

## SERVICE: STORIES OF HUNGER AND WAR

### Episode 8 – “When You Look Like the Enemy”

#### Lawson Ichiro Sakai Transcript

**President Franklin D. Roosevelt (historical audio):** "Every farmer in the land must realize fully that his production is part of war and that he is regarded by the nation as essential to victory. The American people expect him to keep his production up..."

**Host Jacqueline Raposo:** The lives of 123 million Americans changed drastically in 1941. On top of the 16 million men and 350,000 women who would join the armed forces, 6 million workers would leave farm life for the military or to find heftier paychecks in war production industries, as we heard in our episode with Air Corps veteran Harold Bud Long.

**Harold Bud Long:** I got done with high school. We had no money to send me to college. Dad says, "You want the farm? You can have the farm!" I said, "Dad, you want to work from daylight to dark, seven days a week? You never know if you're going to have enough to pay the bills? Not for me." So I worked in salvage work on P-40s until I was drafted...

**Host Jacqueline Raposo:** The fields emptier, food shortages followed. Then, Victory Gardens so named via optimistic government propaganda like that 1942 fireside chat of President Roosevelt's we just repeated from Bud's episode. But there was something in that chat we withheld...

**President Franklin D. Roosevelt (historical audio):** "Perhaps the most difficult phase of the manpower problem is the scarcity of farm labor in many places. I have seen evidence of the fact, however, that the people are trying to meet it as well as possible. In one community that I have visited, a perishable crop was harvested by turning out the whole of the high school three or four days. And in another community of fruit growers, the usual Japanese labor was not available. But when the fruit ripened..."

**Host Jacqueline Raposo:** The "usual Japanese labor" FDR drops in there are the 117,000 persons of Japanese ancestry the government interred in concentration camps; 70,000 who were first generation American born citizens - Nisei, as they're called in Japanese.

**Host Jacqueline Raposo:** Today, we spent time with Lawson Ichiro Sakai, one of the Nisei who would join the Army's 442nd Regimental Combat Team in 1943. Because Lawson saw the most combat of our veterans thus far, and because he has such rich food stories throughout, this episode is a touch longer than our others, and we're going to spread supporting information out piecemeal.

**Host Jacqueline Raposo:** What's helpful to know at the top is the landscape upon which Japanese Americans moved in the United States before the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941. Now, two pre-war government funded studies showed Japanese immigrants posed zero threat to United States citizens. Still, anti-Japanese sentiment had been steadily rising since around the turn of the century, as we'll hear in an audio clip from a Navy training video. Politically, this was because Washington and the Empire of Japan had been competing for economic gain in China. Locally, Japanese farmers had control of 40 percent of California farm production by the start of World War 2, dominating in areas like snap beans, celery and tomatoes and despite Alien Land Laws enacted first in 1913 prohibiting Japanese immigrants or their American born children from buying or long term leasing agricultural land. And, having farmed small plots back in Japan, they were really good at producing a lot of food on their acreage - at that time, the average American farm was valued at 38 dollars an acre; a Japanese American run farm was worth 280.

Let's take just this with us as we slow and sit and travel back in time to California with Lawson Ichiro Sakai.

**Lawson Ichiro Sakai:** My name is Lawson Ichiro Sakai. I'm an American of Japanese ancestry. I was born October 27, 1923 in Montebello, California.

We were surrounded by open land and a few orchards. My uncle and aunt immigrated from Japan in 1895, worked hard, saved money, and they bought this five acres in Montebello before the Alien Land Law was passed. My father came about nineteen five. He went back to Japan,

brought back his wife. We had a five acre - not a greenhouse, it's a lath house with space between laths so the sun can filter in. regrew what they called asparagus plebosus ferns, and that was something that the florist would use while decorating. We also had a 13 acre ranch. My father spent a lot of his time there taking care of the ranch.

