

14 NISEI AND THE MARAUDERS

BY AKIJI YOSHIMURA

In the late summer of 1943 certain events took place, which were to shape the military lives of some 3,000 American troops, among them 14 Nisei GIs and their officer of mixed American and Japanese parentage.

First: The Quebec Conference of Allied Leaders authorized the creation of an American ground combat unit for the China-Burma-India theater, the first such troops to fight on the Asiatic continent since the Boxer Rebellion.

Second: A call for volunteers for an undisclosed mission was issued to all infantry units in the continental United States, the Caribbean Defense Area, and in the South Pacific Combat Zones.

Third, and striking closer to home, the names of 14 or more Nisei graduates of the Military Intelligence Language School, Camp Savage, Minnesota, were being screened and investigated to establish their qualifications for what we were soon to learn was a "dangerous and hazardous mission."

The first indication that something big was brewing happened in mid-August of 1943 when the school brass swooped down on the Ft. Snelling barracks where the graduates were billeted and awaiting assignment. There was a flurry of activity, conferences

and other rather obvious attempts to be secretive. At the time, I was engaged in the rather dull pastime of translating a field manual on the operation and maintenance of a Japanese artillery piece with 1st Lt. William A. Laffin. One day Lt. Laffin began asking me rather personal questions about the state of my health, marital status, language proficiency, interests, etc. At first I thought it was a warm and friendly concern of an officer for his enlisted man, but I soon discovered that his interests in me was more military than personal.

In due time I found myself closeted in a small room with Lt. Laffin, where he offered the opportunity to volunteer for a secret and hazardous mission. In spite of myself, I must have managed to mutter a feeble, "Thank you, sir. Yes sir," because before long I discovered my name on a list of 14 EM with orders to report to the Port of Embarkation, San Francisco. Leading the contingent of Nisei volunteers was Lt. William Laffin, a former Ford Motor Company executive in Japan, who had been interned after Pearl Harbor and repatriated to the United States on the exchange ship Gripsholm. Lt. Laffin (later Captain) was killed in action in the Battle of Myitkyina in Northern Burma in May 1944.



Brigadier General Frank Merrill, commanding American infantry troops in Burma during World War II, is between his Nisei interpreters: Tech. Sgt. Herbert Miyasaki of Hawaii, and the author of this story, Tech. Sgt. Akiji Yoshimura of California. The U.S. Army Photograph was taken at Naubaum, Burma.

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Roll Call of Nisei

In immediate charge of the Nisei linguists was S/Sgt. Edward Mitsukado of Honolulu, a former court recorder and writer. Well read and intellectual, Eddie was a warm and compassionate leader, whose only notable fault was chronic forgetfulness. Eddie was the first among the seven Nisei of this group to win commissions via OCS and field promotions. Answering to the roll call were the following Nisei volunteers.

Thomas K. Tsubota, a former bank employee, affectionately known as "Kewpie." A topnotch drillmaster, his somewhat detached and military demeanor belied a deep and abiding concern for the welfare of the men under his immediate command.

Herbert Y. Miyasaki, Pauulo, Hawaii. Stocky, confident, a vigorous personality. A walking Chamber of Commerce for the then hoped for 49th State, whose strong provincialism was the cause of many heated discussions on the merits of the paradise of the Pacific as a state.

Robert Y. Honda, Wahiawa, Oahu, who took a reduction in grade in order to accompany this team. A graduate of the U. of Hawaii; a man of few well chosen words; a philosopher. He is credited with the classic remark, spoken in the pidgin English of the Islands, "War, good fun, eh?" This statement, we hasten to add, was made while the ominous sounds of battle were still distant rumblings.

Roy K. Nakada, Honolulu, a regular diamond in the rough. Size almost kept him out of the service, but managed to talk his way into uniform—not, so he confessed because he aspired to be a soldier but because he couldn't face his friends who had given him such a warm sendoff. A graduate of the U. of Hawaii; glib; equally at home in the rough and tumble of barracks chatter or a lively discussion of eggheads.

Roy Matsumoto, Los Angeles. Slight of build, unobtrusive. We never suspected that he would be one of the great heroes of the campaign.

Ben S. Sugeta, Los Angeles. Big, Brawling, a complete extrovert. A graduate of a middle school in Japan, whose renditions of "Mori No Ishimatsu" became a regular feature of our frequent "social events."

