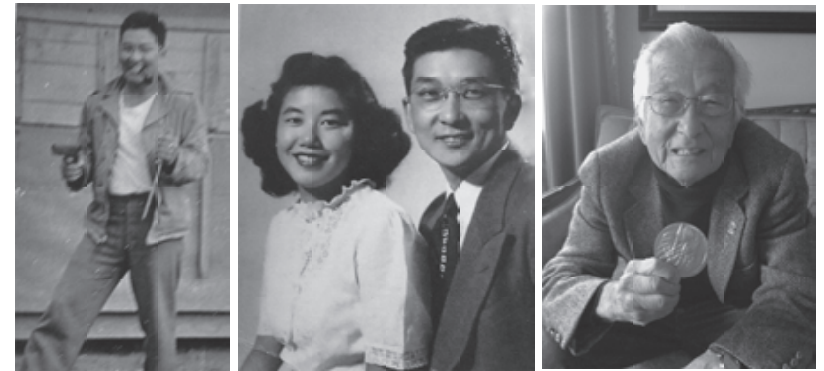


*“I Just Decided to Live That Way”*

## **SUSUMU ITO**

Born 1919 – Retired 1991



*Sus at Camp Shelby, with Minnie on their wedding day, and with the Congressional Gold Medal.*

**Sus is a retired Harvard Medical School professor emeritus who still spends large parts of his days in a laboratory working with high-tech microscopes to view cell specimens. He’s been associated with the Harvard Medical School Anatomy Department since 1961. His research centered on the study of the gastrointestinal system, and for his efforts he became world renowned.**

**Before his career as a research biologist, Sus was a forward artillery observer and a lieutenant in the all Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat Team, which consisted of a regiment of infantry, a battalion of field artillery, a company of combat**

**engineers, and various support units. The 442nd received more awards than any military unit of its size and length of service in US history. In October 1944, Sus participated in the rescue of the Texas Lost Battalion in the Vosges Mountains of France. Two hundred and thirty men were surrounded and under siege by German forces. Two early assaults on the Germans were turned back. The third attempt was led by the 442nd. In five days of battle, the 442nd suffered over eight hundred casualties. On the fifth day, two infantry companies, Sus, and his three crew members were ordered to charge the hill. This charge has become known as “The Banzai Charge.” Of the 371 men who went up the hill, all but twenty-five were killed or wounded. Sus was one of the uninjured. For its service, the 442nd earned the nickname “The Purple Heart Battalion.”**

**A Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian US medal, was voted on by the House of Representatives and the Senate, and awarded in a November 2011 ceremony at the Capitol Building. House Speaker John Boehner presented the award to representatives of the 100th Infantry Battalion, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, and the Military Intelligence Service. It was followed by local ceremonies in California, Hawaii, and other states. Sus was chosen to receive the medal for the 442nd. Minnie, his wife of sixty-six years, attended.**

**M**y memory is good but not perfect. About a year ago, my wife and I went to a ceremony in Washington. Congress gave my old regiment a medal for our role in a rescue mission that took place in 1944. The ceremony made some papers and, when I came home, some of my friends had heard about it. They wanted me to tell them all about the mission. I had to apologize—to explain that I don’t have any memory of it. Well, I remember certain things about it—the atmosphere of it, sensations that I experienced and that I still associate with that time. And, of course, I’m familiar with historical accounts

of what happened. The story is that, on the last day of the mission, my fellow soldiers and I—all of us Japanese Americans—made a cry of “banzai,” surged through the German lines, and rescued a group of trapped soldiers. I have no recollection of any of that, none. And, as I said, I have a good memory. I remember so much so clearly—so much about the war and about my life. It’s strange. That’s how the mind works, I suppose.

I had a very happy childhood. My parents started out as farmers, and so I grew up mostly in the country, in the San Joaquin Valley, which is very fertile land. My father and mother had both left Japan for California. My father arrived first. He was from Hiroshima and from a prominent farming family. As the oldest son, he stood to inherit the whole operation. He gave it all up, thinking he could do even better in America. A few years later, my mother arrived. Theirs was an arranged marriage, which was customary.

