

Nisei Military Experience during World War II

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That fateful moment in history, 7:55 AM, 7 December 1941, when the first Japanese bombs rained on Pearl Harbor, drastically transformed the lives of everyone in Hawai'i, particularly those of Japanese ancestry.

I was awakened that morning by the constant rumbling of thunder. The sky toward Pearl Harbor was black with smoke, punctuated by puffs of white aerial bursts. "They're sure making this maneuver look real," I thought. Turning on the radio, I heard the announcer screaming, "Take cover, get off the streets! We are being attacked by Japanese enemy planes. This is the real McCoy! Take cover!" Those words pierced me like a piece of shrapnel. I was numb and uncomprehending. Then I heard the radio announcer say, "All members of the University ROTC, report to the campus immediately." I jumped into my ROTC uniform and rushed up to the ROTC barracks at the university campus. This was the first of three times that I was to volunteer my services during the first thirteen months of World War II.

Why did those of Japanese ancestry like myself volunteer for wartime service, one, two, and even three times during the war? To really understand why, you have to go back a hundred years to the beginning of Japanese immigration to Hawai'i.

History of Japanese Immigration

In 1885 the first boatload of Japanese immigrants landed in Hawai'i in response to the sugar industry's need for field labor. Successful sugar cultivation required cheap labor, and the Hawaiian planters found the Japanese worker productive and industrious. Boatloads of imported immigrants from Japan followed, and by 1900 there were 60,000 Japanese in Hawai'i.

Although their numbers grew, their wages were low and discriminatory. Portuguese and Puerto Rican workers got \$22 per month, while the Japanese were paid only \$18. A strike in 1909 was beaten down by force. Conditions were slow to improve.

TED T. TSUKIYAMA

Again in 1920 the Japanese sugar workers went out on a general strike that erupted into bitter racial hostility. The whole community was marshalled against the strikers. The strike for better labor conditions was pictured, not as an economic struggle, but as a conspiracy by Japan to take over Hawai'i. The sugar industry's dependence on Japanese labor notwithstanding, by sheer numbers--almost 40 percent of the population--the Japanese in Hawai'i had become an economic, political, and military threat to the community.

Here's how Gavan Daws described the situation after 1900:

The Japanese had a high birthrate, and a high birthrate meant more and more American citizens of Japanese ancestry. That prospect was enough to frighten a good many men who had a vested interest in keeping things as they were. Alien Japanese were manageable--they could be prevented from taking out homesteads; they could be prohibited from working on territorial and federal construction projects; they could be barred from traveling to the American mainland; their language schools and their newspapers could be harassed; and their laborers' organizations could be beaten in any long strike. But what about the nisei, who might be on the verge of taking the advice of the Americanizers, and who would have the law behind them if they did? In 1920 only three voters in every hundred in the islands were Japanese; in 1926 it was eight in every hundred, and in 1936 it was one in every four.

Was there any way to head off this apparently inexorable movement?

The important thing was to prevent the Japanese from "taking over," whatever that might mean. The situation was variously described, but all the descriptions seemed to threaten evil. In 1920 the Japanese had to be controlled on the plantations; by the nineteen thirties they were loose in society at large, and that was a more formidable problem. If Americanization did not take hold among the nisei the islands might become an extension of the Japanese political system in the Pacific, and that was unthinkable. But if Americanization through education was successful, the Japanese--once Hawaii became a state--might vote together and elect a governor of their race, and that would be insupportable. (1974, 315).

That was a description of Hawai'i only fifty years ago. That's well within my lifetime!

In the 1930s talk of statehood for Hawai'i grew, because the future of Hawai'i's agricultural economy depended on gaining voting representation in Congress. Yet Hawai'i was gripped in the schizophrenia of a Catch 22 situation because the biggest threat and obstacle to statehood was "the Japanese question in Hawaii": Would the Japanese in Hawai'i make good Americans?