Grant Hirabayashi, Kent, Washington. One of the top students of the top class at Camp Savage. Gentle, soft spoken, neat. Grant broke an arm during training in India, but refused Gen. Merrill's offer to relieve him of his assignment. He fought through two-thirds of the campaign despite his inability to digest "K" rations which was our steady diet for three months.

Jimmy Yamaguchi, Los Angeles, Calif. A competent linguist with a flair for Oriental proverbs. An orator of considerable talent in the Japanese tongue.

Russell K. Kono, Hilo, Hawaii. A Sansei and son of a World War I veteran. Tall, husky of build. A law student at the U. of Michigan before volunteering for the service.

Henry Goshō, Seattle, Washington. Aggressive and articulate, he earned among other things the nickname of "Horizontal Hank" because of being pinned down so many times by enemy fire while serving with the Intelligence and Reconnaissance platoon.

Calvin Kobata, Sacramento, Eternally gay, with a contagious kind of happiness which infected and inspired the team. Although a qualified and outstanding linguist (middle school in Japan, Junior College in California), Cal always subordinated his personal achievement to group effort.

Howard Furumoto, Hilo, Hawaii. Young, intense and impulsive. Golden voiced Howard, for-

mer Oratorical champ of the Territory of Hawaii, was a student of veterinary medicine at Kansas State when he volunteered for Camp Savage.

Completing the list of 14 was the writer, who for reasons best known to him and his teammates was always bringing up the rear. I shall never cease to wonder how come with such a limited language ability (one prisoner accused me of speaking Japanese with a Western accent), and a physical and moral coward to boot, managed to stumble into such fast company. After some 16 years, it is difficult to recall experiences and emotions. Someone once asked me "Why did you volunteer?" I would be the first to admit that it wasn't heroics. In fact, there were times in Burma when, if it were physically possible, I could have kicked myself for having been such an impetuous fool. Nor was I on a great crusade "to make America a better place for Japanese Americans to live in," because I never regarded my stint in uniform anything more or less than a right and a duty.

Perhaps the most impelling reason, presumably shared by all the other Nisei volunteers, was the feeling that the war was passing us by at Ft. Snelling and we wanted desperately to be caught up in it somewhere, somehow. Once the decision was made, however, each of us vowed privately, because we never discussed it as a group, to serve our country not just well but better than any other American.

Mistaken for a PW

Our journey in quest of adventure and excitement took us across the Pacific aboard the USS Lurline, a Matson luxury liner converted into a troopship. Assembled on board the ship were highly trained infantrymen from the various training centers in the States and jungle trained volunteers from the Caribbean area, who comprised the first two battalions of the unit which was to be later assigned the

highly improbable number 5307 Composite Unit, Provisional.

A third battalion of battle tested troops joined the outfit at New Caledonia and Brisbane, Australia. We found that the majority of our fellow passengers were from the Midwest, New England and Southern States. Many had never seen a Japanese, and I suspect that a few had misgivings about sharing passage on an escorted ship with Japanese whatever their nationality. I recall this incident that occurred as the ship passed under the Golden Gate bridge and headed towards the high seas, which indicated to us a need to orient our fellow passengers. A strange GI approached and asked in a rather clumsy but seemingly sincere effort to be friendly, "Say, how're things in your country?" Without hesitation I replied, "It looks pretty good from here." Then, noting his confused expression I proceeded to explain to him that this was also my first trip away from the United States. Apparently, he had the notion that we were former prisoners of war who had a change of heart.

One of the most common questions asked of us was, "What do you think the Japanese will do to you if they capture you?" Our stock answer was, "I don't know what they've planned for us, but they'll haf to run like hell to catch us."

And then, there was the GI who asked us to say "Lala Pa-loza." He had read somewhere that the Japanese had trouble with the letter "L" and with typical American resourcefulness had planned to use the tongue twister to determine whether the unseen adversary in the jungle was friend or foe. Our California English shattered his well laid plans.

During the voyage the Nisei lectured to the troops on the Japanese enemy, their weapons, tactics, physical and spiritual training. By the time we disembarked at Bombay, India, we

had convinced the uninformed and even the skeptics that we were American in thought, speech and action.

At Deolali, a British Cantonment, and at Deogarh in Gwalior Province, our training was begun in earnest. Combat training in long range penetration tactics included forced marches, river crossings, night problems, weapons and range work, all highly intensified by the prospect of a dangerous and arduous mission. The Nisei, in addition to brushing up on their Japanese, pored over maps and intelligence reports of the North Burma area and participated in the daily training problems of the infantry. We were fast becoming an integral part of a combat unit as rifleman-interpreter, both roles which were to prove equally important in the campaign.

