

THE BAY GUARDIAN'S WEEKLY GUIDE TO THE BEST IN BAY AREA ARTS, ENTERTAINMENT AND CULTURAL EVENTS

## FIGHTING ON TWO FRONTS

Filmmaker Loni Ding's 'Nisei Soldier' tells the story of Japanese American soldiers during the Second World War



A young recruit and his mother appear in a shot from 'Nisei Soldier.'

BY MICHAEL OMI

*It is my sincerest hope that America shall not burden any other ethnic group with the terrible dilemma forced on many Japanese Americans a scant four decades ago: whether to remain with their loved ones or leave them to an uncertain fate to help defend the nation responsible for their incarceration.*

— Sen. Daniel K. Inouye (D-Hawaii)

Rudy Tokiwa recalls "demolishing" a restaurant in Kansas City after being refused service because of his race. It was shortly after World War II, and President Harry Truman had just conferred a Presidential Unit Citation on Rudy's Japanese American combat outfit in a ceremony on the White House lawn. "You fought not only the enemy," Truman said, "but you fought prejudice — and you won. Keep up that fight." Rudy found himself doing just that. How come, he wondered, these folks in the restaurant didn't get the message?

*Nisei Soldier*, a new film by Loni Ding, seeks to jar our collective historical ignorance. Blending rare archival footage, still photographs and present-day interviews, the film tells the story of the Japanese Americans who volunteered to serve in a segregated unit of the U.S. Army, even though they had been stripped of their constitutional rights and their families remained confined in concentration camps for the duration of the war. Produced for the Public Broadcasting System series *Matters of Life and Death*, *Nisei Soldier* is having its world premiere in San Francisco Feb. 19th, on the 42nd anniversary of Executive Order 9066, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's move to evacuate and intern Japanese Americans.

"I want people to come away from the film with the idea that we are *also* Americans," Rudy Tokiwa told the Bay Guardian. "We're just like other nationalities who have made contributions to this country." Building such an awareness, however, is no small task. The history of Japanese Americans, like the historical experience of other racial minorities, has been a

"hidden" one neither known nor acknowledged by most Americans. Surprisingly, the Japanese American World War II experience has also been hidden from the next generation — the children of the Nisei soldiers.

"The wartime experience was not discussed between the Nisei [second-generation Japanese Americans] and Sansei [third-generation]," Emmy Award-winning filmmaker and TV producer Loni Ding noted in an interview with the Bay Guardian. "Sansei found out about it in books, in ethnic studies classes, and then went home to ask their parents about it." Paul Takagi, a Nisei professor in the School of Education at UC Berkeley, says he believes the reluctance of Nisei to talk about the war is similar to the psychology of a rape victim. Although you and your rights have been grossly violated, you can't help but feel somehow guilty of complicity and ashamed that such a thing happened to you.

### 'A Jap's a Jap'

In the early months of 1942, 112,000 men, women and children of Japanese descent — more than 70,000 of whom were American citizens — were evacuated from their homes on the West Coast and subsequently placed in ten concentration camps scattered in desolate areas of the Mountain and Central Plains states. Lt. Gen. John L. DeWitt, the commander of the Western

Defense Command, neatly summarized popular sentiment and the rationale for the forced removal and internment when he stated in his testimony before the House Naval Affairs Subcommittee in 1943, "A Jap's a Jap." All were seen as disloyal citizens and potential fifth-column recruits.

Loni Ding decided to undertake the project after seeing *Go for Broke*, an exhibit at the Presidio Army Museum that depicted a Japanese American combat unit made up in part of recruits taken from out of the camps. She went to the museum at the urging of a Sansei who, like others of his generation, had initially been critical of the Nisei soldiers. How could anyone risk his life for a government that deprived him of his rights and placed him behind barbed wire? After taking in the exhibit, however, the Sansei said he better understood the choices they made. His experience intrigued Ding, who wanted to explore on film the choices these Nisei soldiers faced and to present this history to the general public and the Sansei, both groups that have remained shielded from this experience.

Working with Presidio museum curator Eric Saul, historian Chet Tanaka and Nisei veterans, and conducting interviews in Honolulu, Los Angeles, Seattle and San Francisco, Ding made a film which let the

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Filmmaker Loni Ding wanted to explore the choices facing Nisei soldiers during the Second World War.



GUARDIAN PHOTOS BY LOU DEMATTEIS

**'NISEI'**

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veterans tell their own story. She said she wished to convey "the response of these men

given the situation they were cast into. Here we have a group of people who have to make a heavy individual and collective political decision whether to fight or not — a decision which they felt

would have a dramatic impact on the fate of their families."

Although Japanese American men of military age had been put into the nondraftable 4-C category in the wake of Pearl Harbor, the Army reversed its position in 1943 and directed the War Relocation Authority to administer to the internees a loyalty questionnaire intended to solicit men for combat.