My parents were Seventh Day Adventist, which is very unusual for Japanese or mostly Buddhist. We very rarely ate meat: no pork, duck or fish without scales. We had chickens. So my job was to bring in eggs every day, and Friday, my aunt would pick out a chicken for me to kill. She always had this quart jar of chicken stock in the refrigerator, and we had a lot of vegetables. My older sister was doing most of the cooking and she didn't do Japanese cooking, she did American cooking. So we ate a lot of spaghetti, non-meat food that Seventh-Day Adventists would eat.

At age five, my older sisters hauled me off to their school. We're very limited in this little church school. By high school, I wanted to play football and baseball and they didn't have that. So I went to a public high school. I played football, baseball team sports. I graduated in 1941. So in September I went to Compton junior college. And I was playing football there, enjoying everything.

My parents were always on edge. They didn't know what would happen if Japan and America went to war which they could sense in the years before 1941; they could not become U.S. citizens at that time.

On December 7, 1941, I was doing homework in my room listening to the radio, and that's when the announcer broke in and said that Pearl Harbor had been bombed... My parents were working. When they came in at noon for lunch, I told them, "Your country bombed my country."

By three o'clock that afternoon, the FBI came to our house looking for my uncle. He was a head of UFA - United Farmers Association, the largest produce market in Los Angeles. The FBI picked up a number of business leaders, farmers, doctors, lawyers, men of standing in the Japanese community. They took them all away. My father in law had fifteen hundred acres of garlic - five

acres would have been a huge garlic farm. My father in law was sent to Bismarck, North Dakota. Most of the people didn't know where their father went to.

Monday, December 8, I told my father, three of my classmates and myself were going to Long Beach to enlist. He said, "That's good. You're an American. You should go with your friends." My classmates that I've been playing football with for 3 or 4 years, they're all Caucasian, they were taken in right away. And then they got to me they said, "You're a Jap. We don't want Japs in our Navy. Get the hell out of here." My classmates said, "The hell with the Navy, if they don't want you, we're not going either." We all left.

We continued with football into baseball. February 19, Executive Order 9066 meant that U.S. government could move all of the Americans of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast to, President Roosevelt called them, "My concentration camps." The West Coast had to be evacuated - the eastern half was called the safe zone. So my parents decided, "We'll go to the safe zone." The 13-acre ranch, they just left it like most people did. What could they do with a farm? The five-acre lath house they left in charge of another flower grower and told them, "We'll be back in a month or two. So just take care of it while we're gone and keep the profits. And that was one of the main reasons for the evacuation: The Japanese farmers had hundreds and thousands of acres already producing. People growing five or 10 acres were saying, "These guys are going to run us out of business!" Those are the people who just walked in and took over.

We drove up the coast to Porterville. Some 13 miles up in the hills was a hot spring owned by a Seventh-Day Adventist man. He opened the place up to 9 or 10 Japanese families. I worked helping a man that lived there, chopping trees for firewood. In turn, he would milk his cow and give me quarts of milk, which is really good! I wasn't much of a milk drinker until then, but cutting lumber, felling trees, oh, it's heavy work! Eighteen years old, I figured I could handle anything.

I guess I was in semi-shock. I didn't tell the school administration I was leaving, I just picked up and left. Some of the students were saying, "What happened to our third baseman? All of a sudden there is no Japanese boys." It's hard to believe: Here's all these people dressed up in their finest clothes, standing on a curb with their suitcase, waiting for the bus. They've lost

everything. You think they'd be up in arms or weeping? They have a term in Japanese - Shikata ga nai (仕方がない). "It can't be helped." Our first-generation people said, "We came to this country and if that's what they want to do, we have to obey." And they had a very strict rule that we, their children, the American citizens, obey authority. The older Nisei had to be either in shock or probably very angry. But what the authorities say, we will obey. So we all just went along. I knew I hated to leave school. You hate to just leave.

A couple of months goes by. The federal government says the whole state of California has to be evacuated now. So, again, it was a big blow that we had to leave.