The voice of opposition to statehood is well reflected by the testimony of one John Stokes before a Congressional joint committee in opposition to statehood for Hawai'i. He said:

Of the original Japanese arrivals, 40,000 still remain and 110,000 of their descendants are American citizens, capable even now of dominating the local electorate. In view of their parents' training, characteristics, and background, *how far may they be trusted?*

To one who has studied Japanese and local backgrounds, it seems that statehood for Hawaii at the present time might become dangerous to the United States in the near future. At best it would be risky, so why place Hawaiian control in the hands of an unproven group, especially one descended from subjects of an aggressive and ambitious nation which *at any moment* may become an active enemy? (Ogawa 1980, 262)

That "moment" arrived most unexpectedly when the first Japanese bomb dropped on Pearl Harbor. That dreadful, too horrible-to-even-dream-about nightmare had come true. We were at war with Japan!

That in brief is the picture of pre-Pearl Harbor Hawai'i. Now, the heretofore unknown, unproven, and highly doubted loyalty of the Japanese in Hawai'i became the BIG QUESTION MARK. Let me describe the question in words you can understand. In his prelude to *Ambassadors in Arms* (1954), a story of the 100th Battalion, Professor Thomas Murphy described two American soldiers sitting in a machine-gun pit on the north shore of O'ahu, one was Hawaiian and one was of Japanese ancestry. After a long silence the Hawaiian finally blurted out the question almost every other non-Japanese in Hawai'i had been burdened with. He asked: "Eh, if they come, who you going shoot? Dem or me?" To which the nisei soldier indignantly replied, "Who you think, stupid? Me just as good American as you!" This was the big question mark: Could those of Japanese ancestry be good loyal Americans? Professor Murphy wrote: "To answer and prove the question, deeds would be necessary, not mere words."

The Hawai'i Territorial Guard

On that morning of 7 December 1941, when we reported to our ROTC unit, there was no registration or sign-up, no swearing in, nor any formalities. No one questioned us; there were no doubts, hesitancy, or distrust. We were ROTC cadets responding to the call in defense of our country, just like any other American soldiers or sailors reporting to their battle stations. Rifles and real bullets were issued. Our first mission was to deploy across Manoa Stream and repel Japanese paratroopers who had reportedly landed on St

TED T. TSUKIYAMA

Louis Heights. The enemy never came. This was just one of many groundless rumors that spread across Honolulu that day.

That afternoon we were converted into the Hawaii Territorial Guard (HTG) and trucked to the National Guard Armory, where our state capitol building now stands. We were issued those round pie-shaped tin helmets and gas masks and were assigned immediately to guard the palace, the courthouse, the electric and telephone companies, Board of Water Supply stations and reservoirs, and other utility installations around the city. Our Company B was stationed in the Dole cannery warehouse, where we guarded the industrial factories, gasoline tanks, and Honolulu harbor, armed only with puny Springfield .03 rifles. Fortunately no bombs dropped on the Iwilei area. The enemy never landed. The important thing was that we had responded to our country's call to arms, we were accepted, we were proud to be in uniform, we were serving our country in its hour of need.

Of the 500 of us in the HTG, 80 percent were of Japanese ancestry. Six weeks after the Pearl Harbor attack, the War Department discovered to its horror that O'ahu was being guarded by "hundreds of Japanese" in American uniforms. Everyone of Japanese ancestry was discharged from the HTG on the morning of 19 January 1942. That discharge order was more devastating than if a bomb had exploded in our midst. This blow was worse than Pearl Harbor. To have our own country, in its danger and time of need, reject and repudiate our services was more than we could take. No words could ever adequately describe the feelings of complete rejection and repudiation we experienced when we were dismissed from the service of our own country, just because our faces and names resembled those of the enemy. The very bottom had dropped out of our lives.

But that was not all. More humiliation followed. Hawai'i was gripped by a fear of a Japanese invasion. Other Japanese Americans already in uniform had their rifles taken away, and they were transferred to noncombat engineer units. The Draft Board reclassified all Japanese Americans from 1-A draft status to 4-C (enemy alien) so that we were precluded from military service. John Balch, president of the Hawaiian Telephone Company, wrote a pamphlet, "Shall the Japanese Be Allowed to Dominate Hawaii?" and proposed all Japanese be moved to the island of Moloka'i. Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox pleaded with President Roosevelt for the wholesale evacuation of all Japanese from Hawai'i because "the military defense of Hawaii is now being carried out in the presence of a population predominantly with enemy sympathies and affiliation." On 19 February 1942 President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which called for the evacuation of 110,000 men, women, and children of Japanese ancestry from the west coast and their confinement to

barbed-wired detention centers in inland United States. This was the situation facing Japanese Americans in February 1942.

