

NISEI AND THE ARMED FORCES



PART IV

DEMOCRACY *in action*

At one of the U. S. Army camps way down south in Mississippi, squads of men marched about the parade grounds while drill sergeants barked out orders, "squads left, squads right. Out on the firing range the sharp staccato of the machine gun fire was mingled with the "boom-boom" of a mortar gun. Jeeps dashed madly around.

What's so unusual about a scene like this you may ask. It's an usual activity in any army camp.

Yes, true, but this is Camp Shelby, the only camp in the country designated by the United States War Department as the training ground for the special Japanese Combat Unit. And the men here, about 4,000 of them who had volunteered for this unit, which was created by the War Department in February 1943, are Americans of Japanese Ancestry undergoing intensive training to fight Mussolini, Hitler or Tojo whenever or wherever ordered. Over a thousand of them were recruited from the ten relocation centers. The rest of the group came 4,000 miles away from Hawaii.

Was there no American citizens of Japanese ancestry serving in the Army before this? Why the Special Combat Unit?

Before the outbreak of the war in December, there were approximately 5,000 nisei soldiers in the United States Army. (This figure represents the largest percentage in proportion to all na-

tionalities--E.). The bulk of them came from the Pacific Coast and were serving in the various branches of the Army at many of the camps situated along the coast. They trained side by side with their fellow American soldiers.

When war came, the army did not know what attitude to take concerning the Japanese American soldiers in their midst. If the nisei soldiers were sent to the Pacific Combat Area, how could they be differentiated from the soldiers of Japan? What of the attitude of the Caucasian soldiers? There were many other puzzling questions. Until some solution to this problem could be found, nisei soldiers training in the combat branches of the service were transferred to non-combatant groups. A large percentage of them were shifted to the medical corp division. Subsequently all nisei soldiers on the Pacific Coast were transferred to camps in the Mid-West. Simultaneously, General DeWitt, commanding officer of the Western Defense Area, proclaimed that American soldiers of Japanese ancestry would be barred from the coastal area. This was done to eliminate any possibility of a spy hazard. The Pacific Coast was jittery with invasion fear. The coast was in the grip of a war hysteria.

Those who reported to the Selective Service Board as their induction turn came were told that the Army was not accepting nisei into the service at the present. Many volunteered but received the same answer. All nisei were automatically placed in the 4-C, aliens, and 4-F, physically unfit, classification.

NISEI COMBAT TEAM

A few months after the outbreak of the war, evacuation of all Japanese, aliens and citizens alike, from the coastal area, was ordered by General DeWitt. Subsequently all were placed in ten inland relocation centers.

During their confinement either in the assembly centers or later in the relocation centers, the nisei sent hundreds of letters to the Secretary of War and even to the President of the United States, asking that they be allowed to serve in the Army. But the answer was always the same, "The War Department does not at the present time contemplate taking nisei into the armed forces of the country." Plainly the War Department, had not as yet formed any definite policy in regard to Japanese-Americans of military age.

Their loyalty questioned, denied even a chance to prove their

loyalty, the nisei became wrapped up in their sense of grievances and lived an apathetic life within the confine of the centers. The nisei jokingly referred to their 4-C and 4-F classifications. But beneath their banter one could discern a note of resentment and bitterness.

In such environment, Secretary of War Stimson on January 28 suddenly proclaimed, "Plans have been completed for a nation-wide voluntary induction of American-born Japanese now in the ten relocation centers and elsewhere in the United States and the Hawaiian Islands. Loyal Americans of Japanese ancestry will compose a special unit in the United States Army. This action was taken following study by the War Department of many earnest requests by loyal American citizens of Japanese extraction for the organization of a special unit of the Army in which they could have their share in the fight against the nation's enemies.

"It is the inherent right of every faithful citizen, regardless of ancestry, to bear arms in the nation's battle. When obstacles to the free expression of that right are imposed by emergency consideration, those barriers should be removed as soon as humanly possible. Loyalty to country is a voice that must be heard, and I am glad that I am now able to give active proof that this basic American belief is not a casualty of war.

"Steps must be taken to determine those individuals in whom the United States can place full trust and confidence. The questionnaire is a means to that end."