Farming was more difficult than they had anticipated. My parents made four or five attempts at it, always in and around Stockton. They were tenant farmers. The setup was simple. My father managed the farming, which involved thirty or forty field hands, and my mother managed everything else—keeping the place running, making three meals a day for the family and for all of the hands. It wasn’t easy. We all lived together in tarpaper shacks, with no electricity and no privies. Still, I was happy. I spent a lot of time outdoors, fishing and hunting and running around.

Because my parents had difficulty establishing themselves as farmers, we moved around a good deal. I attended five elementary schools, I think—one of which was segregated. All my classmates were Asian. In most cases, a single teacher taught eight grades of students at the same time, with all of the students cramped into a run-down, one-room schoolhouse. By third grade, I’d fallen behind. My teacher decided to hold me back and sent word of her decision to my mother. Now, my mother was an optimistic, aggressive woman, and she knew that I was not unintelligent. So she decided to pay my teacher a visit—and

also to offer her a bribe. She gave her a pair of silk stockings and a bar of chocolate. And it worked, by God. She passed me. From that day on, I always kept up.

At sixteen, I finished high school and was admitted to the University of California at Berkeley. I wanted to go, but my parents had doubts. At the time, because of segregation and discrimination, there were relatively few professional opportunities for Japanese Americans. My parents were uncertain of the value of a university education. They thought it might prove to be a disadvantage. I'd be locked out of professional positions for being Asian, and locked out of skilled labor for lacking the necessary training. So, instead of sending me to Berkeley, they sent me to a school for auto mechanics. This wasn't as strange as it may sound. You have to understand it from their perspective. They'd struggled for so many years. First, they hadn't been able to make it as farmers. Then, they were forced to work on someone else's farm, helping with cooking and the upkeep. Later, they scraped together enough money to open a traditional Japanese bathhouse, which they made a success by force of will. Every day, they started working at five and ended at midnight. They wanted something better for me. I think they dreamed that, one day, I might own my own service station and live happily ever after.

Also, I was mechanically inclined—always taking things apart and putting them back together. I did want to go to college, of course, but I was young and unsure of myself. So I took my parents' advice and went to mechanic's school. I finished my training in about a year and then spent a few years working different jobs around the Bay Area—at a frame shop in San Francisco, at a service station in Stockton, at a Ford dealership in Lodi.

In late 1940, I turned twenty-one. One month later, I was drafted into the army. That was exciting. I'd never left the state of California. Anything further than a hundred miles from Stockton was an adventure. The army represented a chance to experience a new kind of life.

In Japanese culture, soldiers are very much admired. After my friends and I were drafted, the Japanese community in Stockton

arranged a large, elaborate banquet in our honor. All the draftees sat together at a table on a makeshift stage. Throughout the night, we were given little envelopes filled with cash. Many people lined up to greet us and to give us these gifts and to wish us well. Many of them, I'd never met—many of them, I knew, had very little to give. In all, I received thirty-seven dollars that night. That impressed me and moved me greatly. It also frightened me, because the banquet took place on the night before our first physical. I'm flatfooted and nearsighted, and so I was worried that I wouldn't pass and that I'd be barred from service. I didn't want to fail and disappoint the entire community.

The next morning, my anxiety deepened. When my family and I arrived at the train station, it was thronged. Everyone who had been at the banquet was there, along with many more people. It was overwhelming. In fact, it was so crowded that, after that day, the station issued an order barring Japanese from the station during future deployments. Well, it took a long while to board the train, because everyone wanted to wish me and the other draftees good luck. And the ride seemed to last forever, because all the other draftees were talking, saying how excited they were. Meanwhile, I was rehearsing what I would say to the army when they found out about my flatfeet: "I'll do all the marches. I'll do everything you need me to do." At last, we arrived and were directed to our physicals. I was probably shaking by the time my turn came. First, the doctor asked me to read a test chart, with and without my glasses. Next, he asked me a few questions about my eyesight and inspected my eyes. And then, just like that, it was over. I couldn't believe it. He never even looked at my feet.