We had nothing to do but go back to the university. But education became meaningless. Nothing made sense. Our nation was crying for workers and servicemen, and yet we were deemed useless and unwanted.

The Varsity Victory Volunteers

One day in late January 1942, Hung Wai Ching, secretary of the university YMCA, talked to a group of HTG discharges and persuaded them that there were other ways besides shooting a gun to serve their country and they ought to petition the military governor and offer themselves as a noncombat labor battalion. One hundred sixty-nine university boys signed a petition that was accepted by General Emmons. I was among those volunteers. This group was given the name Varsity Victory Volunteers (VVV), and we were assigned to the 34th Army Engineers at Schofield Barracks. We were armed, not with rifles, but with picks and shovels, hammers and saws, crowbars and sledgehammers and performed much needed defense work on O'ahu for the next eleven months.

Hung Wai Ching was very proud of his VVV boys. He bragged about how these boys gave up their education and other lucrative defense jobs to serve as common laborers. One day in late December, the quarry gang breaking rocks up at the Kolekole Pass quarry saw Hung Wai Ching with some important looking brass. The visitor was Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy. Was it mere coincidence that just a few weeks later, in January 1943, the War Department announced the formation of an all-nisei combat team, changed the nisei draft status from 4-C back to 1-A, and called for volunteers?

The Triple V boys voted to disband so they could volunteer for the 442nd Combat Team. The Triple V had served its purpose. It had stemmed the rising tide of hysteria, panic, and prejudice against Hawai'i's Japanese at a most strategic time, and had answered the big question mark with bold, dramatic, and positive action, not mere words.

The 442nd Combat Team

The 442nd carried on where the Triple V left off. A call for 1500 volunteers from Hawai'i was made. Ten thousand Japanese Americans in Hawai'i responded. On the mainland more nisei volunteered from behind the barbed wire of detention camps. For the third time in the war I volunteered and was accepted to serve in the 442nd. The 100th Battalion had already been sent to the mainland and had finished training with a distinguished record.

TED T. TSUKIYAMA

The story of the 100th and 442nd has been told and retold many times. It will not be retold here. The 100th and 442nd became the most decorated and probably the best publicized American fighting unit in World War II. Personnel of this single battle unit were awarded one Congressional Medal of Honor, 52 Distinguished Service Crosses, 560 Silver Stars, 5200 Bronze Stars, and 9486 Purple Hearts, and earned 7 Distinguished Unit citations.

The most renowned feat of the 100th and 442nd was the heroic rescue of the 211 men of "The Lost Battalion," which happened in the hills of Bellefontaine, France, in late October 1944, at a terrible cost of 161 dead, 43 missing, and 2000 wounded. After the battle, on 12 November 1944, General John Dahlquist, commander of the 36th Division, who had ordered the rescue mission, called an assembly to honor the 100th and 442nd for their achievements. Seeing only a few hundred men assembled of a regiment which normally numbered over 4000, General Dahlquist asked Colonel Virgil Miller with some irritation, "I thought I ordered the whole regiment to assemble. Where are the rest of the men?" To which Colonel Miller, with tears streaming down his cheeks, replied, "You're looking at the entire regiment, Sir. That's all that's left" (Stein 1985, 32; Duus 1987, 217).

The incomparable combat record of the 100th and 442nd, underscored by over 800 headstones for fallen comrades scattered from Italy to France, gave dramatic and irrefutable response to the big question mark and established for all time the truth of President Roosevelt's statement to the 442nd: "Americanism is not a matter of race or ancestry. Americanism is a matter of mind and the heart."

The Military Intelligence Service

A larger question still remained to be answered: "Would Americans of Japanese ancestry be willing to fight against the Japanese, to fight *against those of their own race and blood?*"

Early in the war the American military forces discovered the need for effective military intelligence against the Japanese. The Japanese Americans provided the best source of trained intelligence language specialists in the numbers that were needed. A military intelligence school for teaching military Japanese was established at Camp Savage, Minnesota, in 1942, and nisei with some Japanese language background were recruited from the detention centers, Hawai'i, the 100th Battalion, and the 442nd Combat Team. I was included in a group of one hundred men recruited from the 442nd in training at Camp Shelby.

