

# 'Honor': sad irony of nisei soldiers

## From internment to the battlefield

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EXAMINER TELEVISION CRITIC

WHEN CONGRESS was considering passage of the Redress Bill, which would compensate Japanese Americans who were unconstitutionally herded into internment camps during World War II, members sat through a showing of two films by San Franciscan Loni Ding — "Nisei Soldier" and "The Color of Honor." No wonder the bill passed.

Ding brings the full power of the filmmaker's art to bear on the vast human injustice perpetrated during the war years, when logical anxiety lapsed into rampant paranoia and officially condoned racism. While others have competently chronicled life in the camps, Ding focuses on the ultimate irony: Many young nisei left those same hellholes to bravely serve in the armed forces of the nation that reviled them.

Ding's first film on this topic, "Nisei Soldier," aired on PBS last year. "The Color of Honor," essentially an expansion of "Nisei Soldier," appears on Channel 9 Wednesday at 10 p.m.

Ding refuses to wag a finger in America's face. Her approach is neither didactic nor preachy. She simply employs vintage film footage and photographs, dramatic recreations and extensive interviews to reach into the hearts and minds of the participants.

"I know when I left the camp a lot of people must have said I was a stupid fool," recalls one nisei. "But this is the only country I have."

IN EUROPE, the all-nisei 442nd Regimental Combat Team became the most decorated unit in U.S. military history. Ding takes her cameras to a reunion of the former soldiers and the people of Bruyeres, France, a village liberated by the 442nd.

But that's familiar territory. Ding also focuses on less celebrated aspects of Japanese American contributions to the war effort. In the Presidio, for example, a secret language school was established to teach Japanese to Japanese Americans, who would become interrogators and translators in the Pacific. Because their mission was classified, these young men never received public recognition for their heroism.

And Ding does not flinch at the fact that many young nisei refused to participate out of a conviction that military service would somehow legitimize the obscene treatment of their people. At the Hart Mountain camp in Wyoming, 63 refused the draft and were sent to prison.

Ding employs interesting artifices to tell her story. Her central metaphor, never overworked, depicts a Japanese American man digging in a field to find the crate of family heirlooms his father buried on the day before they were shipped off to camp. Segments of the story are divided by the image

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Loni Ding: a master of her craft



Japanese Americans get their first instructions as U.S. soldiers — learning to salute — in 'The Color of Honor'

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of new pictures filling blank holes in a photographic montage of the war, which is precisely what "The Color of Honor" achieves. It completes the picture.

**M**OSTLY, THOUGH, we see old soldiers reliving their days in the field. These are war stories of a different kind.

In the Pacific, nisei soldiers faced unique terrors. They were often mistaken for Japanese infantrymen and risked being shot by their own compatriots. The interrogators, including many who had been schooled in Japan, had to explain to their captured subjects how they could be serving the American cause.

One, who bravely entered a cave full of Japanese soldiers to request their surrender, gave such a com-

PELLING defense of his loyalty to America that the enemy troops stood, bowed and apologized for mentioning the subject. Then they followed him into captivity.

Even during their time of service, Japanese Americans were routinely shunned by their country. One recalls the shame he felt when he and 200 other nisei soldiers-in-training were held at gunpoint in a warehouse during a presidential visit to his base.

Another, who came home in a coffin, became a cause celebre of sorts when his name and that of

other local nisei soldiers were removed by the American Legion from the honor roll in his hometown.

**C**ERTAINLY, "The Color of Honor" should be seen by all Americans of Japanese ancestry. Never has this chapter in the story of their people been told so well.

But it deserves a wider audience than that. "The Color of Honor" stands as an important contribution to the history of the war effort. It is also a significant example of powerful documentary making. Ding is a master of her craft.