

Kisuke "Richard" Kusdaka Story

By Randall Kusaka, *Puka Puka Parade*, April 2021. No. 4/2021

(PPP Editor's Note: The Club received an email from RANDALL KUSAKA, the son of the late 100th veteran KISUKE "RICHARD" KUSAKA who was a member of Able Company. To honor his dad's 100th birthday in 2019 [Richard passed away in 2000], Randall put together a booklet about his father's life based on the stories that Richard told him in response to Randall's many childhood questions about Richard's wartime experience and how his father lost his leg.

Thank you Randall for the great memories. Unfortunately, due to space, I couldn't include the entire article in the print version of the April *Puka Puka Parade*.)

Kisuke Kusaka was born into a family of sugar cane plantation laborers. His father, KIICHIRO, and paternal grandfather, OKISABURO, worked in the fields around Kalaoa Camp, near Papaikou on the Big Island.

He was 12 when he started part-time work at the plantation to help feed the growing family. He dropped out of English school after the eighth grade for full-time plantation work. He continued Japanese schooling for two more years before dropping out. Some of his English school teachers could not pronounce his name, so each gave him a haole name. One year he was called Paul. Another year he was Richard, after English King Richard the Lionhearted. He liked Richard and used it when he was an adult. He identified himself as Richard K. Kusaka or KISUKE R. KUSAKA.

He saw no future as a plantation laborer, so in 1939 he ran away from his Big Island home for what had to be a better life in Honolulu. He worked short stints at Pearl Harbor and a bakery in Palama. His Army discharge paper listed his prior civilian occupation as "plumber."

His civilian life ended when he was drafted into the Army on November 14, 1941. He was at Schofield Barracks when Japanese warplanes attacked Oahu on December 7, 1941. He put on his uniform and rushed to report for duty, but when the haole soldiers looked at his face and name, they arrested him and locked him in the stockade, where he was joined by other Japanese American soldiers.

One day, soldiers drove him and other Japanese American soldiers to Waimanalo, where they were ordered to look out for Japanese ships. The military feared the Japanese would return to invade Oahu. They were given rifles but no bullets. He said the soldiers feared the Japanese Americans would shoot them in the back.

If they saw the invading fleet, they were to contact a command post at the Pali lookout. Where's the walkie talkie, one of them asked. The answer was they wouldn't get one. The authorities didn't want them using any radio equipment to contact the enemy. So how were they supposed to warn the command post? The answer: Send a runner.

Imagine, the Japanese invading Oahu and someone having to run from Waimanalo up to the Pali lookout. That's how ridiculous it was for them at that time, he said.

In 1942, he and other Japanese American soldiers formed the 100th Infantry Battalion, the famed "One Puka Puka" whose battlefield courage, heroism and sacrifices earned the nickname "Purple Heart Battalion.

"He was injured three times while fighting in Europe. The first time, shrapnel hit the bridge of his nose and knocked him to the ground. When he opened his eyes, he was shocked to find he could not see. For a moment he feared the shrapnel blinded him, but he quickly realized blood covered his eyes. After wiping away the blood, he was relieved he could see.

The second injury was a minor wound to his left leg on November 30, 1943, near Scapoli, Italy.

The third injury occurred when he stepped on a landmine about a month before Germany surrendered in 1945. After being drafted into the Army before the war started, after going through hell all those years and surviving relatively uninjured, it was the cruelest of fates for him to step on a landmine just a month before the war ended.

He was his squad's point man. Prior to that campaign, his commanding officer told him that he had spent enough time at point and it was time for someone else to take that hazardous position. He refused to give it up, because a new guy wouldn't have the experience he had and could get hurt or killed.

On April 6, his squad was sitting on a rise in the vicinity of Seravezza, Italy, and waiting for orders to move out. He sent a runner to find their lieutenant, but the runner returned after failing to find him.

Looking down the slope, he could see other squads bunching up behind his. It was like a traffic jam, and dangerous for the soldiers who were potential sitting ducks. He decided they had to move. He used his bayonet to probe the ground in front of him to make sure it was clear. He looked back at his squad, raised his hand, barked "Let's go!" and took a step forward.

