



HISTORY

>> Historical Information

NISEI LEGACY

"As sons set off to war, so many mothers and fathers told them, live if you can, die if you must, but fight always with honor, and never ever bring shame on your family or your country. Rarely has a nation been so well served by a people it so ill-treated."

- President William Clinton

On May 8, 1945 Germany surrendered. Five months later Japan surrendered. The war was over. The men in the [100th Infantry Battalion](#), [442nd Regimental Combat Team](#) and the [Military Intelligence Service](#) had fought the enemy in Europe and in the Pacific. But there was another enemy to fight - prejudice.

During basic training in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, the Japanese American soldiers were bewildered and angered by the segregated buses and bathrooms. They were neither black nor white. America's naturalization laws put them in the same racial limbo. Immigrants of Caucasian or African ancestry could become citizens, but nothing was spelled out for Asians until 1882, when the Exclusion Act barred citizenship to the Chinese.

There were more than 500 federal, state and local laws and ordinances aimed at "persons ineligible for citizenship." Racists claimed that because "Orientals" couldn't be American citizens, they were entitled to fewer rights than other immigrants. They were denied the right to own land or buy homes. Some states even barred interracial marriages. Other barriers prevented the Japanese from engaging in a variety of businesses from hairdressing to law.

In spring 1942, America committed one of the worst crimes against human rights in its history. The government rounded up more than 110,000 persons of Japanese ancestry who were living in West Coast communities and forced them into U.S. concentration camps. Meanwhile, in Hawaii, 2,500 miles closer to the enemy, the Japanese were not incarcerated. Why? In Hawaii 38 percent of the population was Japanese, while only 25 percent was Caucasian. Hawaii couldn't afford to lose 40 percent of its workforce - especially in wartime. Plus, Hawaii didn't have the ships to transport 160,000 resident Japanese. In addition, many powerful leaders in the military, government and community urged tolerance. As a result roughly 1,000 high-risk Japanese from Hawaii were interned.

Despite the *Nisei's* stupendous war record, anti-Japanese sentiment remained strong - especially on the West Coast. In spring 1945, Americans of Japanese ancestry started to leave the barbed wire camps located in desolate areas of the U.S. to return to their homes and businesses - those few who still had them. Anti-evacuee elements used practically every weapon short of lynching and murder to keep the Japanese from returning. Near Sacramento, California, the house belonging to the family of a *Nisei* soldier was set afire. Near Santa Ana, California, the Masuda family received death threats while the local police did nothing.

General Joseph Stillwell was outraged. He personally presented the [Distinguished Service Cross](#) medal to Mary Masuda. Mary's brother Kazuo was killed in action, and he earned the medal for his courageous fighting at "Little Cassino" in Italy. Stillwell said, "They bought an awful hunk of America with their blood. . . You're damn right those Nisei boys have a place in the American heart, now and forever. We cannot allow a single injustice

to be done to the *Nisei* without defeating the purposes for which we fought." Fortunately, many other Caucasian soldiers protested loudly about the ill treatment of the *Nisei* and their families.

But they had their work cut out for them. After all, in 1943 the Commander of the Western Defense, Lt. General John DeWitt, had said "A Jap's a Jap. . . They are a dangerous element. . . There is no way to determine their loyalty." Mainland newspapers published a steady stream of inflammatory lies about alleged acts of sabotage and espionage. One report implied that the Japanese had deviously marked crop fields to point toward an aircraft plant in California and toward the city of Seattle. Another said that 20 Japanese possessed 100 Nazi swastika pins. Other Japanese farmers were accused of sabotage when they were found with explosives - something commonly used to blow up the tree stumps when clearing vegetable fields. The logical explanations were never quiet as exciting as the original alarms. None of these claims of treason were ever proven.

The rumors of treasonous activity in Hawaii were also wrong. This point bears repeating, because many Americans have not heard it before. There were no acts of sabotage, espionage, or fifth column activity committed by the Japanese in Hawaii, prior to December 7, on December 7 or subsequent to December 7, 1941. All of the officials who would know, agree on this point - the Secretary of War, the Honolulu Chief of Police, the Chief of Military Intelligence for Hawaii, and the Director of the FBI.

After the war, the *Nisei* vets returned to Hawaii to much fanfare and celebration. The war, and its numerous sacrifices and injustices certainly accelerated the process of statehood for Hawaii. In 1954, Americans of Japanese ancestry gained political control of the Hawaii territorial legislature. In 1959, the territory of Hawaii became a state.

Throughout the islands and the mainland, the walls of racial discrimination began to crumble. In 1952, the *Nisei's* parents finally won the right to be naturalized U.S. citizens. It was their sons' sacrifices to save the "[Lost Battalion](#)" that helped convince Congress to change the law.

In 1988 President Ronald Reagan signed one of the most important pieces of legislation to Japanese Americans, the Civil Liberties Act of 1988. The act ordered the U.S. government to provide reparations of up to \$20,000 - and most importantly - an apology to those incarcerated in America's [concentration camps](#).

From 1996 to 2000, the Army reviewed the records of the *Nisei* who won Distinguished Service Crosses and determined that 20 deserved to be upgraded to the U.S. Army's highest military honor. In 2000, President William Clinton awarded 20 [Medals of Honor](#) to Japanese American soldiers (19 DSC upgrades and 1 Silver Star upgrade) - many were awarded posthumously.

More than 650 men from the 100th Battalion and 442nd Regimental Combat Team never came home. They died in hospitals or on battlefields. Another 3,500 were wounded.

As 442nd Veteran Rudy Tokiwa said:

"There's a lot of us that never came home. But I think in thought they are home. The guys went overseas and gave their lives to prove that we are Americans. And we've all got to be thankful."

Like many *Nisei*, 442nd veteran Frank Shimada doesn't like to speak about the war:

"I'm not too keen. . . talking about these things. But I owe it to those guys who didn't come back. Because in telling my story, I could be telling some of their stories too. Their stories need to be told. Some of the guys don't want to talk to other people about it. I tell them you know when you die, what you know goes with you,

and its gone forever. At least if you tell somebody, it will be here for the next generation.

Today, many Asian Americans take their rights for granted. They did not live under the discriminatory laws barring immigration, naturalization, land ownership and inter-racial marriages.

Recently, Arab Americans were treated with suspicion after the terrorist attacks in 2001. Japanese Americans were the first to protest when government officials discussed discriminatory treatment. They knew that when the rights of one minority are threatened, the rights of all are threatened.

These quiet, humble American heroes taught a country about patriotism, honor and tolerance. We must not ever, ever forget that lesson.

Copyright© 2006 [Go For Broke National Education Center](#). All rights reserved.