

WHY SERVE?

Presented to

Greater Falls Church Veterans Council
Cherry Hill Park
Falls Church, Virginia
October 13, 2013

By

Gerald Yamada, President
Japanese American Veterans Association

Thank you for the invitation to speak to you this afternoon. I am Gerald Yamada, President of the Japanese American Veterans Association. The topic of my presentation today is the question -- "Why Serve?"

For the Japanese American community, during World War II, this was a divisive and difficult question. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans (or Nisei) were re-classified as 4-C -- aliens ineligible for military service -- despite their American citizenship.

On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which authorized the military to forcibly remove persons of Japanese ancestry from the western United States. Under the authority of Executive Order 9066, approximately 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry were given only 2 weeks' notice to sell their personal property and businesses. They were forcibly evacuated -- first to assembly centers for 10 months -- and then imprisoned in 10 remote relocation centers for the duration of the war.

Then, in 1943, the War Department decided to organize a segregated, all-volunteer Japanese American combat unit. Japanese Americans were asked to volunteer. If you were a young Japanese American, around the age of 20, sitting in one of America's "concentration" camps, behind barbed wire, surrounded by armed guards, with your family's worldly possessions either sold for pennies on the dollar or left behind, with your constitutional rights suppressed by the government, labeled an enemy alien, and your loyalty questioned -- would you volunteer to fight for America in a segregated combat unit? You would ask yourself -- Why serve?

In answering this question, the community divided into two groups. One group felt that fighting for America was the only way to show that they were loyal Americans. About 1,500 Japanese Americans from the mainland answered the initial call to serve. Together with about

3,000 Japanese Americans from Hawaii, they formed the unit that became known as the 442nd Regimental Combat Team (or RCT). They adopted the motto “Go for Broke.” By the end of the war, approximately 30,000 Japanese Americans served in the 442nd RCT; the 100th Infantry Battalion, which was another segregated, all Japanese American combat unit that became part of the 442nd RCT; and the Military Intelligence Service (or MIS) that was made up of Japanese American linguists who were embedded with combat units in the Pacific.

The other group answered the question “why serve?” by refusing to volunteer or to serve when drafted. This group was comprised of two main subgroups. One subgroup took the position that, “when my rights are restored, I will serve.” The other subgroup wanted Japan to win the war, with some returning to Japan when given the opportunity.

Those, who volunteered, put “country” first, in spite of the injustices that they had to endure. Those, who wanted their rights restored before serving, put “me and my constitutional rights” first. Both groups took valid positions. But, did either group make a difference?

The soldiers in the 100th/442nd fought in Europe. They sustained a 300% casualty rate. The combat records of the soldiers in the 100th/442nd and their valor have become legendary. Over a three year period, they were awarded 7 Presidential Unit Citations and over 18,000 individual awards including 21 Medals of Honor. Their most famous battle was saving the Texas “lost battalion”, in which they lost more men than they saved. When asked why the Army ordered them to attempt the futile rescue when other units had failed, Senator Daniel K. Inouye, who lost his arm in that battle, answered, “We were expendable.”

The work of the MIS in the Pacific is less publicly known because their work was classified until recently. Their contributions to the war against Japan are detailed in the book *Nisei Linguists*, which was published by the US Army in 2006. Without question, the MIS obtained invaluable intelligence by translating Japanese messages and documents and by interrogating Japanese prisoners. Their work saved lives and shortened the war against Japan.

The accomplishments of the Nisei soldiers went beyond victory on battlefields. Although their valor brought honor to themselves, their accomplishments also made life better for their parents and future generations of Japanese Americans. Their legendary military record was cited by Members of Congress in support of passage of:

- Walter-McCarran Immigration and Naturalization Act giving the first generation of persons of Japanese ancestry (or Issei) the right to become naturalized US citizens,
- Creation of a Presidential Commission that found that Executive Order 9066, issued by President Roosevelt, was the result of “prejudice, war hysteria, and the lack of political leadership”,
- Civil Liberties Act of 1988 apologizing for the unjust imprisonment of persons of Japanese ancestry during World War II and awarding redress payments,

- National Japanese American Memorial Act of 1992 authorizing the building of a national memorial in Washington, DC to honor the patriotism of Japanese Americans during World War II,
- Confinement Sites Preservation Act of 2006 authorizing a Federal grant program to preserve the confinement sites used during World War II to imprison persons of Japanese ancestry under the authority of Executive Order 9066, and
- Awarding of the Congressional Gold Medal in November 2011 to the soldiers who served in the 100th Infantry Battalion, 442nd RCT, and MIS during World War II.

For those who refused to serve, their decision can be defended on the grounds that they were exercising their constitutional rights. Approximately 78,000 internees were asked if they would serve in the US military and would forswear allegiance to the Japanese Emperor. Of the 78,000, approximately 5,300 answered “no” to both questions, amounting to 6.8%. Although they followed their conscience, some paid a price by having to give up their personal freedom. After Selective Service Act responsibilities (aka the “draft”) were re-instituted for all Japanese Americans, approximately 315 refused to serve, while their families were still imprisoned -- of which 263 were sentenced to do prison time for violating the Selective Service Act. Unfortunately, their actions resulted in no positive change in government policies for the community, and the government used their “no-no” answers to consolidate them in one of 10 camps.

It is important to point out that, notwithstanding this very divisive conflict within the community, no person of Japanese ancestry, residing within the United States, was ever convicted of espionage or sabotage against the United States.

If young men and women were to ask me today “why serve?” my advice is very simple. I am sure that all veterans would agree with my answer that if you serve, you bring honor to yourself, your family, the community, and the military. You affirm your faith in, and loyalty to, America by putting country first, as did the Nisei soldiers who served during World War II.

The Japanese American experience also has an important lesson for the American public. Executive Order 9066 is a harsh example of racial profiling by the government. In fighting to prove their loyalty, the Nisei soldiers showed us that we must continue to fight against racially motivated government policies. In the White House ceremony for the returning 100th/442nd soldiers, President Harry Truman declared, “You fought not only the enemy, but you fought prejudice – and you won.” The President went on to say, “Keep up that fight and we will continue to win....” I encourage all of you to enlist in the fight against prejudice. We must keep up that fight and with your help we will continue to win.

In closing, I encourage you to visit the National Japanese American Memorial to Patriotism during World War II. The Memorial was opened to the public in 2000, and ownership of the Memorial now resides in the National Park Service. It is located at Louisiana Ave and D Street, a short walk from Union Station (and the Red Line) and within sight of the Capitol. As one of the most artistic memorials in Washington, DC, the Memorial captures the story of the Japanese

American experience during World War II in granite and bronze. The Memorial also lists the names of the over 800 Nisei soldiers who were killed fighting for the United States during World War II.

Every November 11th, the Japanese American Veterans Association holds its Veterans Day Program at the Memorial starting at 2 pm, rain or shine. Our program honors all veterans. It is open to the public, and, most importantly, it is free. You are invited to attend.

Thank you.