant to follow him, and commenced to charge the Germans. The rest of the company witnessed that, and one by one, they rose up and charged as well. They all began shouting, “Banzai! Banzai!” Off to their right, they saw one fellow get shot in the head. For sure, he was dead. But then, after a couple of minutes, bleeding profusely, he popped up, grabbed his helmet, and continued to advance up the hill.

Saburo and Kitaro joined the insane rush towards the summit. Just then, Saburo’s right elbow and arm seemed to explode. It almost felt like his arm was being ripped from his shoulder socket. Strangely, though, there was a momentary time lag between when the bullet hit his elbow and he began to experience any pain. Saburo slumped down and looked at his right arm, basically dangling by just a few threads of skin, muscle, and tendons. “Shit,” he said as he realized that his arm was basically useless.

“Saburo!” Kitaro called out. “Saburo!” He began to move toward his downed partner.

Saburo was fumbling with his left hand, buttoning his right shirt button to one of the buttonholes of his shirt to make a crude sling. “Stay where you are, Kitaro. I think I can handle this,” grimacing in pain. He then fumbled to get his field bandage out and tried his best to wrap it around his bleeding elbow.

Kitaro arrived and began to help staunch the bleeding and secure the bandage. “I’ll go get a medic if we have any left,” he announced and started down the hill a bit. He turned around to check on Saburo before leaving, and it was then that the bullet ripped into his chest. He let out a confused and shocked “Ooff” and doubled over, clutching his torso near his heart. He fell on his back and began staring straight up at the top of the pine canopy and the faint glimmer of light in the sky.

Saburo tried to get to him, but the bullets were hitting all around him. He could hear Kitaro making a hissing noise, and he realized that he had a sucking chest wound. He had to get to him and help him. Fumbling with his left hand, Saburo got a package of cigarettes and removed the cellophane outer cover. As he crawled to Kitaro, he was going to try to put it over the hole in his chest to stop the sucking.

It seemed to take forever to get to him. As he got there, Saburo reached out, ripped away Kitaro's shirt with his left hand and teeth, and began to put the cigarette cover over the bubbling, gurgling hole in his chest. He raised up just a little to call out for help from someone below. Just then, a bullet ripped into the right side of his back, knocking the wind out of him and laying him flat on his face. Then everything went black.