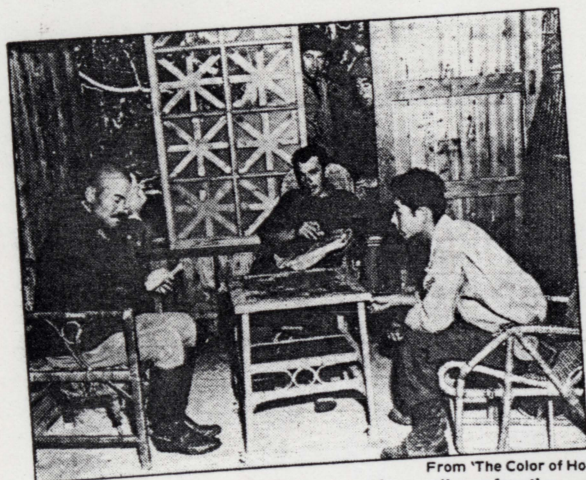


TODAY

Features and Entertainment

The loneliest soldiers



From 'The Color of Honor'

It's an all-too-familiar scene from World War II, says filmmaker Loni Ding: A ranking U.S. military officer, center, intently watches a Japanese-American intelligence linguist, right, questions the enemy. This one was taken in New Guinea in 1944.

'Color of Honor' paints portrait of nisei scouts

By Burl Burlingame
Star-Bulletin writer

OK, even for a movie, it took a long time. When last we saw San Francisco filmmaker Loni Ding, it was several years ago at the Hawaii International Film Festival, where she was premiering "Nisei Soldier," her documentary about Japanese-American soldiers in World War II.

"Nisei Soldier" was well-received, not just by the film people but also by local Japanese organizations. Ding barely heard the praise, though; she was dashing around setting up interviews for a much more ambitious film project. "Nisei Soldier," it turns out, was in many ways a sketch for her "The Color of Honor," which will premiere at this year's Hawaii International Film Festival, Nov. 29 to Dec. 5.

"My interest started way back," said Ding, by telephone from the Bay area. "I've always been interested in Asian-American studies: I teach it at the University of Cali-

Plan to Go?

The seventh edition of the **Hawaii International Film** promises to be the biggest festival yet. The event is scheduled from **Nov. 29 to Dec. 5** at a variety of locations ranging from the Varsity Theater to the U.S.S. Arizona Memorial Museum. **Tomorrow's Star-Bulletin** will include a complete guide to the film festival, including all the films, highlights, special events and ticket information.

fornia at) Berkeley. So I've always been aware of the relocation problem and, in a vague way, of the Japanese-American 100th Battalion and the 442nd Regiment.

"In the early '80s, when the (relocation) redress hearings came to San Francisco, things began to mobilize in my head. It became a very important moment in my

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Courtesy Robert Kaufman

Filmmaker Loni Ding will present 'The Color of Honor' at the Hawaii Film Festival this month. The movie explores what she says might have been the

loneliest, most scrutinized participants in World War II — the Japanese-American soldiers who were linguists and interpreters for the military.

HONOR: Ding's new movie debuts here

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life."

At that time an exhibit went on display at the Presidio Army Museum honoring the 442nd, which later came to the U.S.S. Arizona Memorial Museum in Hawaii. "It was ironic, and fitting, because the Presidio was the major defense command during the war, the place where the evacuation orders came from," said Ding. "There were pictures of the soldiers juxtaposed with pictures of their families being rounded up. I found it incredibly powerful. I didn't know much about the nisei soldiers, and I certainly didn't know they had such a record for valor."

It was around 1982 when "Nisei Soldier" was hatched. It was finished around '84 and, as she worried about distributing it, she began seriously working on "Color." Ding had discovered richer material, historically and emotionally, than could be fitted into "Nisei Soldier," and the two movies can perhaps be considered one long work.

"The Color of Honor" turns away from a dry recounting and instead concentrates on the emotional toll taken on the soldiers that came from relocation centers, and examines in particular what must have been the loneliest job in World War II, that of the Japanese-American Army scouts that served as interpreters in the Pacific.

