

# The Hawaii Nisei Story: Creating a Living Digital Memory

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*"Rarely has a nation been so well served by a people it had so ill treated." – President Bill Clinton.*

**Abstract:** The Hawaii Nisei Story, a Web-based exploration of the experiences of local Americans of Japanese Ancestry leading up to, during and following the Second World War, comprises the life stories of Hawaii-born Nisei (second generation Japanese-Americans) veterans. Some well-known, some less so, these stories are deepened, complemented and complicated by the seldom heard stories of the veterans' wives and families. Read their stories at: <http://nisei.hawaii.edu>

The project bridged the print and digital worlds. Thomas H. Hamilton Library established the Japanese American Veterans Collection to collect, store and catalog official papers, letters, photographs and other materials relating to the veterans' WWII experiences. To document and place these wartime experiences in socio-historical context, the University of Hawaii's Center for Oral History recorded and processed thirty life history interviews. Kapiolani Community College utilized oral histories, a myriad of primary source materials and the technology tools available to go outside the realm of traditional linear narrative and create a digital collection that serves a living digital memory.

## The Nisei Legacy

The Nisei legacy is significant and still relevant today. Their experiences are a powerful reminder of the importance of civil liberties and civil rights in a democratic society.<sup>1</sup>

This community-based project was initiated and funded by the University of Hawaii in response to requests made by Hawaii Nisei veterans for the university to not only preserve but to tell their life stories.

The University of Hawaii Library Archives & Manuscripts Department established the Japanese American Veterans Collection (JAVC) to "document the rich heritage of Hawaii's Japanese American veterans and their families."

The JAVC archive preserves papers and other primary source materials like photographs, letters, journals and manuscripts from individuals, families and organizations. The JAVC web site offers access to comprehensive finding aids for most of their collections and papers. Due to limited resources, only a small part of the archive has been digitized and made

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<sup>1</sup> For more detailed information on the Nisei legacy, please see refer to the Historical Note placed at the end of this paper.

accessible online. Resources have been focused primarily on preserving the collections and creating finding aids for them.<sup>2</sup>

The Center for Oral History at the University of Hawaii at Manoa videotaped and transcribed thirty life history interviews of veterans. World War II and the pre- and postwar experiences of interviewees were placed in the context of individual lives and historical events.

To broadly share and make these stories accessible, Kapiolani Community College's Web Team utilized these oral histories, a myriad of primary source materials and the technology tools available to create the Hawaii Nisei Story web site.

### **Storytelling on the Web**

Print resources (like books) are preserved for generations on library shelves. Digital Libraries and Collections seek to make these resources discoverable online and reach new audiences. Our challenge was taking resources like oral histories and other primary source materials and make them engaging and interesting to a new generation of readers.

The standard formula has been to publish video clips and the oral history transcript text but we wanted to think outside the realm of tradition linear narrative.

Successive generations have no framework for the stories of their grandparents, they have difficulty understanding the meaning and relevance of these personal narratives. They may not understand the references made. Also, watching or reading a personal narrative may not impart connections to larger groups or historical events. These stories need to be placed into context.

Context is defined as, "that which surrounds and gives meaning to something else." Storytelling on the Web allows limitless context.

For the HI Nisei Story, we started with the basic elements. The oral history transcript text provided a personal voice and was supplemented by video clips of the interview. We then started layering in photographs, historical content and supplemental information.

Our goal was to offer readers stories with a depth and interconnectedness that would give a lot of flexibility to the participant. The reader would choose their path and how deeply they delve into each story.

### **Supplemental Information**

#### **Juxtaposing Historical Information with Personal Narrative**

In Whitey Yamamoto's Story<sup>3</sup>, we are introduced to Shiroku "Whitey" Yamamoto. Born in 1923 in Ninole, Hawaii, Whitey is raised by his father Asaemon, an independent sugar cane cultivator. Whitey eventually volunteers for the 442<sup>nd</sup> RCT and is assigned to the Antitank Company.