**Host Jacqueline Raposo:** Executive order 9066 only removed the Japanese from what were considered "military zones": crudely mapped areas that eventually made up most of the West Coast. There was little social protest, but some civilians in safe states took in refugees. And this is how Lawson and his family were able to move to Delta, Colorado - a Seventh Day Adventist church there had volunteered to host a Japanese family and his was randomly selected. Of what was left behind, 258,000 acres of farmland were turned over to the Farm Security Administration.

When we return, we'll hear about what shifted so that Lawson could finally don a uniform. Stay with us.

## COMMERCIAL

**Host Jacqueline Raposo:** Welcome back to Service: Veterans Stories of Hunger and War, from iHeartRadio. I'm Jacqueline Raposo.

While Lawson was moving from place to place, the president of the Japanese American Citizens League - Mike Masaoka - was challenging Congress to let the Japanese American boys fight. Because resistance was so strong, he made an extreme offer: the Nisei would make up a suicide squad to prove their patriotism. It was controversial, but not an empty threat. Five sons of the Masaoka family volunteered.

The army activated the all Japanese-American 100th Infantry Battalion in the fall of 1943, made primarily of Nisei from the Hawaii National Guard, who faced less resistance to fighting than the interred Nisei on the continent, some enlistees of whom were beaten by older Nisei or rejected by their families for wanting to fight for the country that imprisoned them. The 100th proved their mettle through Africa and up and to Italy, facing heavy combat to clear the pathway to Rome, only to be shoved aside, the other troops could pass them by and take the glory, lingering 10 kilometers out until ordered to move northwest, where they made up the 442nd Regimental Combat Team with two newly arrived battalions. Lawson was in 2nd Battalion, Company E, waiting for them.

He had enlisted as soon as he was able, becoming one of the 1500 Nisei to slowly make their way from settlements around the country to Camp Shelby, Mississippi. Let's head there now and follow as he spends a year in training before deploying to Italy himself.

**Lawson Ichiro Sakai:** Boys are coming to Camp Shelby one by one. Now food, you had to get used to it. Of course, if you were a truck driver, they made you a cook. If you were a cook, they made you a medic. That's how the military worked! So the food was really lousy at the beginning until these guys learned how to cook all rations they were getting. Like mutton! That's awful! Old sheep meat full of fat. Oh, taste terrible. I never want to eat mutton again.

And we eat off of a aluminum mess kit - it has a cover, you flip it over, so they put some food here and some food in the cover. If they have something here like Jell-O, the cook's just a likely to pour the gravy right on the Jell-O 'cause he had no other place to put it.

When you go out on maneuvers, for lunch usually it's two pieces of dry bread with mustard and a piece of salami or ham. Sunday the kitchen is closed -- they have cold cuts. But sometimes they'd have a whole bin full of fried SPAM. I would never eat it before, geez! Ha! But when they're hungry like crazy, boy, you eat everything you can.

Our regiment boarded a number of liberated ships on May 1st, 1944. We were part of a very huge convoy zigzagging because the Germans submarines were a threat. We didn't lose any ships, but it took us a whole month.

I was fortunate: I was able to draw guard duty with the Navy. It was really good because even though I'm up on deck, going up and down, getting soaking wet, at least we get to eat with them. And the Navy had really good food compared to what we had!

We docked on May 30 into Naples, Italy. The first thing we noticed as we approached the harbor, these Italian rowboats with the men paddling while they're standing would come near the boat and they waved their hand. And then they had bags of oranges. And they started throwing the oranges up to us. They're saying, "Cigarette, cigarette!" So we're throwing packs of cigarettes down to them and they're throwing oranges up to us. They were blood oranges and we'd never seen blood oranges before! We didn't find out till after we were on land that one cigarette would have been planted for the oranges. What did we know? We enjoyed the blood oranges anyhow.

The war had moved north toward Rome - that's where we formed the 442nd Regiment with three battalions: the 100th was the first and we, the second and third battalions were going into combat for the first time.

That very first day, we were heading pretty much into a flat area with hills on the side. And it was all quiet. And we were just kind of moving along slowly. All of a sudden, the Germans started firing from the left side, and from the right side, and shot mortars to where we were in the middle. Immediately our company commander was killed.

