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G.I. JAPYANK

BY GENE CASEY

When they were training in the United States, the Japanese-American soldiers from Hawaii had to take considerable kicking-around from professional Jap haters. In Italy they tried so hard to prove their loyalty to their country that fully two thirds of the battalion became casualties



Pvt. Mac Yazawa's double row of campaign ribbons is tangible proof of his loyalty to the U.S. Below, members of the famed 100th Infantry Battalion move up to a forward position in Italy

SIGNAL CORPS, U.S. ARMY

THE kid hesitated on the other side of the room, anxious to see how he stood, but when I said, "Hello, Soldier," he bounded across with his hand out and smiled all over his face. I never thought I'd shake hands with a Japanese, but I felt pretty good about it afterward, because this kid was a different kind. His blood was Japanese but he was all American.

I'm suspicious by nature and I didn't approach this kid with any social service worker's milk of human kindness bubbling in my veins. I wanted to talk with him because he was from the famous 100th Infantry Battalion, and dozens of big questions had been forming in my mind as to just what made that outfit tick. The Hundredth was composed almost entirely of Japanese-Americans from the Hawaiian Islands, and it was public knowledge that they'd licked the pants off Hitler's boys in Italy and had kept going in the face of terrific casualties. I was wondering why they'd fought like a gang of tigers.

The kid grinned. "It was so damn' cold and rainy," he said, "we got fighting mad. We didn't care a hell of a lot whether we lived or died. We just wanted to go after those Nazis who were keeping us there."

But that wasn't the whole answer.

The kid's background was typical of the rest of the battalion, all of whose enlisted men and half of whose officers were of Japanese descent. He'd been in constant action with them for six weeks in Italy and had had six months in hospitals to think things over.

"My first name is Mac," he said, "but I'd better spell the last one. It's Y-a-z-a-w-a." He stopped to light a cigarette. "I have to watch out I don't smoke too many. They got all the shrapnel out of my lung, but I'm sorta short of breath."

I could close my eyes and listen and he was strictly a G.I. Joe. He was an American kid with an unruly lock of black hair that hung down over his forehead, and he was still young in his ideas, even though he had been sobered by a large chunk of war. He looked more like an Indian from the Southwest than he did like a Japanese. He was short, just under 5 foot 5, and he only weighed 130 pounds with the shrapnel still in his right arm (which had been nearly torn off) and right foot. Normally, he said, he'd go 140 to 143.

He was wearing two rows of ribbons. There was the Purple Heart, and service ribbons for the European, Pacific-Asiatic, Mediterranean and American theaters of operation, and two battle stars—one for the Italian campaign and one for that one-sided scrap at Pearl Harbor. I'd never stopped to think before that there were Japanese fighting on both sides at Pearl Harbor.

The Story Behind the Decorations

Those Japanese-Americans of the Hundredth knew it, because most of them were there, and their battle slogan, "Remember Pearl Harbor," showed how they felt about the sneak attack. But that wasn't what kept them going in Italy after two thirds of the outfit became casualties. There were more personal reasons for the battle spirit which won them three Distinguished Service Crosses, 21 Bronze Stars, 36 Silver Stars and 900 Purple Hearts.

Pvt. Mac I. Yazawa was celebrating his twenty-fifth birthday the day I talked to him. He was born in Honolulu, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Tokuji Yazawa, who settled there forty years ago and raised eight children. He has an older brother, John (who is probably in the Army now, because he was in 1-A the last Mac heard), three older sisters who are married, and two brothers and a sister who are younger than he. One of his married sisters, who lived on the West Coast, is at the Gila Relocation Camp in Arizona, but the rest of his family are still in Honolulu.

Mac and about half of the other boys of the 100th Infantry Battalion attended Honolulu schools. Most of these kids never learned anything about Japan and weren't particularly interested in the country of their ancestors. Mac never even bothered to learn to speak Japanese. Honolulu was the only home they ever knew, and the United States was their country.

The only time they ever wanted to visit



Japan was after the sneak attack, and then they wanted to go with a lot of other Americans in uniform. They were dying for a crack at the Jap army all the time they were fighting in Italy. Some of them couldn't understand why they'd been sent to fight the Germans when they had a personal bone to pick with the Japs who had attacked their homes.

Like many American kids, Mac left high school after his junior year to earn a living. He'd always wanted to be a pipe fitter and he had a chance to learn the trade at the Masaki Plumbing Shop. He became pretty good, too, and he got a Civil Service job as pipe fitter, engineer and general handy man at Fort Armstrong. He left this job by the Selective Service route on November 15, 1941, just three weeks before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

He was assigned to a former National Guard regiment made up of Oahu residents and was sent to Schofield Barracks for training. His company was composed of boys of Hawaiian, Chinese and Japanese ancestry, and they got along beautifully.