After completing a six-month crash course in military Japanese, my unit was assigned to the 10th Air Force in the India-Burma theater to perform

Nisei Military Experience

radio intelligence work intercepting radio transmissions of the Japanese Air Force in Burma. Other military intelligence graduates were assigned to the US Infantry, Mars Task Force, the Air Force, Marines, Navy, Paratroopers, OSS, and OWI, and to the British, Australian, New Zealand, and Chinese forces operating in the Aleutian Islands, Guadalcanal, Buna, New Georgia, Tarawa, Leyte, the Burma Road, Okinawa, and Iwo Jima, over the entire Asian-Pacific theater. They translated captured documents, intercepted and deciphered coded messages, deciphered and translated maps, battle plans, military orders, diaries, and letters, and interrogated captured Japanese prisoners. They were the eyes and ears of Allied forces fighting the Japanese in the Pacific War. After the peace they served with the Japan Occupation Forces and the War Crimes Tribunals.

In 1944 nisei interpreters translated the captured Operation Z, a Japanese Navy plan for the defense of the Marianas and the Philippines. When the American fleet steamed into the Marianas, Admiral Spruance already knew the exact number and location of Japanese ships and planes, resulting in a decisive American victory in the battle of the Philippine Sea and Leyte Gulf. Nisei interpreters were instrumental in determining the location of Admiral Yamamoto's whereabouts, which led to the ambush of his airplane and his resulting death. Back in the Pentagon, Kazuo Yamane was leafing through some captured Japanese documents that Navy Intelligence had classified as "routine" (of no military value). He discovered a thick book that turned out to be the Imperial Army Ordinance Inventory listing the numbers of every type of Japanese weapon. This discovery led to new targets for B-29 raids over Japan.

The Japanese-American military intelligence linguist faced an added danger--being mistaken for the enemy and being shot at by their own troops. Most of them had Caucasian bodyguards. Yet some were killed by mistake. Sergeant Frank Hachiya of Hood River, Oregon, volunteered to parachute behind enemy lines in the Philippines, but as he made his way back to American lines, he was mistakenly shot by Americans as an enemy infiltrator. On his body they found maps of the complete Japanese defenses for Leyte. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross posthumously. Yet his name was one of the fourteen Japanese-American names removed from the War Memorial Honor Roll by "patriots" of the Hood River American Legion Post. Following a nationwide outcry the names were restored. A memorial to Frank Hachiya now reads:

The life of Sgt. Hachiya symbolizes well the story of the Japanese-American soldiers of WW II. Unwanted by the Army, he could not be drafted. Suspected by his own Government, he was confined in a relocation camp. Given

TED T. TSUKIYAMA

the most trying of assignments, to fight against those of his own ancestry and culture, he was mistakenly shot and killed by his own comrades. Though he died, his courage resulted in the saving of lives of thousands of his countrymen.

During the War, over six thousand nisei served in the US Military Intelligence Service against the Japanese enemy, but little is known of their identity and exploits because their services were confidential and kept secret until their recent declassification. The nisei of the Military Intelligence Service were the Allies' "secret weapon" in the war against Japan. General Douglas MacArthur stated that "Never in military history did any Army know so much about the enemy prior to actual engagement." General Willoughby, head of US Army Intelligence in the Pacific theater stated: "The nisei saved a million lives and shortened the war by two years." Theirs was a ringing and undeniable response to the question: "Who you going shoot, me or them?"

Conclusion

When the 100th Battalion and 442nd Combat Team returned from the European battlefields they were awarded a special Presidential Unit Citation on the White House lawn, the only American military unit to be so honored. Speaking for the whole nation President Harry Truman rendered the final verdict on the loyalty of Americans of Japanese ancestry when he said: "I can't tell you how much I appreciate the privilege of being able to show you how much the United States thinks of what you have done . . . [Y]ou fought for the free nations of the world . . . [Y]ou fought not only the enemy, but you fought prejudice, and you won!"

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Nisei Military Experience

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