

"NISEI'S DEVOTION - BEYOND THE CALL OF DUTY"

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John Kaku, our new President called me one night, stating that the West Valley JACL needs a speaker for its Installation Dinner. He said, this year, they have decided to have a low level format for its program, and have some one within the club as its speaker. He then asked if I wouldn't say a few words about my experiences.

I guess he caught me off guard and the way he asked - made me feel that I should accede to his request.

After giving much thought to the subject of my talk, I thought that I would be informal and starting with the overview of early days of San Jose and the events that followed.

I was born in San Jose Nihonmachi - as my father ran a boarding house (ryokan). My memory, although now very vague - brings to mind mostly about the Chinatown along 6th street. I can still recall the smoke filled rooms in the back areas of the old "Ken-eng-low" restaurant. In that dismal atmosphere, memories of bearded Chinese smoking long waterfilled opium pipes and gambling away still remain with me.

In those prewar days, - when Isseis were prohibited from owning lands, life style in this valley was one of exploited labor - or commonly known as share cropping. Most Japanese families struggled to eek out their livelihood on the farm, and barely survived. But, yet they raised large families.

Through economic necessity, Isseis stuck together, helping each other, building simple houses, often borrowing horses to plow the field, and helping with labor. There was this genuine spontaneous mutual help spirit among the families that prevailed.

Thus, Isseis were more dependent upon each other and formed a tightly knit group. There existed a limited intermingling socially with other ethnic groups. For this reason, Japanese in San Jose had no time, in those days, to establish the political base as we see it today.

Demographically, Japan Town was pretty much as it is today. Our community and social life was centered around the Buddhist Church, Wesley Church, JACL, Kenjin-kai, Asahi Baseball and Sumo. About the only entertainment was a periodic silent Japanese movies narrated by a "Benshi" at the Okita Hall which is still standing. Nevertheless, we got by with what little we had, and yet, these were enjoyable times.

Downtown had one large store called the Hart Department Store where Isseis took their kids to do their annual school year shopping. Street cars ran along 1st street and when the Bank of America building was built, this was the only tall building visible for miles around.

The level of society, too, must have been rather backward. In 1933 a mob violence occurred and I saw a lynching that took place in St. James Park. An heir to the Hart Department Store fortune was kidnapped and killed. A group of local people were so aroused, that despite the police barricade and tear gas, the mob dragged the two kidnappers from the jail across to St. James Park, stripped the two, naked and hung them from a tree. As high school kid then, seeing the two die at the end of a rope made me realize the fearfulness of mob violence.

This was San Jose as we approached the latter part of 1930's.

My life changed radically from this rather provincial existence, as in 1934, I went to Japan for a "chugakko" education. Upon return to San Jose - our lives were consumed by news of war in Europe and Japan's military expansion into Manchuria and North China.

The first military draft was initiated in late 1940's. In Feb. 1941, about 10 of us Niseis were among the first draftees from San Jose. It's been so long ago that I have forgotten the names of the 10 Niseis and those that I do remember are no longer living.

On that day, large numbers from Japanese community came to send us off. They gathered at the old Santa Clara Railroad Station, and as the train moved off, the families waved both the Japanese and American flags shouting "Banzai". That moment was so memorable that , the echos of "Banzai" stayed with me in my memory for many years.

Thus, began my military career. Much has been publicized about the contribution in the European theater of war of our brothers in the 100 Infantry Battalion and 442nd Regimental Combat Team. However, the Nisei's role in the Pacific War has not been fully publicized , due to the secrecy at the time. After 4 decades, stories in some detail are beginning to emerge.

There is insufficient time to cover this period in detail, but I would like to summarize some of the significant aspects of Nisei's sacrifices in the Pacific.

It is interesting to note that just prior to Pearl Harbor, ironic as it may seem, in November 1941, 40 of us Niseis were secretly selected for an intensified Army Language School in an abandoned airplane hangar. This school was right under the nose of Lt. General DeWitt, infamous for causing such pain and suffering to us Japanese-Americans, then the Commanding General of 4th Army, headquartered on the same Presidio of San Francisco.