Guarding the Beaches

When the December 7th attack came, the airfield near their barracks caught hell, and Mac's outfit turned out with full combat equipment and was sent to Waiananalo Beach to repulse possible landing attempts. There weren't any, but the morning of the second day on the beach, a sentry from Mac's company spotted something offshore that might or might not be a log. One of the company's strongest swimmers stroked out for a closer look, then splashed back to report to his captain: "It's one of those two-man Jap subs!"

The submarine was stuck on a reef, and Mac's company captured it with the aid of a dive bomber from Bellows Field which bombed it free. One of the crew died from bomb concussion, but the other was taken prisoner. Mac will always be proud of the fact that his company captured the first prisoner taken by the United States in this war. His outfit guarded that beach for seven months, then was called back to Schofield, and the Japanese-American boys in it and those in another regiment made up from all the other Hawaiian Islands except Oahu were sent to the United States for more combat training. There were hundreds of them and they formed the 100th Infantry Battalion.

On the mainland, they first learned of the problem that was making life difficult for great numbers of loyal Japanese-Americans. They were willing to take their government's word for it that there were Jap spies in this country, just as there were German spies. But they thought that most Japanese-Americans were loyal citizens, the same as most German-Americans. They couldn't understand why some folks in the United States were down on everyone of Japanese ancestry. They trained at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, for six months, and all the white folks they saw treated them fine, but they worried about the sentiment that was arising against them in other sections. They'd never run into anything like it before, and they didn't know what to do about it.

Then Mac went to the Gulf of Mexico Command with some of his buddies for specialized training in the handling of war dogs. He spent three months at this, rejoined his battalion at Camp Shelby, Mississippi, for seven months, and then went on maneuvers in Louisiana. The G.I. Japanese ran into their first racial trouble in the South. It didn't turn out to be serious trouble, because they kept their mouths shut, but they'd never had anything like it up North. Some folks—soldiers and others—made dirty cracks about their Japanese blood. It hurt them.

The Hundredth went to North Africa and joined the 34th Division, becoming part of a regiment the other two battalions of which were made up of boys from Iowa. The white soldiers at first accepted the G.I. Japanese with reservations, but they didn't make any trouble.

In all his time overseas, Mac never heard anyone make a slurring remark about his Japanese blood; nor, to his knowledge, did any of the others in his battalion. They got

along increasingly well with the white lads in the regiment, and the Japanese-Americans and Iowans became very proud of one another after they'd been in action. The white soldiers got so they used to brag about their Japanese battalion to the soldiers from all-white regiments.

The Hundredth landed at Salerno about ten days after the beachhead was opened, and went right up the valley to take the lead in the Fifth Army advance. The kids were happy and they went ahead to establish a number of "firsts" in the Italian campaign. They were first to take German prisoners, first to destroy a German tank, and the first to charge and take a German position with bayonets.

"We weren't," Mac said, "like Japanese and German troops who fight only because they are sent somewhere and made to. We knew what we were fighting for—for our country and our homes and families, just like other American boys. We fought a little harder because we were anxious to let people know we were good Americans, so our families would be better thought of and better treated back home."

Brunt of the Attack

Mac's company was out in front, leading the way up the Salerno Valley, and it took most of the punishment when the first tough German resistance was encountered. Sergeant Joe Takata, who was a close friend of Mac's and one of the best noncoms in the company, was up ahead with his squad, and suddenly he became suspicious. He made his squad stay back while he went up a hill to reconnoiter. The Germans spotted Joe and opened up, and an 88-mm. shell landed near him.

Joe was killed, but his caution saved the rest of his squad. He was the first Japanese-American soldier to win the Distinguished Service Cross, but he never knew about it. It was sent to his wife in Honolulu, and because Mac and Joe's wife were in the same class all the way through grammar, intermediate and high schools, Mac wrote her a letter. It was a hard letter to write.

Mac was his company commander's bodyguard. (The company commander was Captain T. Suzuki, of Honolulu, who was wounded about three days after Mac, and is at Walter Reed Hospital.) The first they knew of contact with the Germans was when the Nazis opened up with mobile artillery and pinned down Mac's company for an hour.