Going to Battle

The battle situation at the time the Marauders had its final bivouac before crossing the point of no return is noted as follows:

The Japanese 18th Division, the famed "Kurume Shidan (Div.)," which played vital roles in the fall of Singapore and the capture of Burma, had a stranglehold on the Hukwang and Mogaung Valleys through which the proposed Ledo Road was to be built to link with the old Burma Road. In order to build this land supply route to China, it was necessary to first clear the North Burma area and capture the town of Myitkyina and its all weather airstrip.

By now the rumors of the out-house variety were flying fast and thick. We wanted to believe the one about "the outfit being scheduled for a single strike behind the lines, followed by air travel stateside for a month furlough." Commented one realist, "Yeah, those that are left can be flown back in a P-38." The War Department had estimated in advance 85 per cent casualties.

Merrills Marauders, so named by a Time Correspondent James

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Behind the hunkering Indian houseboys at the CBI Army rest camp at Khanpur, India, are (standing from left) Edward Mitsukado, Akiji Yoshimura, Grant Hirabayashi, Russell Kono and Herbert Miyasaki. Hunkering is quite a feat for Nisei GIs.

Marauders

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Shepley, was ordered to make a series of raids behind enemy lines disrupting communications, destroying enemy strongholds, and in general confusing and harassing the Japanese, while the American trained Chinese Division exerted pressure with frontal attacks. To achieve these objectives, it was necessary for the Marauders to operate in complete secrecy, with bold, swift movements in and out of enemy held territory.

Troops were supplied by air-drops, which is difficult at best and in this case further complicated by combat columns (six in all) operating independently in simultaneous attacks on separate targets. Because of the limited number of desirable "drop areas," it was necessary at times to clear several acres of jungle in order for the planes to successfully unload the cargo of 5-day supply of K rations per man, feed for the animals, medical supplies and ammo.

To escape enemy detection, the Marauders marched for days without food; hacked their way through the heavy undergrowth; clambered over mountains; and waded through leech infested streams. One battalion waded neck and waist deep in a stream for almost a full day, crawled into holes dug into the sheer banks that night, then launched an attack in the early morning hours catching the Japanese by complete surprise.

Nisei G-2 In Action

Because of the nature of the mission, no prisoners were taken. Where then did the Nisei fit into the plan? The Nisei linguists were called upon to accompany reconnaissance patrols. In certain situations, they were sent out beyond the perimeter of defense on listening posts to pick up

scraps of information dropped by the Japanese who conversed loudly secure in their mistaken belief that the Americans could not understand a word they were saying. On occasion they interpreted on the spot oral commands given by the platoon or

squad leader during the Banzai attacks.

Once, when the outfit stumbled over a telephone wire, the Nisei with the aid of the communications personnel tapped the lines and gathered valuable information about enemy disposition and movements. And, of course there were always the diaries, battle orders and other documents to be quickly read and translated for information of immediate tactical value.

On the Marauders' first mission, a strike on the village of Walabum where the Japanese were dug in. Hank Goshō distinguished himself both as a rifleman and an interpreter. Under heavy enemy fire, Hank interpreted the oral commands, pin pointing the area of attack, thereby making it possible for the platoon to anticipate and shift its firepower to meet the onslaught.

In another area with the 2nd Battalion, Honda, Matsumoto, Nakada and Sugeta were crouched over a telephone wire tap, interpreting the communication between elements of the 18th Division. Matsumoto overheard the conversation which disclosed the location of an enemy ammunition dump, which was subsequently destroyed by the U. S. dive bombers. Although under heavy enemy fire, the four Nisei remained on the job gathering intelligence as to movements, disposition and the equally important negative information on reinforcements.

By the time the Marauders withdrew to less violent areas, they had accounted for 800 enemy dead and forced a major withdrawal of the Japanese. This was accomplished at the cost to the Marauders of eight men killed and 37 wounded. However, midway through the second mission, which were two deep penetrations into enemy held territory of from 30-40 miles behind the lines, fatigue, enemy guns and many and varied diseases of the jungles began to take its toll.

Of the Nisei Tsubota, who had been marching despite fever and pain was finally forced out the

campaign. Nakata, too, fell heir to one of the tropical diseases and was evacuated to a field hospital in Northern India. Meanwhile, Mitsukado, Hirabayashi, Kono and Yamaguchi were performing outstanding services translating documents at a roadblock at Shadazup. They were all eventually decorated for meritorious achievement.