"It's an interesting human story, not just a military story," Ding said. "I'm not really interested in war itself — though World War II is a fascinating war — I'm interested in what happens to men. It's about pride, not a bunch of 'woe is me' stuff. 'The Color of Honor' is about something that went wrong in American history, and how one people dealt with it."

She wanted to have it done in time for the recent Smithsonian exhibition on the Constitution, which dealt with how Japanese-Americans were treated in the war. "It was really an extraordinary thing for them to do, considering the amount of fire they got for it," Ding mused. "And, as soon as you send out invitations, you're really committed!" It was completed in time, though Ding still admits it may need fine-tuning.

Based on a videotape version, "The Color of Honor" has some minor structural problems — some events don't seem to follow a logical order, and some terms, like sansei, kibe, nisei, might need translation for wider audiences. But the film makes perfect sense emotionally, and the material it presents is fascinating.

"It's still largely unknown," Ding explained of the Army translators. "Much of the available information was classified until 1974, and I had trouble finding footage. In many ways, it was a secret operation. We didn't want the Japanese to know we had nisei soldiers on our side, and we also wanted to protect any relatives the soldiers had in Japan."

"It's also my (guess) the Army has an ambivalence about crediting these men with the job they did. Very, very few got commissioned as officers, even though they were doing dangerous intelligence work. I mean, look at the pictures. The nisei are always doing the interrogating, while the white officer looks on, with great interest and maybe some skepticism, and the nisei always only has a couple of stripes. Even after the war, they were discharged at

essentially the same rank as when they entered."

The film also touches on the Japanese soldiers who were drafted before the war and were shuttled from camp to camp and given menial jobs. Many were kibe, Japanese Americans who also had Japanese citizenship, and their thick accent alone isolated them from other soldiers. Many resisted, and years later were vindicated in court.

Formally, the nisei interpreters were strictly Army, though other services "borrowed them." There were only a handful of linguists and every branch wanted some of the action. "They weren't together enough to have any unity, and besides, through much of the war, no one knew how best to use them. It must have been terribly lonely."

"At the beginning there were no prisoners taken. Japanese soldiers would rather die than be captured — I don't think they even had a word for surrender — so they were often booby-trapped and American soldiers didn't take any chances. When prisoners were finally captured, the Americans' only idea of how to deal with them was to use the same methods they used on German prisoners; yell

and bark at them and order them to talk.

"The nisei interrogators instead befriended them, and it worked. It's been said MacArthur was the best-prepared, in terms of military intelligence, of any of the Allied commanders. Japanese language training actually was the first time the Army conceived of having a language school. MacArthur certainly trusted them with heavy responsibilities."

"Without sympathetic white officers, there was no one to vouch if they were doing a good job. In fact, one nisei was nominated for the Distinguished Service Cross, and his officer had to get the information on his heroics from Japanese prisoners. The officer said it was the first time an American soldier got an award based on information from the enemy."

Another problem Ding faced was the reticence of the veterans themselves to talk about the war years. "They were told not to talk about it, and later, after all the years had passed, they figured, what's the point?" said Ding. "So, they kept it to themselves. Only the Hawaii men seem to be able to talk about it with easy pride and acceptance of their whole cultural background."

One of the soldiers, Herbert Miyasaki, was asked by the prisoners why he chose to fight for the United States. "I'm not fighting for the 'United States,'" he replied. "I'm fighting for my life, and for my country — which happens to be the United States. I'm fighting for the same things you are."

"A filmmaker has to be obsessive and single-minded when you're dealing with such a sprawling subject," Ding said. "A couple of years ago the money ran out, and since then I've been doing the best I could with what I had. It's been a marathon!"

And there are still miles to go before she sleeps. "I've still got to raise money and pay off terrible, terrible bills," said Ding. "It's almost a rule; independent filmmakers spend a year filming, and three years paying bills. For example, if PBS wants to show it, it's up to the filmmaker to come up with the publicity budget, which is generally at least 15 percent of the entire film budget."

"My immediate concerns are to see that 'Color' gets seen, and to get out from under the bills. And to get my home in order! There are things sitting in corners that have needed doing for years!"