I could remember seeing specks of dust flying in the dirt coming toward me and wondering, "That's funny. I see specks but I don't see any bullets." All of a sudden I heard "bbbrrrrrr" right over my head! That's a German burp gun! Our submachine gun goes - tut, tut, tut, tut. The German burp gun goes, "brrrrrrr". We'd never seen a burp gun before! Hundreds of rounds are going. Luckily for me, the barrel shot the bullets right over me. And you can hear the bullets - "pop pop pop!"

Lieutenant Zukowski had us in the wrong position. And now, he got killed! Sergeant Moreta took over, and we moved behind a little ridge. The battalion commander could see what was happening. He ordered the 100th Battalion to come over. And the 100th got behind the Germans. I don't know how many they killed: two, three hundred. We captured a number of

vehicles, over 50 German prisoners. So even though we had a huge loss in manpower, the battle itself was very successful one. But that's how we started combat.

Within that roughly two months' time, we were on the front line maybe three or four times and, of course, off the frontline just as often. You can't go more than a week: You never change clothes, you never eat hot food, you're eating canned C-rations or packaged K-rations, and you're hoping to get water. If they can't bring water up to you every night, you fill your canteen with dirty water, if there's a stream or something - they used to give us tablets when we had to use stagnant water. You just need liquid.

Even at night, you sleep maybe an hour! You're being shot at. We do it to them - don't want them asleep either. That's when the Reserves bring up food, ammunition, and water and they can carry their wounded back. But sometimes, it can't be done - you're pinned down, maybe. All you can do is go forward with whatever you have.

Before we got into combat, we're not really worried about what's going to happen. But once we actually can see people getting wounded and the horrors of what's happening when people are killing each other, your mindset changes. You're more protective of each other: your squad, your platoon, your company. Outside of that, very seldom do you meet somebody you really know. But you know that they're to protect you, and you're there to protect them.

We're charging, running, maneuvering to position and covering whoever's in front, shooting to make sure that we keep the Germans from spotting our men that are going forward. They're retreating, so they've had time to dig foxholes, they can always occupy the higher location, shooting down. We're successful most of the time. But that's why our casualties were so high. You can't advance if you're sitting still.

We did manage to move all the way up past the Arno River through Florence over to the coast where the 442nd was sent to join the 36 Division to begin the invasion of southern France.

The battle in Normandy was taking such a huge toll that we didn't have very much resistance when we landed in France. We're only about 45 miles from the German border. The main city in that area was called Bruyères. That was our objective: Take the city of Bruyères.

In northern Italy, it was summertime; we were in open territory. In France, a completely different situation: This is close to the middle of October. Most of the homes are down the bottom and there were hills on both sides covered with very thick forest because forestry was one of their main industries of that area. As we're heading in the flat area, like we did in Italy, it started to rain and it's getting cold...

The shots came from the hillsides. We had to suddenly climb the mountain into the forests. It was an entirely different type of fighting. We were having to go tree to tree to root out the Germans. You had to look for the uniform; what the helmet looked like. You never knew who was out there - your man or the enemy. Not only that, the Germans didn't have Air Force because the Americans had pretty much wiped them out. But they had the anti-aircraft gun capable of shooting down airplanes. The Germans used that weapon on the infantry! Everything is coming down like an umbrella; the explosion cuts tree limbs, branches, fragments - besides the shrapnel! - and there's no way to hide. Men would get crushed by a tree limb three/four hundred pounds coming straight down on top of them... Really a horrible experience.

At night, the cooks, the band members - whoever was available - would have to carry a five gallon can of water by foot; that is really heavy! Ammunition and water - food was secondary - and medical supplies, to help our medics that are on the front line. As they come up - slip-sliding, if it's muddy and wet - you'd bring two or three men off the line, replace them, bring them back, even if it's only for half an hour or 15 minutes. And maybe they can get some food, water for their canteen, maybe ammunition. And then they're ready to circulate back to the front. And you keep rotating the men.