I was inducted into the army in February 1941. At first, I was thrilled. Soon, however, I discovered that in many ways army life isn't too different from civilian life. My first assignment was to a maintenance shop where I repaired cars and trucks. We were stationed near Riverside, in a semi-integrated camp with a population of about eighty thousand. Now, I was living and working with Asians, Whites, and Latinos, although Blacks were still segregated. I got along well

with everyone. I felt accepted by everyone. I was enjoying myself. I had a car and, when I was off duty, I could drive home to Stockton, or to Riverside, or to Los Angeles. Months passed like this. I settled into a routine. Army life began to seem as natural and as ordered as civilian life.

On Sunday, December 7, 1941, I was in my tent listening to the radio. I had a day pass, and I was getting ready to go see my girlfriend in Riverside. At about nine or ten, we heard that there was an attack on Pearl Harbor. At first, the details weren't entirely clear. Word got out that nobody was allowed to leave camp. My sergeant was a good guy, an old World War I vet. I can still picture him. Well, he didn't mind bending the rules. He told me to go ahead and use my day pass, and that if I were caught, to say that I hadn't heard the order to stay on the base. So, I left the camp and went into Riverside and spent the day with my girlfriend. It was a strange day, a sad day. We sat together and listened to the radio. We went to church. We walked around the city, which seemed empty. When I returned to camp, I was directed to report to headquarters. I thought that I was going to be punished for leaving, but that's not what happened.

Instead, they asked me to interrogate a group of local Japanese American leaders. The army had found them in Riverside and brought them to the camp. My commanding officers had been waiting for me all day. They wanted to see what I could get out of this group—if I could get anything in the way of military intelligence. I refused to do it. I didn't think it was appropriate. Of course, I was patriotic and completely supportive of the war effort, but interrogating Japanese American civilians who had just been picked up off the street wasn't my idea of fighting a war. I wanted to be a warrior, to go all-out for my country, to serve bravely and honorably. These interrogations didn't fit with that idea.

I had the same reaction to all the propaganda, which told us that we should all hate, hate the enemy. I didn't see that. I thought, *Those guys are just like us. They're fighting for their country and we're fighting*

*for ours.* Anyhow, that night I told my commanding officers that my Japanese was extremely limited; that I knew only a few words. This wasn't entirely true. My Japanese was not excellent, but I'd taken language lessons back in Stockton and, of course, my parents were native speakers. Anyhow, that day I was excused from having to participate in the interrogations. A few days later, however, I was asked to attend language training, which would have prepared me to conduct future interrogations. Again, I declined. They asked a few more times, but my position didn't change.

Three months after the attack, in March of 1942, my parents were directed to report to a local assembly center, allowed to take with them only what they could carry. Next, they were shipped to an internment camp in Arkansas that housed about ten thousand. There, they lived behind barbed-wire fences, in twenty-foot-by-twenty-foot cabins. The conditions were primitive. My father was sixty-four when he was interned. My mother was fifty. For more than a year, I couldn't visit them and they had no access to phones. The internment caused my parents to lose their little business. Everything they'd fought so many years to build just disappeared.

After Pearl Harbor, the army didn't seem to know what to do with me—really, with any of its Japanese American soldiers. We were asked to turn in our rifles. We were no longer allowed to have access to any kind of weapons. Our travel was restricted. I continued working as a mechanic, working in motor pools. This lasted for about a year and a half, until the spring of 1943, when I and some other Japanese American soldiers were shipped off to Camp Shelby, Mississippi. We went not knowing where we were going or what it was all about. When we arrived, we learned that we were joining a newly created regiment—the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, which was to be comprised of all Japanese Americans. I was happy about it. I thought it would be exciting and it was. This regiment was bound for the front, and it included men from all over the country. Many were from Hawaii. Some had been drafted directly out of internment camps. Most were assigned to

serve in the infantry division. Because of my mechanical background, I was assigned to the artillery battalion. This was fortunate, because many of the infantrymen in our regiment would later die in combat.