Plainly this was an initial step in a program to restore the nisei back into normal community life where they could share the lot of the general public. The questionnaire and the Combat Unit were the keys. But before this could be done, their loyalty had to be determined first, for the government was fully aware that there were some "whose ties with the Japanese Empire were such as to disqualify them for positions of trust in this country."

One of the nisei's reactions to the announcement was that of confusion and they failed to see the gravity of the issue before them. Experiences of the past year rankled in their minds, and they hesitated; they doubted; they questioned.

Place any other group under similar experience and the reaction would have been the same. For, after all, the basic emotions of human beings are all the same regardless of racial differences.

Far sighted nisei leaders as well as the WRA Administrative staff pointed out the seriousness of the issue at stake. "The

whole future of the nisei in the United States is at stake," they said.

"You are on the spot, you must look forward and not backward. For your own sake you can't let the bitterness and hurt in your hearts blind you to the tremendous implications of your refusal to cooperate. The people on the outside will not know your reason. They will simply think, 'There, that proves it. The Evacuation was necessary and right. Those people are disloyal. Look they won't even join our sons to fight for democracy.'"

"The people on the outside do not know of your loyalty and therefore the success of the government's program is of the utmost importance. You should be thinking of your duty to your country rather than the rights which have been temporarily suspended due to exigencies of war. Establish your loyalty first, then your rights will be that much easier to recover."

THE ANSWER

The government patiently waited for the verdict which was to decide the future of the nisei in the United States. Were they still loyal in spite of the bitter experiences which they had undergone or had the strain on their loyalty been too great?

The Volunteer Combat had been endorsed by the President of the United States. On February 1, he had written to the Secretary of War Stimson endorsing the plan and attesting to its high purposes in these words; "I am glad to observe that the War Department, the Navy Department, the War Manpower Commission, the Department of Justice, and the War Relocation Authority, are collaborating in a program which will assure the opportunity for all loyal Americans, including Americans of Japanese ancestry, to serve their country at a time when the fullest and wisest use of our manpower is all-important to the war effort."

The answer came in slowly and then gained momentum as the issue before the nisei became clarified. Leaders, who took a long range view of the situation pleaded in behalf of the future welfare of this racial minority.

At Minidoka Relocation Center, 300 volunteered. This group represented 19 per cent of eligible males of military age. Although the other centers did not have as high a figure as Minidoka, Army officials expressed satisfaction with the results obtained.

Nisei soldiers in training or fighting at the front and the volunteers are all of one opinion in their determination to dispel the doubts and suspicions about their loyalty to the country of their birth. They had to justify the faith placed in them by liberal minded army officials as well as others who had worked diligently to make this opportunity possible. A volunteer from the Topaz Relocation Center wrote:

"I have volunteered because it is my firm conviction that the destiny of the Japanese American people is here in America.

"I am as much embittered as any other evacuee when I consider how our race was singled out to be uprooted from our homes, farms, businesses on the Pacific Coast and herded behind barbed wire fences, even though we are American citizens and our parents are law-abiding pioneers who have been denied citizenship by the U.S. naturalization laws.

"Devote the utmost of ourselves to this cause, and not let the darkness of our present situation or our grievances prevent us from proving our worth before the eyes of the American public."

Another letter from a nisei serving as interpreter in the Solomon Islands to his former instructor at Camp Savage reflects the same spirit.

"I have a good chance of not coming out of this alive and I tell you that I don't mind dying but I won't stand for anyone undoing all of the work that you, our classmates and all of us are doing."

When Japan attacked Hawaii, nisei members of the National Guards rushed out to the field and manned machine guns in defense of the Islands. Three members of this group recently received recognition from the War Department. Former nisei members of the Hawaiian National Guard, about 1,000 of them are now on the mainland training for active combat duty.

About 175 soldiers are serving in the South Pacific combat zone acting as interpreters, according to the recent United Press dispatch.

They and the thousands of others who will follow them into the widely scattered combat zones are proof to the scoffers and the doubters, who are continually trying to discredit the loyalty of the nisei, that Americanism is a matter of the mind and heart and is not based on ancestry. Nisei are fighting to gain public recognition of this fact in addition to fighting the axis.

--Tsuyoshi Nakamura