



Amazing Montanans—Biography

George Oiye

[pronounced -oi- as in boil and -ye- with a long a sound, such as in hay]

Most pictures of George Oiye show him smiling. He loved to live his life having fun, no matter what the situation - even during his first military training. Prankster George and a friend caught and dangled a tarantula from a string above a bald-headed commander's bed while he was sleeping! The commander was bitten upon awaking, but did not become deathly ill, and somehow George and his good friend "Sus" escaped severe punishment.

Born February 19, 1922, to Japanese immigrants Tom and Taka Oiye who worked as miners near Basin, George grew up in Logan and Three Forks when the family moved there so that George's father could work in the nearby cement plant. The family also bought a small farm and raised vegetables. The Oiye's expected their children to work hard, do well in school, and get along well with everyone. George met their expectations everywhere. Not only did he excel academically, he was extremely well liked by his classmates, loved to fish and hunt (becoming a good shot with a rifle), and quarter-backed the Three Forks Wolves six-man football team in 1939 to a division title, undefeated.

George Oiye, a gifted engineering student at Montana State College (now MSU) responded the same way thousands of his fellow Montanans did after the December 7, 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor - he immediately tried to enlist in the military and serve his country. He specifically wanted to serve in the Army Air Corps. Even though he



COURTESY OF VANESSA PALLISTER

George Oiye

was healthy, strong, and intelligent, the military looked upon him with suspicion and distrust because of his ancestry. He was rejected from service based on the fact that he was a second generation Japanese American. Disappointed but not defeated, George continued on in college, maintaining high grades. He also continued to inform as many people as possible that he still wanted an opportunity to serve his country.

Finally in 1943, two of his college professors appeared in front of the Adjutant General of the Army Air Corps, and defended George's

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right as an American citizen to enlist. He was told that he had to pass a physical examination and produce five letters of commendation (formal statements of praise) from prominent citizens, both easily done. But his goal of being a member of the Army Air Corps was never accomplished. By this time in the war, President Roosevelt had established a special military fighting force – the 442nd Regimental Combat Team – made up entirely of Japanese Americans (also called Nisei). Much to his dismay, he was sent to join a field artillery battalion as part of this unique unit. Growing up, George avoided his identity as a Japanese-American. Now, he was immersed in this identity. He learned more than he had ever known before about being Japanese-American and found strength and pride. His group trained twice as long as other groups because the military was not sure where the 442nd should be used in the war. When they were finally sent to fight in Italy and then on to France and into Germany, they were extremely well-trained, excellent sharpshooters, in top physical condition, and with the motto “go for broke” - all qualities that helped them become the most decorated fighting unit of its size in American history.

George quickly rose into positions of leadership, demonstrating kinship with his fellow soldiers, courage and calm, and always making wise decisions even while under devastating fighting conditions and often close to death. He observed and remembered, as best he could, the local people and the effects of war upon them. He recalls a French

woman standing out in the street during a battle between German and American soldiers. She was sweeping rubble from the street in a vain attempt to cope with war’s reality. He remembers how hard it was to shoot at the young 16 and 17-year old German soldiers. Finally, George’s unit helped liberate some of the Nazi concentration camps - a task that made him even more keenly aware of how horrible war could be. By the end of duty, the 442nd had suffered the loss of half of its soldiers.

During WWII the Oiye family also endured racism - George’s father, Tom, lost his job at the cement plant, and one of George’s sisters and her husband, residents of California, were placed in a Japanese detention center.

After WWII, back home in Montana, George realized that he was not quite ready to go back to college. He needed time to adjust from his war experiences. He worked as a farmer and a railroad hand for a bit, and then moved to California in 1948 where he graduated from college and pursued a career in the aeronautics field. He married Mary Sumie Toyoda, a Japanese-American woman. They raised two children. Although George and his wife still live in California, George stays in close contact with his Missouri Headwaters roots. He comes home almost every summer to fish. . His experience with his fellow Nisei soldiers in WWII led him to a lifelong commitment to preserving their story, sharing their proud service to the US, and celebrating his ancestry.