During our training in Camp Shelby, the army lifted the special restrictions that they'd imposed on us after Pearl Harbor. Now, we were training with weapons, and we were freer to travel. Because I was stationed in Mississippi, I was able to visit my parents in their camp in Arkansas. I remember driving there on a number of occasions. After so long, it was wonderful to see them. Also, during this period, we exchanged letters frequently. My mother wrote to me in Japanese. She would tell me how proud she was that I was in the army. She would also tell me to avoid any hazardous duty, to avoid it at all costs. She told me to go to jail, if necessary, and that I should become a conscientious objector rather than expose myself to danger. Her warning was always in my mind. I thought about it constantly.

One day, I learned that there was an opening in our battalion for the position of forward observer. A forward observer is part of the foremost advancing infantry, in the front lines scouting for targets, enemy troops, and installations. It's among the most dangerous positions available. In spite of that, and in spite of my mother's warning, I volunteered. Afterwards, I lied to her about it. I said that I didn't volunteer but that I was assigned. I hated to lie to her, of course, but I did want to be a forward observer. I wanted to see action. As a forward observer, I underwent special training, which was intense. But I knew what I would be in for, and so I worked like mad to prepare myself.

In May and June of 1944, our regiment sailed the Atlantic for Italy. We traveled in a huge convoy, turning and twisting to dodge German U-boats. After twenty-six days, we landed on the Adriatic Coast, in open territory. We took a train to Naples. From Naples, we took a landing craft to Anzio, which had already been taken. From Anzio, we went to Rome. At the time, Rome was an open city. It was undefended and seemed relatively untouched by the war. I remember when we rode through in our convoy very early in the morning, and there weren't too

many people out. The city seemed to go on and on, like we were riding through in slow motion. After Rome, we followed the coast north, which is where we had our first battle. I remember the first time we came near German forces, and the shells they fired at us. You could hear them before you could see them. In the distance, they sounded like freight trains.

Many people write about war. But I don't think it's possible to describe it. You cannot know it in the abstract. You can only feel it after you've been through it. Then, it becomes real, and it becomes a part of you. On one of our first days in battle, we walked into a trap and my friend was killed. He was someone that I'd known since I was boy in Stockton and that I'd been to school with. We took a wrong turn and we were attacked and then he was gone forever. With that, war became real.

In spite of the danger, I don't remember any situation where our group was reluctant to expose itself or to enter into combat. I kept thinking about my parents, and about my mother's warning. I didn't feel invulnerable. I wasn't. None of us were. But, all that time, it never occurred to me that I might be killed or wounded. Somehow, even in situations where there were tremendous casualties, where people were dying all around me, I held on to this positive attitude. To this day, I don't understand how I was able to maintain that feeling, that assurance. In every situation, no matter how dangerous, I always told myself: "I'm not going to be one of the victims."

As I explained, I do not remember much of the rescue of the "Lost Battalion." I can only remember certain things—sensations, the darkness of it, the darkness and the thickness of the forest, and that we were under constant fire. I still get goose bumps when I go into dark places. As I explained, I do not remember anything about the last day of the battle, or about our final charge. That's not uncommon, I don't think. That's how memory works.

Months later, we were advancing on the retreating German forces when we came on Dachau. This was in the spring of 1945. According



to the Holocaust Society, our group liberated a subcamp at Dachau. I cannot begin to explain what I saw there. I remember listening to a young prisoner of the camp—a teenage boy, emaciated, draped under that gray uniform. He spoke about what he had survived. He translated for the other survivors. I cannot describe it.

A few months later, I left the army. I was home in time for Christmas. Today, I wonder how I made it through and made it back. Sometimes, I think it was a matter of fate. My own decisions had nothing to do with it. I volunteered for dangerous duty. I put myself in dangerous situations. I don't know—it just happened—I just survived. I can't offer an explanation for why I'm here, more than seventy years later, talking about it. I was so fortunate. I don't know why I was so fortunate. Even now, so many years later, I'm still grateful for the time that's been given to me. I'm still trying to make the most of it.