When the anti-Japanese war hysteria was at its peak which eventually forced the mass evacuation of 120,000 Japanese-Americans, - there were a small group of career U.S. Army Officers in the War Dept., Washington D. C. who still had faith in the loyalty of the Niseis.

These were West Point Officers who were former Military Attaches or Language Officers in Tokyo in the late 1930's. They realizing the complexities of the Japanese Language, foresaw the need to have Nisei linguistic ability within the ranks of the Army at a time when war with Japan seemed eminent.

After Pearl Harbor, graduates of the Language School participated in all major campaigns in the Pacific from Alaska to Guadalcanal, New Guinea, Phillipines, Saipan, Okinawa, and to Burma, India and China. Over 6,000 Niseis served in various Pacific Theaters by the end of World War II.

While Niseis were given this chance to serve, we still had to prove our loyalty in battle, as many commanders in the field still, were not ready to accept us.

Many Niseis then were still Buck Privates. Not until a year later in the battlefield, did Niseis began to be recognized. They were finally given their stripes as Non-Commissioned Officers. Even then - sensitive key assignments were still not given to Niseis but to "Hakujin" linguist officers who in most cases had only a limited Japanese language exposure which they acquired in pre-war Japan as Missionaries or Businessmen.

As the war advanced closer to Japan proper, many Niseis were given direct commissions.

With wars end in 1945, many Niseis made military their career. During World war II, as I have tried to describe, Niseis in the Pacific Theaters were used primarily in linguistic roles. However, subsequently during the occupatic of Japan, Korea and Vietnam conflicts, Niseis became professional military officers and occupied high and responsible positions. Niseis were finally recognized not only because of proven loyalty but for their true ability.

Here tonight we see number of fellow high ranking veterans present among us - Ko Sameshima, Gunji Moriuchi, Bill Oda, Ted Miyagishima. These career field grade officers - served our country well in many sensitive and difficult assignments. Most significantly, there is one person among us who volunteered soon after Pearl Harbor from a small mining town in Utah. In Feb. 1946 after studying Japanese at Ft. Snelling, Minnesota, she was among the 13 Nisei WACs who flew into Tokyo to assume occupation duties. She is Atsuko Moriuchi.

Today, we are proud to see Niseis and Sanseis graduating from West Point, Naval and Air Academies and reaching the highest ranks of military. Lt. Gen. Ono now heads the Personnel Dept. of Army in Pentagon. A Navy Capt. Nakagawa, until recently was the Commander of the highly sensitive missile command at Ft. Mugu near San Luis Obispo.

So, in the final analysis, despite the gross injustices incurred by Japanese-Americans during the World War II, there existed an element in the U.S. Army who never lost faith in our loyalty and, who gave us a chance to prove ourselves. In reponse to this challenge, we can say that Niseis most positively served our country "Beyond the Normal Call of Duty".

Last year on Oct. 30, 1987, the Defense Language Institute at Presidio of Monterey established a ~~permanent~~ photo exhibit displaying the contribution of Niseis in the Pacific War, for all to see. At the same time, the Institute held a 46th year anniversary dedication ceremony, reaffirming the legacy of the first Language School of Nov. 1941 at Crissy Field, Presidio of San Francisco.

In conclusion , my life has taken a full circle from those early days in San Jose, and like the salmon that swims back to its original place of birth - this last job in banking brought me back to San Jose Nihonmachi where I was born. Life has been good to me as I had the privilege of serving the community of San Jose in my second career.

Having vowed to myself not to end my life working at the desk, I have retired while I could still walk away. Now, I am enjoying this retired life as a Senior Citizen.

Yet, as some one once said, "If you live only for yourself, you're always at risk of being bored." Adhering to such wise counsel, I am now finding satisfaction in becoming involved in the various community activities, but yet manage to play "a hacker's golf".

As they say in golf - it's not how you drive but it's how you arrive. In life too, even in these so called twilight years I still find many challenges.

In closing may I wish you all a happy and constructive 1988.