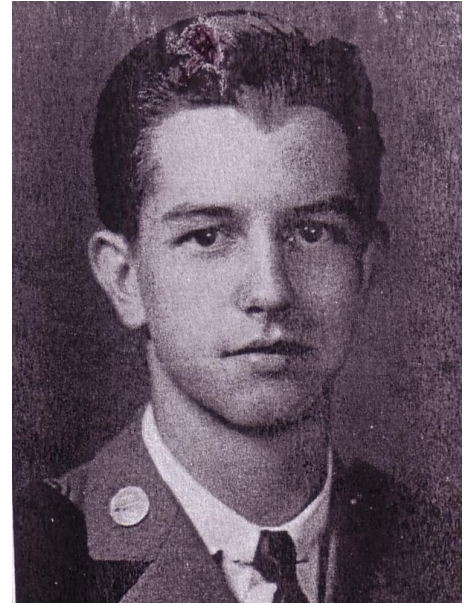


The Purple Heart Battalion

Following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, General Delos Emmons, the military governor of the Hawaii Territory, supported placing Japanese-Americans in internment camps and classifying them as enemy aliens. But Emmons recognized that many among Hawaii's Nisei, the American-born children of Japanese immigrants, wanted a chance to prove their loyalty to the United States through military service. An effort was mounted to organize some 2,000 Japanese-American soldiers into a fighting force to be sent to Africa or Europe to fight the Germans and Italians, but the War Department initially turned down the request. Then in June 1942, more than 1,400 Nisei serving in the Hawaii National Guard had their weapons confiscated and were ordered aboard a US Army transport ship bound for Oakland, California. Upon arrival, the men were designated the 100th Infantry Battalion. Given the social attitudes of the day, the Nisei of the 100th felt they had something to prove.



Cloudy Gray Conner, Jr. of Lamar was another soldier with something to prove. Conner was a 1937 graduate of Clemson College who had posted an unremarkable record as a general science major. According to one account, Conner had elected to forgo participation in ROTC as an upper classman because he was judged too short to qualify for an Army commission.

Following graduation, Conner married Anza Willeford of Florence. He took a job teaching school and also worked as a railroad telegraph operator. Despite his alleged lack of stature and his not pursuing a commission, Conner was called to active duty in October 1941.

Conner trained at Fort Jackson in Columbia, then at Camp Wheeler, Georgia and Camp Clay, Louisiana before being ordered overseas in September of 1943. He was assigned to D Company of the 100th Infantry Battalion which was committed to action in Italy as part of the 34th Infantry Division. The 34th was a veteran of the bitter fighting in North Africa. By the winter of 1944, it was slugging away as part of General Mark Clark's Fifth Army attempting to break through the heavily fortified Bernhardt Line of German positions in central Italy. In harsh winter conditions, Clark's forces were battling to



*The Benedictine Abbey atop Monte Cassino in February 1944.
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capture Highway 6, the main route through the Liri Valley leading to Rome. But Clark couldn't control the valley or the highway without first wresting from the Germans key high ground: Monte Cassio. Dominating the heights was a Benedictine monastery with structures dating back to the Sixth Century. To knock the Germans off of Monte Cassino, Clark called on the 34th Infantry Division, including the 100th Infantry Battalion.

On January 30, the 34th managed to cross the north-south running Rapido River and seize ground north of Cassino, prompting Clark to predict that Cassio would fall "very soon." But the uphill fighting, in snow and freezing weather, crept forward. During the first two weeks in February, the division made repeated attempts to dislodge the Germans from Monte Cassino. Historian Rick Atkinson writes that "Hills were won then lost, then won and lost again," as the fighting raged back and forth. "Each yard, whether won or lost pared away American strength."

Despite coming within "100 meters of success," the 34th eventually spent its strength. On February 12, Lieutenant Conner was killed by a sniper's bullet to the head. The 34th was relieved by a British Indian division the following day. Casualties among the men of the 100th were so high—one forty-man platoon was down to just five men—that reporters dubbed the 100th the "Purple Heart Battalion." The Nisei had indeed proved something: their commitment to the United States and to the freedom even then being denied to many of their family members in stateside internment camps. And Cloudy Grey Conner had proved his ability as a combat officer leading loyal Americans in battle.

Lieutenant Conner, like so many others in his battalion, was awarded the Purple Heart. He was survived by his wife, his mother, a sister, and a brother. After the war, his body was returned to Lamar and buried in the Baptist Church Cemetery.



See also *Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943-1944* by Rick Atkinson, 2007.