I do know this, however. I don't regret any moment or experience that I had during the war, no matter how tense or awful it might have been. What I experienced and lived through is invaluable. It's a matter of pride for me, pride and satisfaction, that I lived through all that—that I got through it all and that I'm still here and intact and relatively happy.

My parents were released from internment after V-J Day, in August of 1945. Because they'd lost their home and their business, they had no place to go. They ended up in Cleveland, where some other family members had settled. I joined them in December. After the war, thousands of Japanese Americans settled in Cleveland. There was an active social life. One of my friends worked as a caretaker at a Jewish funeral home. The owner allowed him to have parties on occasion, right there in the funeral home, with all the corpses lying about. That's where I met my wife, Minnie. She was raised in Oakland and interned in Utah. (One hundred twenty thousand Japanese Americans were confined behind barbed wire in ten segregated camps for the duration of the war.) We started talking and found that we had many things in common. A year later, we married. We remain happily married to this day. She's wonderful. She's always been very patient and supportive and loving.

One of the last things I did after I left the army was to take an aptitude test. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I knew that I wasn't excited about going back to being a mechanic. Also, I knew that I didn't want to be a door-to-door salesman. I'd tried doing that. I only lasted a few weeks. It was horrible. I was horrible at it. Anyhow, the counselor reviewed my test results and suggested three professions. First, engineer, because of my mechanical background. Next, social worker, because he said that I had good people skills. Last, he suggested that I might try something related to science. He thought I might have an aptitude for it.

First, I started a college engineering course. I hated it. Right from the start, I knew. And I dropped it. I didn't have an idea about what I'd do instead. So I decided to follow my instincts. Here, I should make a confession. Ever since I returned from the war, I've only done things that I enjoy. I just decided to live that way. My decision to drop engineering was the first instance of it. Since then, it's been a guiding principle. Pretty much everything I choose to do, I do because I think it will be fun or interesting, not for security or money or recognition. It's one of the most important decisions I've ever made. It changed the direction and the quality of my life.

So, I quit engineering and began taking courses in biology. I found that I loved it, and so I decided that would be my life's work. I told this to one of my teachers. He said: "Why don't you just go into medicine or dentistry? The pay's much better." He was against it, and he was a biology teacher. For me, it was a natural choice. I was excited about it.

At first, I didn't have a clear idea of where my studies would lead. I finished my undergraduate degree and moved on to my master's. One day, I read about Woods Hole, the institute for oceanographic sciences. What they were doing out there didn't have direct bearing on my research, but I was fascinated by it. And so I followed that instinct. I arranged to spend a summer there, studying marine biology and working. I met so many scientists from all over the world—from Japan, Europe, South America. Woods Hole was like an oasis, an academic

oasis. It deepened my love of science and broadened my view of what was possible, of what I could accomplish with my life. After that, I won a fellowship to continue my research in Germany. I spent about six months there, researching genetics. I finished my PhD in 1954.

After that, I was hired by a man who would later become a life-long friend, Don Fawcett. He was a world-renowned expert in cell biology and had just become the chairman of the Biology Department at Cornell Medical School in Manhattan. After five years at Cornell, in 1959, Don decided to go to Harvard to become chairman of the Anatomy Department. He asked if I'd like to join him on the Harvard faculty. I agreed immediately. By then, my wife and I had three kids, and we were all living in Queens, in a miserable two-bedroom apartment beneath the Triborough Bridge.

Harvard was wonderful. I had limited teaching duties and was free to spend most of my time pursuing research that interested and excited me. Much of my research involved electron microscopic studies of the gastrointestinal system. In particular, I became interested in how the stomach secretes acid, and I looked at this process and thought: *Some cell has to do that. What cell? How?* I was absorbed by what I was studying. It may sound arcane, perhaps, but to me it was fascinating. I worked in other areas as well. I did research related to Legionnaire's Disease and to the HIV virus.

