

Understanding AJA experience 75 years after war



As a Japanese-American, or American of Japanese Ancestry (AJA), my preferred term, I had been born in Chicago one year before the end of World War II. My father had immigrated from Japan. Mother's parents had come from Japan and she was therefore the second generation to live in America, referred to as a "Nisei."

In order to understand the AJA experience, one needs to go back to Dec, 7, 1941, when America entered World War II with the attack on Pearl Harbor. On Feb, 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed the infamous Executive Order 9066 that ordered the evacuation of all persons of Japanese descent from the major Western states. They were moved under armed military guards to 10 so-called "Relocation Centers" or "Internment Camps" into forsaken barren desert areas away from the coast. One hundred twenty thousand people, nearly two-thirds being American citizens, were removed without any criminal charges. They were moved solely on the basis of their race. They were put in concentration (not death) camps with barbed wire fences and armed guards manning towers with machine-guns facing in, not out. They stayed in those camps for over three years, resulting in the loss of their jobs, homes, and businesses.

Because our family had settled in Chicago a decade earlier and there were fewer than 400 persons of Japanese descent, we were not put into the camps. My parents furthermore had assimilated our family so well into the local community that our neighbors and chamber of commerce sent a telegram to our Congressman vouching for the loyalty of my father to the United States.

We did experience racist events at our retail store business and in school. My older brother and I received taunts of "Remember Pearl Harbor" and were called "Japs" long after the War was over. My older cousins who lived on the West Side were not as fortunate, getting into serious and numerous fights.

During the war, an AJA nurse died, and her family could not find a cemetery willing to accept her remains for burial because of her race. My father and other AJA community leaders found only the Montrose Cemetery on the North Side of the city willing to provide a burial site. Ever since then, the vast majority of the AJA Chicago community have been buried in that cemetery.

What was the response of my community to the evacuation? They complied with the orders of their government but protested against this abrogation of their civil rights. They sought relief through their elected officials and the court system. Unfortunately, the politicians did nothing. The Supreme Court folded its tent and ruled Executive Order 9066 constitutional.

Instead of being bitter, most AJAs remained loyal to America, had savings bond drives and victory gardens in support of the war effort and volunteered to serve in the Army as most able-bodied Americans did.

At that time, our military was segregated, and the Nisei were formed into an AJA infantry unit that became the most highly decorated unit for its size in the history of the U.S. Army. It was the 100th Battalion, 442nd Regimental Combat Team, authorized with approximately 4,000 soldiers. In 18 months of combat in the European Theater of Operations, it was awarded over 9,400 Purple Hearts, 21 Congressional Medals of Honor, and eight Presidential Unit Citations.

Another unit composed mostly of Nisei was the Military Intelligence Service, or MIS, that served in the Pacific. These were linguists who translated Japanese documents, interrogated prisoners and were instrumental in cracking the secret Imperial code that, according to Major Gen. Charles Willoughby, Gen. Douglas MacArthur's Chief of Intelligence, shortened the war by two years.

I have been asked about my opinion of using the atomic bombs against Japan. As an Army Veteran of 32 years who served in combat in the Demilitarized Zone of South Korea and in Vietnam, I fully supported President Truman's decision. Recognizing the tremendous loss of Japanese civilian lives, far more lives, military and civilian, would have been lost if we were forced to attack the Japanese mainland. The Japanese population would have fought to the death. My grandmother, who was in her 70s, was practicing with a spear for the invasion of the Americans. Instead of a protracted bloody campaign, the Japanese government surrendered within a week after the second bomb was dropped.

After the war, the Nisei turned to rebuilding their lives, many staying in the Midwest and East Coast and most returning to the West Coast. They

concentrated on their families, careers, and communities by emphasizing education, hard work and responsibilities as American citizens. Their example helped AJAs and all Asians to become accepted and welcomed into American society.

As a result, they gained a reputation for being good neighbors, excellent workers, with strong families and low juvenile delinquency. Many became model Americans. At the same time, they continued their fight for the injustice done during the war, and they were supported by their fellow citizens, resulting in the passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, signed by President Reagan. It contained an official apology on behalf of the United States government and authorized a payment of \$20,000 to anyone who had been interned and was still living at the time the act was passed. It admitted that government actions were based on “race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership.”

The Americans who lived during World War II are often referred to as the Greatest Generation. This is absolutely true for me personally as an American of Japanese Ancestry. The Nisei generation were my personal heroes who demonstrated the true spirit of Americanism by keeping faith with our country through the worst of times. They fought for their rights vigorously yet peacefully within our established legal system, which eventually vindicated them.

The lesson for today is that we are blessed to live in a nation that has provided freedom for its citizens and fought for the freedom of others. Our Constitution provides for the redress of citizen grievances, and our nation has recognized injustices and taken actions to correct those faults through lawful processes. It is available to all who care about improving our republic’s founding traditions of freedom and equal opportunity.

• *James H. Mukoyama Jr., of Glenview is a retired Major General in the U.S. Army, a former executive in the financial services industry and an officer for numerous community service organizations, including the ministry of Military Outreach USA, the Patient Advisory Council for the James A. Lovell Federal Health Care Center in North Chicago and the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in Chicago.*

(This article appeared in the *Daily Herald Newspaper*, August 10, 2020.)