While the Marauders made maximum use of the element of surprise, they were constantly exposed to counterattacks and envelopment. Near the end of the second mission, after the primary objectives had been accomplished, the 2nd Bn. was surrounded on Npum Ga Hill by the Japanese and cut off from elements of the 3rd Bn. The 1st Bn. was five days march away, recuperating from a highly successful thrust on Shadazup. For 15 days the battle raged around Npum Ga, which was later named Maggot Hill because of the enemy dead and our own pack animals decaying in the hot and humid Burma weather. The only water hole near the base of the hill changed hands a number of times, and it was finally necessary to drop plastic bags of water, along with rations and ammo, to the beleaguered members of the 2nd Bn. On Easter Sunday, 1944, elements of the 3rd Bn. broke through to effect the rescue, while the 1st Bn., which had made forced marches to reach the scene of the battle, made diversionary attacks to the west and south.

'Horizontal Hank'

Once again we were to discover that the Nisei had distinguished themselves on this battered and bloodied hill. It was here, perhaps more than any other time during the campaign that Goshō earned his nickname of "Horizontal Hank." Marauders of the 2nd Battalion were high in their praise of Honda, Matsumoto and Sugeta who time and again, crawled out on listening posts inviting enemy detection, as well as, fire from friendly forces.

On one of these risky excursions into no man's land, Matsumoto learned that the Japanese

planned an attack the next morning in a given sector. With this information, the perimeter was alerted and elaborate preparations made. Came dawn and the attack. The first wave charged and fell under a murderous discharge of weapons at close range. The second wave hit the ground,

but Matsumoto forced them on their feet again by screaming, "Charge, Charge!" They charged directly into a devastating fire of automatics and machine guns.

But for the Marauders, too the Battle of Npum Ga Hill had been disastrous. The original strength of the outfit was now down to approximately 1,400, and there remained yet another and most difficult mission to achieve the capture of the airfield at Myitkyina.

Ahead loomed the Naura Hkyat, the 6,100 foot pass of the Kumon range, and at best 15 days of climbing and crawling over steep, slippery trails. It was a desperate race against time, the monsoon season, and the fast deteriorating stamina and spirit of the Marauders. For this mission, the Marauders were joined by two regiments of Chinese. Among the Nisei, Hirabayashi, Honda and Sugeta were evacuated because of fever and fatigue.

Capt. William Laffin, leader of the Nisei linguists and doubling as the Unit Intelligence Officer (S-2), led a small advance party of Marauders and native

Kachins to survey and prepare the trails leading over the Kumon range. Our brief farewell meeting at the unit HQ at Naurabum was the last time that I was to see Capt. Laffin alive. Quiet, soft spoken; he was a man of considerable courage and a highly disciplined soldier under fire. (Despite the disparity in our military rank, we had always enjoyed a warm, personal relationship.) News of his fate at Myitkyina came as a great shock to me, and the few minutes I was able to spend at his gravesite near the airstrip seemed a totally inadequate tribute to a fine officer, leader and friend.

Mission Accomplished

The Marauders, its ranks riddled by disease and fatigue and further depleted by skirmishes along the trail, in a final magnificent drive captured the airfield on May 17. With the strip scoured, fresh Chinese regiments were flown in by transport planes to consolidate the gains and relieve the Marauders.

For most, this had been the last ounce of effort. It is estimated that only 200 Marauders remained of the original outfit, who could if necessary carry on for a few weeks longer. But, this was not to be the end. The Japanese at Myitkyina regrouped and began threatening the airfield.

The situation became critical and a number of Marauders who were still recuperating in hospitals in Northern India were declared fit for duty and returned to combat. This resulted in a complete breakdown in morale of an outfit that had successfully executed three daring missions behind the lines; fought through five major and 30 minor engagements; marched through and over 700 miles of impenetrable and impossible terrain; and cleared the North Burma area of the seasoned troops of the crack 15th Japanese Division.

For the Nisei Marauders, however, there was little time to brood over the justice of military decisions. Except for those evacuated for hospitalization, the Nisei continued to serve as interrogators and translators for the new (and green) replacement troops (American) who were committed to battle in a desperate effort to relieve the situation.

