

Legacy



Family

100th soldier, Eddie Ikuma, poses with his family.
and a family friend (far right)



Left to right, Top row - Tetsuo Kanano, Yoshito Morikawa, Shigeo Tanouye, Chikami Hirayama. Middle row - Yutaka Inouye, Kenneth Harada, Taketoshi Chigawa, Stanley Teruya. Bottom row - Katsumi Murrai, Yutaka Suzuki, Mike Nagaishi.

Who Was the Nisei Soldier?

No one could have predicted the outcome for the men of the 100th in June 1942, when they boarded the troopship *S.S. Maui* and headed for ports unknown. No one could have known how many would never return or how many would return gravely wounded in body and spirit. Within two years, however, Japanese Americans from Hawaii became renowned as the "Purple Heart Battalion," having endured heavy loss of life during their battles in Italy as they marched northward toward Rome.

These unusual looking men were remarkable troops who evoked curiosity and questions wherever they went. They had Asian faces. Generally small in stature, sometimes wearing spectacles, many looked like mild-mannered schoolteachers. Most spoke a different kind of English called "pidgin."

The civilians knew the Asian soldiers as gentle, friendly men who shared their chocolates, cigarettes and food. German soldiers and fellow American troops knew them as driven, extraordinary warriors. "Why do you fight for America?" the Germans wanted to know. The civilians asked, "Where do you come from?"

With the exception of some Mainland-born soldiers, the men of the original 100th were from Hawaii – products of a complex social fabric and the beneficiaries of a cultural legacy that emphasized education, honor, loyalty and honesty. They were the sons of the Issei – immigrants from Japan who bore much adversity for the sake of their children.

Like millions of other immigrants who came to America, the Issei left their homeland for various reasons. A few Japanese, such as shipwrecked sailors and fishermen, could be seen in America by the early 1800s. But large-scale, purposeful immigration eastward to America and the Kingdom of

Hawaii was sparked in the late 1800s by the push and pull of hard economic times.

Thousands of struggling subsistence farmers in Japan, hit by low harvests and high taxes, answered the call of Hawaii's haoles sugar planters. The planters needed people with strong backs who were able to labor from dawn to dusk under a blazing sun.

Getting and keeping cheap labor had been a continual problem for Hawaii's sugar industry. Native Hawaiians could not meet the need for plantation laborers in large numbers since their once-thriving population had dwindled drastically after contact with the West. Hawaiians were used to living within a mainly cooperative, nature-based society. Like native Americans, Hawaiians were devastated by the effects of a different value system which virtually annihilated their natural environment. Before long, much of Hawaii's natural resources were depleted through such activities as whaling and hunting. Due largely to greed, rare wildlife and sandalwood forests were destroyed. Numerous Hawaiians, latched together like pack mules, died from the hardships of hauling sandalwood logs and working in the damp cold of the mountains. Like fish out of water, native Hawaiians perished from diverse causes, including despair, social ills and such foreign diseases as measles and smallpox.

Before long, the sugar industry flourished with the labor of Asians, especially the Japanese. Of nearly 40,000 sugar workers in 1901, about 70% were Japanese.

While industry profits soared, the conditions of the Issei laborers improved little. Many of the laborers were treated as commodities similar to pack mules. One sugar company, for instance, acknowledged a plantation manager's letter that requested bonemeal, canvas, "Japanese laborers," macaroni





Perpetuating cultural values

and a "Chinaman." Such dehumanization turned hope into bitterness for many a worker who toiled for a few cents a day.

Unlike the men, most of the Issei women were not in Hawaii by choice. They were brought to the Islands either by parents, husbands or as "picture brides," but their contributions were enormous. Besides performing physically grueling labor (some women gave birth in the fields), the women took in laundry, ironing and sewing, prepared lunches for bachelors, and tended to the daily needs of their fast-growing families. Sleep was a luxury for many a weary Issei mother who comforted a crying baby through the night so that her laborer husband could get adequate rest for the next day's work.

Rising at dawn, the laborers faced a full day in the hot fields where endless rows of sugar cane awaited. Sharp leaves of the cane cut deeply into flesh. Swirls of red dust flew into eyes and nostrils and clung to hair moistened by sweat. Inside the humid, noisy mill, workers could taste the dust and perspiration which poured down their faces. At night, after a dinner of rice and some fish cooked with vegetables, shoyu and sugar, the exhausted laborers found a few hours of rest in their tiny hovels.

When asked about the use of only nonhaole plantation labor, a millionaire businessman responded: "When you are asked to go in the sun and into the canebrake ... you are subjecting the white man to do something that the good Lord did not create him to do. If He had, the people of the world, I think, would have had a white pigment of the skin and not variegated colors."

The striking image of the plantation luna, or overseer, is etched in the minds of many an oldtimer. Luna were usually haole or Portuguese men who carried a black "snake" whip as they rode horseback through the fields. No wonder that Mits Fukuda was surprised when he first arrived in Oakland, California as a 100th soldier and observed the following:

"In Hawaii most of the working people were either Japanese, Chinese or Filipino and all the white people were supervisors and management ... This is the concept that we had as we grew up. We got to Oakland and we looked at the people working the waterfront and saw white faces doing longshore work. This struck me as being different. All through my visit through the U.S. Mainland, I was struck by this difference."

When plantation workers turned to unions and strikes to improve their conditions during the early 1900s, they faced scorn and stereotyping. Haole-owned newspapers displayed cartoons with buck teeth and slanted eyes – a forerunner of things to come. How, wondered many haoles, could such people be molded into an "American" and "Christian" image? The establishment attacked "Asiatic paganism," saying Buddhism was a major influence behind worker unrest, and blamed, among others, Japanese editors and language schools. Ironically, language schools emphasized such values as respect and loyalty.