The questionnaire created intense factional conflicts within the camps, wrenching parent-child disagreements and agonizing personal decisions. How, the internees wondered, should they respond to the call-up? Was the issue really one of loyalty and disloyalty or of how one chooses to express one's allegiance? The debate left many scars.

**'Remember Pearl Harbor'**

Fifteen hundred men initially chose to volunteer, forming the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. They joined forces with 3,000 Japanese Americans from Hawaii who had been organized as the 100th Infantry Battalion. Together, the 100th/442nd fought in seven major campaigns in Europe. The troops turned out to be, in the words of Gen. Mark Clark, "some of the best goddamn fighters in the U.S. Army." The 100th/442nd went on to become the most decorated unit in United States military history, with 18,143 individual decorations for valor being bestowed on its men. This was not without a price. At maximum strength the 100th/442nd numbered 4,500 men, yet the unit suffered 9,486 casualties.

The 100th Infantry Battalion had a motto and nickname that were oddly appropriate to the contradictions the Nisei soldiers faced. Emblazoned on the unit's insignia were the words "Remember Pearl Harbor." The

unit's nickname was "The Purple Heart Battalion," acknowledging the tremendous percentage of casualties its men sustained. Patriotism and death were indeed central themes to their story.

Nisei soldiers believed they were waging a war on two fronts — fighting to halt the advance of fascism in Europe and fighting to abolish the legacy of racism and mistrust at home. Many times the connection between the two must have seemed tenuous. In an emotional voice-over sequence in the film, Chaplain Hiroshi Higuchi recalled searching a dead soldier's pockets for effects to be sent to his parents:

"I found a letter . . . some vandals in California had burned down his father's home and barn in the name of patriotism. And yet this young man had volunteered for every patrol that he could go on. You know, you can't give a medal high enough for a man like that."

The soldiers shown in *Nisei Soldier* displayed extraordinary unity, loyalty and responsibility to each other. Differences between the "buddhaheads" (as Japanese Americans from Hawaii were derisively known) and the "katonks" (those from the mainland) led to segregation and occasional fights during combat-readiness training in the States. But such conflicts dissolved in the European theater. To the amazement of their medical caretakers, recuperating soldiers requested early release so they could return to the front lines.

"They knew they were going to sink or swim together," Ding notes. "One person we interviewed told us that when you said 'Charge!' you didn't need to look around to see if the others were advancing alongside of you — you knew it."

The exploits of the 100th/442nd certainly illustrate personal and collective valor,

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but they also raise some disquieting questions. In the unit's now-famous rescue of the surviving 211 men of the "Lost Battalion" caught nine miles behind enemy lines near St. Die, France, the 100th/442nd suffered 800 casualties. Were Nisei soldiers simply used as "cannon fodder" for dangerous and impossible missions? This question has been debated within the Japanese American community for years. Some, including a few Nisei veterans, think perhaps they were. Others suggest the Japanese American unit drew the toughest assignments because they were simply the "best" troops available — not because they were expendable by reason of race.

Such questions are left unresolved in *Nisei Soldier*. "I didn't want the narrator of

the film to set the tone, the level of analysis, the way to basically think about the experience," Ding explained. "I wanted to tell a story from the perspective of those who went through it. These men were trying to get their parents sprung from camp or to possibly create a better life in the future. They sacrificed their blood so that they would have something to go back home to."

### *Reparations revisited*

National attention has recently been focused on the experiences of Japanese Americans during the Second World War. A year ago, the Congressional Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment concluded that the exclusion and detention of Japanese Americans was not justified by

military necessity, but was instead the result of "race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership." An intense debate has erupted over its recommendation to grant reparations to the 60,000 surviving members of the camps.

More recent revelations present a picture of a group of people who were set up by the federal government to answer for the crime of being of Japanese descent. In his book *Justice at War*, historian Peter Irons shows, through declassified documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, how the War Department, Justice Department and the U.S. Solicitor General knowingly suppressed, altered and destroyed key evidence to influence the Supreme Court cases of three

Nisei who defied the evacuation order.

Three Nisei men chose the path of civil disobedience by refusing to obey evacuation orders, challenged the nation not to renege on its constitutional promises and ended up receiving prison sentences. The Nisei soldiers, in contrast, chose to prove their allegiance on the field of battle. They received accolades for their military feats, but the price was often disability and death. Ironically, or perhaps

fittingly, the San Francisco premiere of *Nisei Soldier* is a benefit to assist the legal effort to reopen the aforementioned cases in the hope of overturning the original criminal convictions.

At one time, these groups stood on different shores, viewing each other with disdain. That they can acknowledge each other at this upcoming event underscores a new openness within the Japanese American community, an understanding that differ-

ent responses were legitimate and sincere given the dire circumstances and times. ■

*"Nisei Soldier" will have its world premiere on Sunday, Feb. 19th at 7:30 pm, Palace of Fine Arts, Marina and Lyon, SF. A reception for surviving Nisei veterans and their families will precede the screening at 6 pm. Tickets are \$15 and \$25. For more information, call 673-6428.*

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