Serving with the replacements was like joining the original outfit in San Francisco all over again. One day, Kono and I were conversing in English when a strange GI approached, listened to our discussion for quite some time before inquiring, "Are you Chinese?" We replied in the negative and allowed that we were Japanese Americans. After a moment of thoughtful silence,

he shook his head and said, "Geez, you're a lot better looking than I tho't you'd be."

It takes a lot of patience to dispel the strange notions that the comic strips and hate movies have implanted in the young American minds. On another occasion, Kono, Miyasaki and I were bathing a short distance away and out of sight of the bivouac area. Naturally, we had little on our person to identify us as American soldiers. Once again an unidentified GI approached, and again the same

question. Again we responded in the negative, but this time omitting the fact that we were Americans. We watched the color drain from his face and a "Oh, please God! Say it isn't so!" expression replace the open, friendly countenance. We hastened to correct the omission.

Marauders No More

In mid-August 1944, after the fall of Myitkyina seven months after the Marauders began their historic drive into the jungles, Mitsukado, Miyasaki, Kobata, Kono, Yamaguchi and the writer were finally relieved of their duties. The other Nisei who had since recovered from their various ailments, were serving with G-2, Northern Combat Area Command in Northern India. By this time, the Army had invoked the provisional feature of the 5307 Composite Unit, Provisional. The outfit was no more, and the Nisei Marauders were without a home. Only the Combat Infantryman's Badge, which was a rarity in a Theater where American ground activities were primarily support; the Presidential Unit Citation Ribbon; and the Unit shoulder patch, which though never officially approved

but was worn by the Nisei with the Marauders' characteristic disdain for regulation and formality, linked us with the outfit which was once described in a postwar issue of the Infantry Journal as "the most aggressive, toughest and bravest outfit to fight in the Far East in WW 2."

Eventually the Nisei were assigned to the Southeast Asia Translation and Interrogation Center (SEATIC) in New Delhi, India. In the meantime, Major General Frank D. Merrill, former commanding general of the Marauders, had been made Deputy Theater Commander with Headquarters in New Delhi. The General promptly promoted T/Sgt. Edward Mitsukado to 2nd Lt. Mitsukado, AUS. Miyasaki, Kono and Honda were ordered to Officers Candidate School at Ft. Benning, Ga. Hank Gosho, who for a time had served with the Office of War Information, was returned to the United States for medical care. Thomas Tsubota was also shipped stateside for further hospitalization. Nakada, Furumoto, Hirabayashi, Matsumoto, Yamaguchi, Kobata, Sugeta and the writer were transferred to China where they with other Nisei linguists formed the Sino Translation and Interrogation Center (SINTIC).

Nakada, Furumoto and the writer were to later receive field commissions, while all others held the rank of M/Sgt. by the end of hostilities. Several participated in surrender negotiations and ceremonies in Chinkiang and Nanking, China.

In total, the Nisei volunteers had been awarded a Legion of Merit, 14 Bronze Star Medals and Clusters, and seven of the original 14 were commissioned. More important to the Nisei Marauders than the medals and the gold bars, however, was winning the confidence, respect and trust of their fellow Marauders and other American troops in the CBI Theater. The late General Merrill wrote for the Ex-CBI Roundup (a theater publication being perpetuated by CBI vets)— "As for the value of the Nisei group, I couldn't have gotten along without them. Probably few realize that these boys did everything that an infantryman normally does plus the extra work of translating, interrogating, etc. Also they were in a most unenviable position as to identity as almost everyone from the Japanese to the Chinese shot first



The bearded GI is Sgt. Roy Matsumoto, who participated in the rescue of the 2nd Battalion at Pphum Ga Hill, one of the major battles fought by the Merrill Marauders.

and identified later."

More recently ex-Marauder Charlton Ogburn, Jr., author of "The Marauders" which has received excellent reviews, writes of the Nisei—"All of us, I suppose, when we are moved to reflect upon what human beings are capable of, find that certain images come to mind as illustrations of surpassing achievement. One that will always leap to mine is a composite recollection of Nhpum Ga, and of no part of it more than the heroism, moral as well as physical, of those Nisei . . . What was unspeakably hard for the others can only have been harder still for them. Some had close relatives living in Japan, all had acquaintances if not relatives held in concentration camps in the United States on the grounds that persons of Japanese descent

and feature must be presumed to be disloyal. To help justify the unhappiness we were enduring most of us could tell ourselves that the survival of our people and of the country our forefathers had fought and died for was worthy of sacrifice; for them here was only the value of an idea."