

AMERICAN-JAPANESE HEROES

THIS is a story I've been aching to tell for a long time, but military security has kept it under wraps. It is the story of how well and how valorously Japanese-American lads worked in the India-Burma theater during the last two years of the war.

Perhaps you read that interview with Uncle Joe Stilwell in which he volunteered to become a charter member of a "pickaxe club" to beat some sense into those narrow-minded Americans who are trying to deprive the Nisei of their rights back home. And I'm looking in the direction of a Los Angeles police commissioner, too. Well, Uncle Joe, count me in as Charter Member No. 2.

I've yet to find an officer or a G.I. out in this theater who has anything but praise for the unselfish toil those lads performed in the reconquest of Burma. Although they were not permitted to engage in combat, like their associates in Italy and Germany (you can imagine how they would have been treated if captured), they worked not only in the front lines but behind the Japanese lines for months. Principally their work was psychological warfare and interrogation of captured Japanese, but they also organized Kachin tribesmen to harass the enemy from the rear.

Here is what Col. G. F. Blunda, commanding officer of the Southeast Asia Translation and Interrogation Center said about the Nisei:

"Each Nisei was as valuable as a company of infantry in Burma, despite the fact they were noncombat troops. Many Allied soldiers are returning safely to their homes because the Nisei lighted the darkness in front of them by interrogating prisoners and translating documents.

"The value of the Nisei was that they supplied the missing link—understanding of the shades and meaning of the Japanese language, written and spoken—between the enemy and the British and U. S. intelligence officers responsible for evaluation of information gathered from various sources."

There were 150 Nisei in the India-Burma-China theater during the last

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two years of the war. Yet they were so well protected that none was captured or killed, and only one was wounded. (I say "captured" advisedly. T/5 Tony Uemoto was seized by the Chinese south of Tonkwa, and it took considerable persuasion to liberate him.)

Two of the lads won silver stars for gallantry. They were T/3 Eichi Sakauye and S/Sgt. Kenny Yasui. Kenny is from Los Angeles and is fondly known as "Baby York." Sakauye rescued a British officer under fire at the Mawlu Road Block, when the latter was buried by a shell blast. Once, 150 miles behind the Japanese lines with an Indian division, Sakauye tapped a Japanese telephone line but Burmese agents reported the incident to the enemy. The Japanese commander honored him by addressing him personally over the phone. Sakauye didn't reply, of course.

Kenny once swam the Irrawaddy River at Myitkyina, impersonated a Japanese colonel, and made eight enemy enlisted men swim back with him. He then ordered them to perform close order drill and marched them into the Allied lines. Kenny was working with the psychological warfare team of the Office of War Information at the time, and our records show he brought nine men back with him. If his citation reads eight, let it go at that.

One of my favorite Nisei is S/Sgt. Karl Yoneda of Glendale, who was too old for the Army when I last saw him—42. Karl had returned to Japan in the early 'thirties and spent months, off and on, in jail because of his activities on behalf of labor unions. He left Japan in 1938 and returned to Oakland, where he also spent considerable time in jail because he was one of Harry Bridges' best organizers on the waterfront when Bridges was an extremely disliked person. Karl later was sent to a relocation center and headed up a petition asking permission to serve with the Army. He got in, and had worked himself up to the point where a commission as second lieutenant was coming his way when the war ended and he was discharged as over age.

On the same psychological warfare team with Karl was Bill Roth, son of W. P. Roth, the Matson Steamship magnate. Karl and Bill, while on the opposite sides of the ideological fence, spent their evenings planning

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labor-management committees they would set up when they got home.

Then there was Lt. Clark Kawakami, whose father was a New York correspondent for Japanese papers before the war. Clark is a handsome devil, because his Irish blood mixes well with the Japanese. The gals always sighed when he walked into the office.

Lt. Kan Tagami of Selma, California, was one of the fourteen Nisei awarded direct commissions in the India-Burma theater. He was a team leader of the 124th Cavalry, Mars Task Force language team, and accompanied that outfit from its training at Ramgarh through the capture of Lashio.

I ran into him again last night. He'd just returned from Malaya, where he had headed interrogation teams for the British, all the way from Singapore to Rangoon.

"The only difficulty in interrogation of Japanese prisoners was overcoming their fear," Kan told me. "But after medical attention, a hot meal, bath and cigarette, they realized they weren't going to be killed or tortured as their leaders had led them to believe. They then gave information freely. Their only reticence was in disclosing their names, for they feared disgrace at home."

Americans with the Mars Task Force marveled at the guts the Nisei showed marching long, grueling miles through the jungle with the same field equipment carried by their American compatriots, who were nearly twice as big and husky. They were model soldiers. There are no records of disciplinary action, no instances of disaffection. Praise for their work came not only from the American Army, but from the British and Chinese forces, from the Marauders and Mars Task Force, from the Office of Strategic Services and the OWI.

One lad who gave long and distinguished service to Merrill's Marauders was T/Sgt. Roy Masumoto, whose favorite stunt was to crawl within hearing distance of a Japanese command post and listen to verbal orders which he relayed back to the Allied lines.

Four Nisei were awarded bronze arrowheads for their theater ribbons for parachute jumps behind Japanese lines. They operated for the OSS with the Kachin Rangers in the

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Myitkyina-Fort Hertz area for eight months. The Kachins continually harassed the Japs with ambushes and road blocks and made that section of Burma pretty unhealthy. The job of the Nisei boys was to direct the operations, to translate captured documents, and to interrogate prisoners. Their information was radioed back to the Allied lines. And none of these Nisei had ever before made a parachute drop until they were dumped into the jungles of northern Burma. One of these lads was T/3 Tomochi Tsuruda of Santa Barbara, and I hope he gets a big hand when he returns home. Hell, I hope they turn out with brass bands to meet every one of them.