Boom!

When he opened his eyes, someone was tying a tourniquet around his mangled left leg. He told them to remove his grenades. He was surprised the explosion had not set them off. Someone picked him up and ran him back to the medical area.

Where was the landmine? After all, he had used the bayonet to make sure the ground was safe. He extended his arm, made the probing motion, and said, "It was under my elbow."

He shared other stories of his wartime experiences:

After an exhausting day of fighting, he and other Able Company soldiers started digging fox holes in the frozen ground. He and his friend next to him managed to scrape out shallow holes.

The breaking light of dawn woke him up. He was cold and hungry, his bones felt frozen in place and his muscles ached from a night of constant shivering. He turned to the fox hole next to his and called out to his friend, who was sitting upright, his chin resting on his chest, his eyes closed.

He called his name, but instinctively knew there would be no response. He touched the body and it was frozen stiff. Of the many deaths he witnessed, this one still gave him chills decades later.

He said that wartime soldiers had few personal items they carried in the field from battle to battle. Soldiers carried Zippo lighters, letters from home, Bibles, photographs and other small personal objects, but he possessed something few had: a fountain pen.

After a hard-fought firefight, a wounded friend called his name. He knelt by his buddy's side as a medic patched his wounds. The friend asked to borrow his pen because he wanted to write a letter to his mother back in Honolulu. He promised that after he recovered he would find him and return it.

He was reluctant to part with his pen because it was his cherished connection to his civilian life and he didn't know where or when he would find another. But this was his friend and for his friend's mother, so he took it out of his pocket and placed it in the man's and. His friend smiled and promised again he would give it back.

But fate intervened. He stepped on a landmine a month before the European War ended. He went to a hospital in Michigan, where he stayed a year, and transferred to another hospital for six months of rehabilitation. He returned to Honolulu and was discharged at Tripler Hospital in 1947.

He remembered the friend who had his pen. The friend had probably recovered from his wounds and might be living at his family home. He didn't blame him for not returning the pen because war made such promises hard to keep. He found the friend's address and decided to visit.

He walked up to the man's house. Behind the fence an elderly woman tended her flowers. He caught her attention and, speaking Japanese, asked if his friend was living there.

The woman looked quizzically at him and questioned why he was asking for her son. He introduced himself and said he was a friend from the Army.

Tears came to the woman's eyes and she beckoned him to enter her home. She said nothing as she led him into the living room toward the family shrine. Her tears made him suspect his friend had not survived. The friend's photograph in front of the shrine confirmed it.

And in front of the photograph, on a small wooden stand, was his fountain pen.

The mother said her son's last letter mentioned how he borrowed a fountain pen from his buddy, Kisuke Kusaka, to write to her. He had promised to return it after his wounds healed. So when she found the pen among his possessions returned to her, she put it in an honored place awaiting the day she could fulfill that promise.

Although it was one of the saddest days of his life, he felt some joy that his pen allowed the man to write a final note to his mother.

While he willingly shared some wartime stories, other stories upset him. For example, when asked how many men he killed, he reacted with an ice-cold glare, but after a moment, he answered he killed seven men. There might have been an eighth, but the soldier fell off a cliff and he could not see the body to confirm the kill.

He was also upset by how movies and television programs portrayed fighting soldiers. He grumbled that he never bit down on a grenade pin to pull it out. He used a plier to remove the pin and then taped the handle in place. 1-2-3...tear off the tape, flick off the handle and throw the grenade.

He shook his head when he saw movie soldiers brace their Browning Automatic Rifle on their hip to shoot as they ran across a town square. He said not only was it difficult to aim that way, the recoil would injure their hip and even break their hip bones.

He was awarded Purple Heart Medals for his second and third injuries. His other decorations included the Good Conduct Medal, World War II Victory Medal, six Battle Stars, Asiatic-Pacific Theater Ribbon, and European-African-Middle Eastern Theater Ribbon.

He died in 2000 and his ashes are interred at the Hawaii State Veterans Cemetery in Kaneohe. He was 80 years old, just a little more than four months short of his 81st birthday. 30