I retired in 1991. I did so because, at the time, Harvard imposed a mandatory retirement age. But I continued working after my retirement, researching and teaching. So, the change didn't cause me any significant anxiety. At first, my life didn't change very much. I'd always kept long hours. That didn't change. I'd still get to the lab at around six in the morning. I kept going at my own pace, pursuing what I liked.

Retirement did give me more freedom. In those first few years, I did a lot of traveling. After retiring from Harvard, I spent two years working in Africa. I lived and worked in Kenya, at the International Laboratory for the Study of Animal Diseases, where my research

focused on parasitic diseases. I traveled all over Africa, and to many other places. Sometimes, I traveled for work—for special projects and funded scientific exchanges—sometimes, for pleasure. Some of the trips would last months. During this period, I went to Japan six or seven times. Once, my wife and I stayed for three months.

It was wonderful. I went to Australia, India, Europe, Africa, South America. I traveled all over America. I've made it to all forty-eight continental states. I enjoy road trips. Since turning eighty, I've driven across the country four times. I always went alone, because my wife doesn't like to be in the car with the way that I drive. Once, I went coast to coast in three days' time. That's driving. On these trips, I'd visit old friends, from the war and from my academic career. And I'd visit places where I used to live, California, the Midwest.

Today, I'm ninety-two and reasonably healthy. I wake up very early, before the paper is delivered. When it arrives, I read it in bed with my coffee, thinking about how I'll spend the day. I do most of the cooking now. Minnie got tired of it. So I get to cook whatever I like. I do the shopping now, too. I don't exercise, but I do work. I fix things, cut trees, chop wood, move things around. And I still do all my own auto maintenance and repairs—so that early training is still paying off. Last year, I painted part of the house. Not too long ago, I shingled the garage. Also, we have a second home, a small house on the beach. I keep it open year-round and do all the upkeep. That kind of work keeps me healthy.

Our children still live in the area, except for one son, who lives in California. We have five grandchildren. They all visit us, which we love. Our five-year-old granddaughter just visited. We spent the afternoon decorating our Christmas tree. And I still keep in touch with so many people from my life, with army buddies, with friends from all around the world, with colleagues from the world of science. In fact, I still enjoy doing science. I'm not trying to make any earth-shattering discoveries. I do it just because I enjoy it. I like the feeling of participating in scientific inquiry, of making contributions to work that may

expand our knowledge of the world. I work at the labs at Harvard and at a lab that we've set up here in our home. Right now, I'm working on three different research projects. Two of them have told me that they want to put my name on the papers. I explained that it wasn't necessary, that I'm not working to gain recognition. I'm just enjoying myself.

I no longer have any immediate goals or long-term objectives. In my life, I've done more than I ever expected. And now, I realize that I may not have much time left. My father died at seventy-six. My mother lived to almost one hundred. Sometimes, I wonder if I'll reach one hundred. I'd love to live that long if I could still be myself—if I could live and not be too tied up.

I had a very close friend from my days in graduate school. When I'd drive cross-country, I'd visit him and stay at his home. And he used to visit us and to stay at our home. After his wife died, he took his own life. Physically, he was still fine. But he'd grown discouraged. He no longer saw any purpose to anything. He wrote me a letter. I still have it. It began: "By the time you get this letter, I won't be here." I don't think that I could ever do something like that. I don't think I could ever think like that.

And so, here I am. These days, with all that behind me, I often find myself asking: "What should I do?" It's a difficult question. Sometimes, it seems like an impossible question. Still, I ask it over and over: "What should I do? What should I do?" Sometimes, I find an answer by reminding myself of the promise that I made to myself after the war, when I swore that, for the rest of my life, I'd only do things that I enjoy. That changes my perspective. I stop asking: "What should I do? What should I do?" Instead, I ask a different question—a better one, I think, one that's far healthier and much more productive: "What do I want to do?"