Clearly, Hawaii's Nisei and Issei lived in an environment that regarded them with suspicion and prejudice. Especially as they grew in numbers. By 1920, there were some 256,000 people in Hawaii. Of that number, about 109,000 were Japanese.

Like other immigrants, the Issei clung to traditions and beliefs that brought comfort in their new environment. Some traditions were passed on to their children such as *O bon*, in which ancestors long gone were honored.

As the Nisei grew older, they helped their parents on plantations, farms and small businesses. Some Issei had become bookkeepers, tailors, barbers, fishermen, storekeepers, carpenters and the like. "We worked summertime in the cane fields," recalled Kenneth Higa, whose father labored at Kekaha, Kauai. Higa's classmates at Waimea Junior High School included Spark Matsunaga ("one class





Honabata Days

above me"), Ben Tamashiro ("one class below me") and Sakae Takahashi ("the first graduating senior class of 1937.")

No matter which island they called "home," the Nisei belonged to a generation that took to heart the lessons of democracy learned in the public schools. Nearly 20,000 Japanese children were in public school by 1920, rising to more than 41,000 by 1930.

McKinley High School, sometimes called "Tokyo High" by its detractors, was a place where many Asians were exposed to ideals of "justice" and "equality." Some progressive haoles, such as schoolteacher and principal Miles Carey, inspired the Asians to reach out. "Miles Carey got his people to do what he wanted because he treated them humanely and considerately," said Major James Lovell. "If there was any fault to find with him – and maybe it's not a fault – I thought of Miles as a dreamer. But I think it was due to his efforts to treat people right."

But the "real world" contradicted the ideals the Nisei learned in public schools. In the real world, nonhaoles were excluded from meaningful promotions or positions of power. In the real world, nonhaoles who murdered haoles were given the death sentence, as in the 1929 hanging of mentally deranged Myles Fukunaga. But haoles who murdered nonhaoles were given minimal sentences as in the 1889 lynching of Katsu Goto. Goto's murderers mysteriously escaped jail and managed to flee the islands. In the infamous Massie case of 1932, the murderers of a native Hawaiian, Joseph Kahahawai, were set free. Kahahawai's convicted killers included Navy Lieutenant Thomas Massie and two Navy enlisted men.

Within a society that considered nonhaoles as "inferior," the Japanese, like other minorities, tried to be "Americanized." During the process, however, many declined the opportunity to speak and write

the language of their ancestors. Like other Asians, many Japanese put away their Buddhist and religious shrines, burned family kimonos, pictures and other heirlooms, denied their rich cultural heritage and emulated the characteristics of the larger culture. But no matter how hard the Nisei tried to "be American," no matter how high their test scores, no matter how hard they worked, they could not escape the visibility factor. Injustice and racism during the era were some of the harsh realities of life.

Feelings of inferiority in being "different" were intensified by media projections of the era's socially approved appearances and behavior. Movies and magazines extolled the appeal of Betty Grable and the sophisticated manner of Clark Gable. History books told of hardships faced by the Pilgrims and new settlers, but ignored the enormous suffering of Native Americans and African Americans. The realities of ethnic minorities were a far cry from the sugar-coated images illustrated in Dick-and-Jane elementary schoolbooks. Such one-dimensional views of history exacted a sad price from minorities. Some rejected their parents' traditions. Others could not relate to their history books. Some remember teachers saying, "Forget your Japanese heritage – be American." But many Nisei found it difficult to relate to Pilgrims and European history. Such far-away people and places had no bearing on their daily lives.

Although their lives were a daily struggle, the Nisei found comfort in their large numbers and in the kinships forged since childhood. (By 1937, there were nearly 400,000 people living in Hawaii. Of that number, more than 150,000 were of Japanese ancestry.) The boys who would become men of the 100th shared a common cultural legacy. They went to school and played together. They knew each other's families. They worked at similar jobs. They were related through blood, work, or marriage ties.





Hawaii Rainbows - early days

At home, they enjoyed the traditional Asian fare of rice, fish and vegetable dishes. Outside, they pledged allegiance to the American flag, learned about the Declaration of Independence and thrived in the richness of other cultures – Polynesian, Filipino, Chinese, Puerto Rican, Portuguese and others. They danced to Glenn Miller songs and knew the words to “I’ll Be Seeing You.” They enjoyed poi, hot dogs and the sunshine that encouraged physical activity.

Island Nisei excelled in sports – boxing, judo, swimming, baseball, football. Years of outdoor exposure, including labor on farms and plantations, toughened their bodies and enhanced their overall strength. Despite their generally smaller physique, the Nisei often beat much larger opponents, a skill that proved useful during training on the Mainland. Whatever the sport, many became champions in their field.

Several other factors contributed to the Nisei soldiers’ outstanding prowess in battle. They were able to communicate with other cultures through pidgin, a skill honed from living in Hawaii’s multi-racial society. The Nisei were generally flexible and open to other cultures. Most important, however, were the values the Nisei held dear within their hearts and minds and gave to their comrades in battle. These were concepts learned from their parents – *on*, or obligation to others, and *giri*, or reciprocity. Such values proved priceless to the men of the 100th as they evolved into some of the finest combat soldiers of World War II.

Portions of the article are excerpted from the book, “I Can Never Forget”: Men of the 100th/442nd by Thelma Chang



Pals – Ronald Yoshioka & Eddie Mitsukado



