

MASARU TAIRA

WWII

Private

Company L, 3rd Battalion

442nd Regimental Combat Team

U.S. Army

Dec. 28, 1924 – July 4, 1944

Honolulu, Hawaii



Private Masaru Taira was the second son of Kame and Kamado Taira of Honolulu, Hawaii. The Tairas – from Oroku, Okinawa -- owned Pacific Bakery alongside a small store with a soda fountain on King Street in Honolulu. After Pearl Harbor was bombed, Masaru and his four brothers and six sisters helped their parents in continuing to operate the bakery amid daily blackouts and restrictions.

By early 1943, Masaru was a senior at Farrington High School when he learned of the U.S. Army's call for volunteers for the 442nd. He hurried home over the lunch period to consult Edith, one of his older sisters. Knowing that the family's eldest son, Wilfred, had already planned to enlist, Edith tried to dissuade Masaru. But Masaru made up his mind to sign up for the Army too.

Masaru and Wilfred were sent, with other Nisei, to basic training in Camp Shelby, Miss., but once there the two brothers rarely were able to see one another. As training ended in 1944, Masaru reached out to Masako, another one of his sisters. With a hint of the coming deployment to the frontlines in Europe, he tucked in his Social Security card and other documents along with his class ring. "It fits perfectly and I would like to keep it but I think it's better if I send it home," he mused. "You might not understand why, but I hope you will put it away till it's all over." Shortly afterwards, Masaru tried to paint an optimistic picture as the troop-laden ship neared Italy: "We will be in our foxholes sometime in the near future. This boat ride is a cinch, the only thing is it's too long. Tell Mom not to worry too much. I am in good health and as I always say, 'I never felt better in my life.'"

Masaru knew of the perils ahead. So did his brother Wilfred, now a 442nd medic. Assigned to the 3rd Battalion, Company L, Masaru and his fellow 442nd soldiers were joined with the 100th Battalion in the Allied campaign that would take them from Rome to the Arno River. On July 4th, during the grinding battle to capture Hill 140 -- a strategic point leading to the key port city of Livorno -- Company L was shelled by German artillery fire. Masaru was killed in the barrage. He was just 19 years old.

(Photo: Wilfred at his brother Masaru's temporary grave in Follonica, Italy; inset is a photo of Masaru. His remains were later sent home for burial in Honolulu.)

Wilfred, who would go on to be awarded the Silver Star and Bronze Star Medals for bravery in combat, never talked about what happened to his younger brother. In the book "Silent Valor: the Story of the 442nd Medics," Wilfred would say only that he and Masaru had joined the 442nd to "prove their loyalty."



This biography, by Masaru's niece Linda Taira, is adapted from an essay she wrote that was published by USA Today on Independence Day in 2021.