It was their first time under fire, and most of them were pretty frightened. Mac knows he was, and some of the others told him they were so scared they couldn't move, but none of them were frightened very much after that. They had their first casualties, saw their first buddies killed, and all they wanted to do was kill Germans in revenge.

During the first two days, the Hundredth drove the Germans out of the valley and pushed them back six or seven miles, and the Nazis were beginning to wonder what breed of wildcats they were up against.

On the second day, Captain Suzuki sent Lieutenant Krive (later wounded) and Sergeant Kiyota (killed the night Mac was wounded) out with a squad to take prisoners. They brought back five, including a German officer who spoke English. Mac was standing with the captain when the prisoners were brought up, and he could see that the German officer was dying with curiosity.

Finally the officer asked, "You are Chinese?"

Captain Suzuki shook his head. "No," he answered, "we're Japanese."

The Germans gasped. The officer exclaimed, "Mein Gott! Is Japan fighting against us, now?"

The Hundredth took turns with the other battalions in leading the attack all the way up from Salerno to Cassino. They were attacked twice by German planes north of Naples, and both times were caught in the open, moving along the road. There wasn't much of any shelter, and one attack lasted twenty minutes. The Jerries bombed and strafed and several men were killed and wounded. The Hundredth got madder at the Nazis.

By mid-October, 1943, they were in mountainous terrain, and it turned rainy and cold.

It was no weather for a bunch of boys from Honolulu. Between the cold at night and the Nazi artillery, they couldn't sleep and were pretty miserable. Overcoats and overshoes hadn't caught up with them, and they were half frozen most of the time, but they were hardened to outdoor life, and no one knew became sick or even caught a cold.

They suffered a lot, but they kept it to themselves. They wouldn't even admit to one another that the weather could be too tough for them. Mac was pinned in foxholes for gunfire for days at a time. The longest stretch was three days, and there was a foot of water and mud in the foxhole. He had to keep stamping up and down to keep from freezing, and that made more mud. Bullets and shells were so close that the stench of cordite was always in his nostrils. Shrapnel rained so heavily around him that he gave up all hope of surviving, and he got so mad he didn't care.

Three times the Hundredth fought its way across the Volturno River, and three times was thrown back. The battalion jumped off the fourth time shortly after midnight on the morning of November 4th. Mac's company was in the lead and, for once, there wasn't any opposition crossing the river. But after they were across they slowed down and felt their way along, because no sappers had been out ahead to clear the mines.

At about 2:30 A.M. Captain Suzuki and Mac were up in front when they hit a mine field. They were about sixteen miles south of Cassino. The captain was lucky; but one of the mines got Mac. Shrapnel smashed into his chest and right foot and nearly tore off his right arm. Much of it went into his right lung, but he didn't feel any pain. He was just numb and losing blood, and after a while, as he lay there thinking this was it, he became unconscious.

The next he knew, he was in an evacuation hospital thirty miles behind the lines, and it was three days later. Medicos had taken some of the shrapnel out of his lung and were giving him blood plasma. They told him that his company had kept on going toward its objective, which was a hill, and later in the morning, after Mac was wounded, had charged the hill with fixed bayonets. It was the first bayonet charge the Germans had faced in Italy, and they broke and ran or surrendered. By noon the hill belonged to the Hundredth.

Leadership by Courage

Mac's company kept going and, farther along on the road to Cassino, Lieutenant Kin, a Korean from the West Coast, and his squad took six machine-gun nests. Lieutenant Kin was wounded taking the sixth nest, and he won the Distinguished Service Cross.

Mac spoke so proudly of Lieutenant Kin's achievement that I questioned him further. In Japan, the Koreans are a despised race; I wondered if the hatred had carried over to these Japanese-Americans. I asked Mac how the boys of his company felt about Lieutenant Kin.

"He was very well liked," he said, without realizing why I asked. "We had great faith in his leadership, and most of the boys were glad of a chance to go on patrol with him." The Hundredth went on to greater deeds in the house-to-house and hand-to-hand fighting at Cassino, but Mac was sent back to the station hospital at Naples and then to hospitals in North Africa, where more shrapnel was removed from his lung. He arrived back in this country at the end of February and is now under treatment at Gardiner General Hospital, Chicago.

"I'm one of the lucky ones," he said. "I never expected to get back. I was very sick for three months. I couldn't talk or eat, and I was fed by injections. But I was given the best of care by nurses and Medical Corps men (all of whom were white), and they were very nice to me. Soldiers from the other battalions in our regiment, who were in hospitals with me, were always pointing me out to others and telling them what a swell job my battalion was doing. I was very proud."

THE END

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