The Story of Tom Haji and Rural Nisei in WWII

By Mario Vega

Life in Monroe

- When the Hajis came to Monroe in 1938, the town was still very small. Because of this, the townspeople were very close knit and suspicious of outsiders.
- Tom quickly became active in high school clubs and sports, building up an already charismatic personality. He would excel as a star basketball and football player.
- By Tom’s junior year in 1941, he had become one of the most popular boys in town and the Haji family as a whole was widely respected by the community in Monroe.

“An All-American Boy”

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Training For Battle

- Tom was shipped to Camp Blanding, Florida for training during the summer of 1944, becoming a part of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team.
- After completing basic training in November, Tom went back to visit his family in Spokane and his friends in Monroe before deploying. He left Monroe for the east coast on November 28th.

Tom Haji Goes to War

- In late 1944, Tom and other replacement soldiers headed to Southern France to rebuild the strength of the regiment.
- By late March, the unit was moved to Northern Italy for an offensive in April that required them to break the German-managed Gothic Line.
- The offensive began on April 5th as the soldiers began taking three different mountains that were the first objectives.
- When the Germans fled the mountains, the 442nd chased and Tom would be killed on April 9th, 1945 in the pursuit.

Conclusions

Tom Haji died at the age of 19 in the service of his country, a life of potential laid down for ideals like freedom and justice that had his country had denied him. Like a firework, his life was brief but brilliant and is still lovingly remembered by those who knew him 70 years after his death.

Despite being Japanese in a deeply suspicious town, Tom lived a life in Monroe not unlike many other boys in the United States. In his high school years, he was remembered as a leader as well as a gifted athlete, all the characteristics that an all-American young man could want. He was able to pierce through the prejudices of a small town as perhaps the first Japanese American boy to live in Monroe. He had the trust of the community even in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor.

While being interned at Tule Lake, Tom was like many others in the camps who were willing to fight for their country. The 442nd went on to become one of the most iconic and respected units of the war, displaying loyalty to the United States like most Japanese in the camps.

Selected Sources

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