

FAUBION BOWERS

The deepest experiences of my life, the warmest affections, the proudest moments all belong to my memories with the nisei and kibei whom I met and worked with during the Pacific War of 1941-1945. It was they who truly won the war, because without the eyes and ears of what was happening on the other side of warfare, an Army is blind and ignorant. The nisei and those of us who were lucky enough to know a little Japanese when war, hateful war, broke out, were able to translate documents and interrogate prisoners, so that we could know who, what, where, and when the "enemy" was. It was from an intercept that we learned of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto's air journey to the front into the Pacific Islands and were thereby able to shoot down his plane. The Japanese were so certain that the "Americans" were unable to cope with the Japanese language, they were enormously careless of codes and messages. They were also so sure that no one could interrogate a captured Japanese, they never bothered to instruct their soldiers in case of being taken as prisoners of war.

America's treatment of ~~their~~ American-born citizens was so poor that the Japanese had good reason to believe that no one would co-operate with the American Army. I remember once when Tom Sakamoto and I went to a swimming pool in San Francisco, "Asiatics" were not allowed. Earlier I remembered how the great ^{black} singer Marian Anderson had been unable to stay in any hotel in San Francisco and had always put up at my friend Noel Sullivan's apartment, in San Francisco.

Here were the nisei with their friends and family in relocation centers, still drafted as soldiers in the American Army. Their loyalty was questioned by many, but the need for them was overwhelming. Without them the Army ~~and Navy~~ could not have functioned. And the Army ~~particularly,~~ was slow to recognize the obvious.

I was drafted in 1941 immediately after returning from a year and a half in Japan and Indonesia. On my MOS I reported that I spoke Japanese, Russian, Malay, as well as French, but the Army never got around to that knowledge until after Artillery training at Fort Bragg and Fort Knox. Major Dickey somehow got word of the word "Japanese." He flew me to the Presidio to interview me and said something like "konnichi wa," to which I responded in show-offish, kabuki-esque, Bowers-like effusiveness. I was immediately saved from further "artillery" duty. Everyone at the Presidio was nisei, except for a handful of hakujin -- Matt Adams, Belousoff, Jorgenson and Charlie Fogg.

After this we all went to Camp Savage, an old man's home, and worked for days to clean it out and up. We were Privates, and the instructors were marvelous. Tom Sakamoto was superb not only in Japanese but in English, and Toshio Tsukahira taught me as much about Japanese as he did about life. Not so many years ago in Washington I had occasion to say to Peter Sellars, the director, as I introduced Tsukahira, that "he taught me everything I know," a bit of hyperbole that is not ^{too} far from the truth.

The days and nights in Camp Savage were intoxicating. Not only did I learn Japanese as I had never worked on it so deeply in my year in Japan from 1940-1941, but my relations with the nisei -- none of whom I had known before the War and about whom my prejudices had been sifted from the Japanese in Japan -- deepened into undying respect and recognition. Those were glamorous days in Minneapolis -- Sinclair Lewis the writer was there, meeting and admiring his first nisei, and so was Brenda Uland and Stanley and Peggy Hawkes, the owner and publisher of the leading Minneapolis newspaper. Their lives ~~was~~^{were} changed by the nisei, and so was mine.

There was trouble however. Here were the nisei -- like me, mostly privates at the bottom of the rung of the Army ladder -- with vastly superior knowledge of Japanese to the hakujin officers who were over them -- Dickey, Rasmussen, and the quite silly others who had gone to Washington at the outbreak of War to say that they had been born in Japan or that they had stepped off a boat in Japan and therefore were qualified to be "officers." Colonel Rasmussen was a very clever fellow, and realized that something had to be done. The nisei were in an impossible position, fighting for their country America but being treated as second-class citizens. At that time, no one had ever been commissioned on the basis of language from private to officer. So,

Rasmussen made an example of me. "Here is a superb linguist, but a private...and a War is on," he told me he said. Washington had to commission me, and within a year later the first nisei were commissioned from private to first lieutenant on the basis of language. And all of you know the rest of the story.

One last thing: the Army because of the draft had to accept nisei as soldiers. The Navy, an arrogant organization, felt otherwise and ignored the draft. They went around to the top ivy league universities in the East and told the Phi Beta Kappas that they ^{would be given} a commission if anyone completed a year's Japanese language training at Boulder Colorado. This worked, as some of today's scholars in Japanese studies can attest.

Still and all, it was the nisei who won the war, who devoted their lives of service to a once thorny, now glorious, career.

My heart was, and always will be, with the nisei who gave honor to their country and joy to those of us who remember their place within it.