More than half of our men were lost fighting through the forest to take over the city of Bruyères and the rail line that went through there.

**Host Jacqueline Raposo:** Securing the railway was a huge win: it cut the main support line for the German front and allowed the Allies to then move troops, food, and supplies. But in the eight days it took to capture Bruyères and neighboring Biffontaine, veterans remember the

desperate Germans firing at their wounded men as medics removed them from the field. It would end as one of the costliest battles of World War Two.

When we return, we hear how the 442nd fueled up after this long fight. Stay with us.

## COMMERCIAL

**Host Jacqueline Raposo:** You are listening to Service: Veteran Stories of Hunger and War from iHeartRadio. I'm Jacqueline Raposo.

In our episode with Air Corps veteran Harold Bud Long, we heard how General Patton wanted to be the first to have his troops cross the line into Germany; a line Hitler was holding at all costs. Lawson's General Dahlquist had the same goal. Let's go back with Lawson to that front line, in late autumn of 1944.

**Lawson Ichiro Sakai:** We came off the line on October 23. Grimy! Hadn't had a shower for a week or two. They had showers, trunks and naked heat the water. They had a big bar of light, so they were proud. They wipe the paint right off your car so you get cleaned up and you get a new set of clothing. They had a mess set up. Open, of course! But hot stoves, hot food - the first hot food you've had for eight or 10 days.

The next day, we were ordered to gear up to go back again.

Wait a minute - we just came off the front line!

The 1st Battalion of the 141st regiment had been surrounded by Germans. The 36th Division had been unable to reach them. We had just finished eight days of huge battle. "An order is an order. So we obey."

On October 25, we start up again - same place that we came out of. It's raining. Miserable. "Here we go." The trapped battalion is about five miles farther out.

October 27. My 21st birthday. Now, I was feeling pretty good about that. We were making an attack. All of a sudden, a German popped up and shot me pointblank!

But he missed.

I just went - "tut, tut, tut" - hit him in the head. When his helmet off, it was a 14 or 15-year-old boy. He must have been more scared than I was.

We're all scared. You never know when the next bullet or the next shrapnel's gonna hit you.

The next morning at daybreak: we're approaching where the trapped men are. They're running out of food and ammunition! We have to get to them! The Germans must have suspected something - they started shelling! Tree bursts, all around us, nobody could move! You tried to hide as much as you could behind a tree or a rock...

That's when a large piece of shrapnel hit me in the back and that red hot piece of metal went sideways right into my ribs and stayed there. It just hurt so much. Burning, painful, and you can't breathe. Your body curls up into a ball... I don't remember anything. I don't know when the medic got to me. He must have determined that it could save my life, 'cause he shot me full of morphine.

It took five days for the 442nd to go through the five miles of forest, push the Germans back, and finally reach the trapped men. They had no medical supplies, no food, no water. They had so little ammunition, they formed a circle: no matter which direction the Germans are coming from, they were going to make a last stand.

There were 211 men left. 200 of our men were killed through that rescue.

General Dahlquist's order to the 442nd was, "Don't stop! Keep chasing the Germans!"

They didn't know that it was a 442nd that rescued them.

When the military press made the statement - "The Lost Battalion Has Been Rescued!" - they never mentioned the 442nd.

None of us really thought anyone return home alive. Most of our families were prisoners of war, guarded by American soldiers with the machine guns pointed in at them. So what do we do to remove that situation? We needed to let the government know that we may look like the enemy, but we were true Americans and we wanted to fight to this country.

When I woke up, I was on a hospital train going to the American hospital in Dijon for surgery. It took about two months of recovery and I was able to go back and join my company at the border between Italy and France - the 442nd was sent back down to preterm that area. Where we were, inside this concrete for that at the top, it was very steep, and the jeeps couldn't get up there. Some of the supplies had to be brought in by donkey: water, K-rations and C rations. Sometimes they could bring hot food up. Not very often. If you were down in the cities - Nice, Cannes - you were probably staying in a hotel eating hot food three times a day. Just our luck to be up there.

