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Museum exhibit on Fort Drum highlights ‘Pando Commando’ and its creator

FORT DRUM, N.Y. (May 23, 2024) – A new exhibit at the 10th Mountain Division and Fort Drum Museum sheds light on “Pando Commando” and the Soldier who sketched the iconic image while stationed at Camp Hale, Colorado, during World War II.

Pando, the valley upon which Camp Hale was built in the early 1940s, was the training grounds for the ski troops who formed the original 10th Mountain Division. The Pando Commando – a cartoon panda bear on skis with an M1 Garand rifle and bayonet slung across its back – became a familiar sight for Soldiers reading the camp newspaper.

Doug Schmidt, museum curator, said the Pando Commando didn’t draw much public attention until the 2017 Army-Navy Game. The West Point football team wore a 10th Mountain Division-inspired uniform honoring its World War II roots, and the Pando Commando logo featured prominently on the athletes’ shirt and footwear.

But in all the hype surrounding the game – and the Army’s 14-13 victory over Navy – there was no mention of the Pando Commando’s creator.

“We only knew circumstantially about who we thought the artist was, based on some of the Camp Hale newspapers that had a Pvt. Tatsumi Iwate as an artist on staff,” Schmidt said. “No definitive proof that he drew the Pando Commando.”

So about two years ago, Schmidt started looking for answers, which led to a researching effort with representatives from the Japanese American National Museum, History Colorado, and the 10th Mountain Division Resource Center.

He reached out to Jamie Henricks, the JANM archivist in Los Angeles, California, who shared a collection of Iwate family letters, photos, and documents to help confirm the speculation.

“It was a treasure trove of information, and as I’m looking through it, reading his letters, I was able to put together a timeline of when he served at Camp Hale and see some of his artwork,” Schmidt said.

That included what Schmidt believes to be the first drawing of the Pando Commando on a camp bulletin. While assigned as staff artist for the Camp Hale Ski-zette newspaper, Iwate drew a ski trooper on the masthead. Eventually it would be replaced with the Pando Commando logo, but Iwate had already left for another assignment.

This wasn’t a typical assignment for the average GI in the Army. Iwate, a second-generation Japanese American (Nisei), had orders to Camp Shelby, Mississippi, to join the 442nd Infantry Regiment.

“The 442nd was the only Japanese American infantry regiment that the Army activated during World War II,” Schmidt said.

Until that time, Nisei Soldiers were relegated to menial jobs in the Army, such as kitchen patrol (KP), guard duty, or clerical work. The attack on Pearl Harbor outraged the nation, from which racism against Japanese Americans grew rampant. Even in the Army, Soldiers like Iwate were judged by their race and not the skills or talent they brought to the team.

“What’s interesting here is that the unit activated on Feb. 1, 1943, and by Feb. 6, he was already gone,” Schmidt said.

Within a week’s time, Iwate was pulled from the 442nd and reassigned to Station Complement Separate Unit (SCSU) 1947, at Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

Iwate was flagged for having traveled to Japan once – he was 7 and visiting his ailing grandfather – which put his loyalty in question. He regarded the SCSU essentially as an internment camp, like the one where his family was sent when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on Feb. 19, 1942. Regardless of their American citizenship, more than 100,000 West Coast residents of Japanese descent were placed in internment camps.

He wrote to his friends still serving in the 442nd Infantry, expressing his anger and disappointment.

“I regard this action taken by the Army to be one of the most cowardly and shameful, without mentioning wasteful. We all swore true faith and allegiance to the United States of America, as we came into the Army and that’s still good as far as I’m concerned. I swore to help destroy our enemy were it Nazi or Japanese. That still holds true. And let me say that if the Army had as much faith in us as we have in the USA, there wasn’t any need to create SCSU or prison for American soldiers of un-American ancestry.”

Despite his dismay, Iwate told his teammates that he would remain hopeful that he could return to his unit.

“They put him in a unit with actual supporters of Nazi Germany, fascists, and people who had loyalties to other countries,” Schmidt said. “I found a letter in the National Archives that Iwate wrote to an officer where he basically said, ‘I am a loyal American and I want to fight for our country.’ This letter made a difference, because it got in the right hands.”

Following an investigation, Iwate was transferred back to the 442nd Infantry where he trained for combat until the unit departed for Europe.

The 442nd fought in Italy and participated in the invasion of southern France. In March 1945, they were reassigned to Fifth Army for the Po Valley campaign where they helped to drive enemy forces from northern Italy. They did this, notably, alongside the 92nd Infantry Division, a segregated African American unit.

Iwate received the Silver Star and a Purple Heart for his actions under enemy fire. His Silver Star citation reads, in part:

“Although relieved of his temporary assignment as a litter bearer and after having continuously evacuated wounded soldiers throughout the entire day, Sergeant Iwate volunteered to lead his litter squad into the midst of a fierce fire fight in order to evacuate an injured soldier. Having successfully reached the wounded man and administered first aid and while evacuating the patient to the aid station, Sergeant Iwate was painfully wounded below the left eye by a tree burst from enemy artillery fire.”

Iwate continued to help in the evacuation until the severity of his wound forced him to seek medical aid.

“Talking to both the Japanese American National Museum archivist and a distant relative of Iwate’s, he apparently had a sketchbook that he carried with him everywhere,” Schmidt said. “He took that into combat, and it got lost when he was wounded. But we have a few of his sketches that are absolutely phenomenal, and it shows what he saw during the war.”

After World War II, the 442nd was recognized as the most decorated regiment in the U.S. Army, with Soldiers having received 21 Medals of Honor, 52 Distinguished Service Crosses, 371 Silver Stars, 4,000 Bronze Stars, and more than 4,000 Purple Hearts.

“The focus of the exhibit is on the Pando Commando, because that’s what everybody associated with the 10th Mountain Division is familiar with,” he said. “But the circumstances surrounding that, and Iwate’s story, is just so compelling that I felt we needed to tell it.”

The museum is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Admission is free.

For more information visit https://history.army.mil/museums/fieldMuseums/fortdrum or follow www.facebook.com/FortDrumMuseum.

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Photo Captions:

A new exhibit at the 10th Mountain Division and Fort Drum Museum sheds light on “Pando Commando” and Pvt. Tatsumi Iwate, the Soldier who sketched the iconic image while stationed at Camp Hale, Colorado, during World War II. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)