After the war was over, we could get passes into town. Occasionally, you would run into a Chinese restaurant. Of course, the boys really would head for that because you'd get rice. It was very hard to get enough rice for our men because everybody wanted rice! In the rations, there were mostly potatoes, in the U.S. Army. Wherever the cooks could, they would trade our potatoes for other groups' rice. Naturally, we didn't have much Japanese-style food. Our most popular food might have been fried shrimp or maybe hamburgers and hot dogs. We'd get a few of those in the army mess. It wasn't too bad.

My parents, we never corresponded during the war. I didn't see them for almost four years. They didn't write English, so they never wrote a letter to me. And when I did write a letter, it was to my sister who was in the concentration camps.

My sister had married doctor from Hawaii, and she was pregnant with her first child. Her husband was sent to a concentration camp in Potson, Arizona. The doctors and nurses said, "We'll hide her." They kept her hidden in the hospital for two months before she gave birth. Of

course, the birth is recorded. A week after the trial was born, the authorities found out. She was sent to join her husband.

The war ended in May, and around July, I was assigned to go to Rome and become a Second Lieutenant at the Army training school. I told Captain Burns, "The war is over and I want to go home. Do everything you can to get me out of here." July, August, September, October... Finally, I get a call that I should get ready to go.

I finally arrived back at Newport News, Virginia the third week of November. They put me on a train and I had a duffel bag and eventually I finally got to Fort MacArthur and Los Angeles. I don't remember how I got home - I knew where my home was, I assumed my parents were living there. I went to the front door, rang the bell and sure enough, my aunt answered the door! I was home and they were home. I was finally discharged on December 11. That's when they said, "Take off your uniform. You're a civilian now. Get out of here."

**Host Jacqueline Raposo:** Completing seven major campaigns, the 442nd casualties totaled 9,486 - that's 50 percent of those total who would serve under the 442 from 1943 through 1946. And they're often called the Purple Heart Battalion for their sacrifice. To this day, the forty second is also the most decorated unit in military history. Upon their return home, President Truman remarked the Nisei fought "not only the enemy but prejudice." Yet their fight continued.

The interred Japanese had been paid one quarter of what other farmhands were paid and not nearly what they had taken in as farm owners. At the Tool Lake Camp, those who had refused to work were fined. At Manzanar, botanists and chemists who had made scientific advancements for the Allied cause would not receive public recognition.

It's been estimated their incarceration lost the Japanese Americans up to 4 billion dollars by today's values. By 1960, Japanese American farmers would number only a quarter of what they had pre-war. And it wasn't until 1988 that President Reagan signed legislation offering each survivor an apology and twenty thousand dollars in compensation.

And Lawson's family? His parents had to evict the flower grower they had left using their property because he refused to give it back upon their return. His uncle requested repatriation and returned to Japan.

Lawson went to Pepperdine University and worked in farming and the shipping of agriculture before he opened a travel agency which he sold after 20 years, so to retire in 1991. He lives in Northern California to this day. You can hear more of his story - like how Lawson became his legal name and how combat experience led to PTSD - in our episode "Dad, I Can't Talk About It," and in clips on our social media - we're @servicepodcast on Instagram and Facebook.

Thank you to the Japanese American Veterans Association for connecting us with Lawson for this episode. I highly urge you to check out Lawsons page at [servicepodcast.org](http://servicepodcast.org) to learn more about the Japanese American contribution to farming and the frontlines.

In our next episode, we head back to the Pacific with Navy Lieutenant Robert Hanson, exploring how income affected how we lived, served, and ate during this time. Service is a production of iHeartRadio. This episode was produced and edited by me, Jacqueline Raposo. Colby Macdonald and Andrew Stelzer engineered our interviews with Lawson. Gabrielle Collins is our supervising producer, Christopher Hassiotis, our Executive Producer. Thank you for listening and thank you to those serving and those who have served.