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<sup>2</sup> Japanese American Veterans Collection web site: <http://libweb.hawaii.edu/libdept/archives/mss/aja/index.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Whitey Yamamoto's Story: <http://nisei.hawaii.edu/page/whitey/>

In the European campaign, the Antitank Company is detached from the 442nd RCT and trained to be glider infantry. They participate in the D-Day invasion of southern France. "Operation Dragoon" commences on August 15, 1944. With paratroopers securing fields for landing, 44 gliders make the dangerous attempt to land. Their mission: hold the area until seaborne troops relieve them.

In Whitey's Story, we provide context by juxtaposing supplemental historical information with the interviewee's words and personal photographs.<sup>4</sup>

Whitey's text:

"And the Germans were smart, too, they had about ten-foot pole, or about fifteen-foot pole, with cables holding up the poles. And they knew just about where we were going to land, and they must have studied, that's what's going to happen."

Historical Information:

As [the gliders] got closer to the ground, they found that the terrain was not as they had been briefed. They hadn't counted on the high hedges or "Rommel's Asparagus." German Field Marshal Rommel had ordered that thousands of wooden poles be erected in open fields to impede glider landings. The spiked poles were about four inches in diameter, 10-foot-tall, and were criss-crossed with barbed wire. Many poles were mounted with Teller Mines, which exploded on impact.

We also provide links to additional stories, allowing the reader to approach this event from more than one perspective. In this instance, we get Lizo Honma's and Chilly Sasaki's accounts of the glider landing. Readers who want to learn more are also provided with annotated bibliographies on the subject.

### Using One Narrative to Enhance Another

Stanley Akita, 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion, was captured in France and marched into Germany. He spent six months in Stalag VIIa, a German POW Camp. By 2005, when the oral history interview was recorded, Mr. Akita had forgotten many of the details surrounding his experience. Using an unpublished memoir he had written in the 1950s, we were able to enhance his story to an incredible degree.<sup>5</sup>

Oral history text:

"It took us quite a while [to get to the POW compound in Munich] because the day [October 23, 1944] we got captured, we went to a small village."

Memoir:

By late afternoon the artillery fire had faded to a soft boom when we came out of the forest near a small town. This is where the wounded were separated from us and taken to a hospital.

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<sup>4</sup> Whitey Yamamoto's Story > Glider Training & D-Day Invasion: [http://nisei.hawaii.edu/object/io\\_1149148189765.html](http://nisei.hawaii.edu/object/io_1149148189765.html)

<sup>5</sup> Stanley Akita's Story > Prisoner of War: [http://nisei.hawaii.edu/object/io\\_1158866319689.html](http://nisei.hawaii.edu/object/io_1158866319689.html)

The rest of us were herded in a small barn with straws spread on the ground. It was almost dark when a guard came in and gave us a few loaves of that 23% wood pulp bread. Hungry as we were, we couldn't stomach the bread. The bread was the same size and shape as our American loaf but instead of weighing one pound and being soft, it weighed 1 kilo (equal to two pounds) and very hard. You could kill a guy if you hit him on the head with it.

The German soldiers don't gorge themselves with this bread, for it almost always makes you constipated if you do as we found out. The way they do it was to carry a small pouch on their belt with a slice of that bread about 2 inches thick and a piece of sausage maybe 3 inches long. Whenever they felt hungry regardless of the time of day, they would take out the bread and sausage and put a small slice of each in the mouth and chew on it. Something like the way we used to eat dried abalone back home. They do this 5 or 6 times daily depending on how often they felt hungry.

That night in the barn was uneventful but a sleepless night. We stayed up until late talking of what it'll be like or food we used to eat back home like *sushi*, fish cooked with *shoyu* and sugar, barbeque meat and etc. We felt full just by swallowing our saliva.

### **Hawaii Memory Project: The Next Step**

The HI Nisei Story web site is very much a community-based project that brought together the University of Hawaii and the various Nisei veterans' organizations.

We worked closely with the veterans in a search for existing resources, both published and unpublished, to provide context for these stories. One unexpected development in the project was the sheer volume of primary source materials made available to us by the veterans.

In response to this development, Kapiolani Community College established the Hawaii Memory Project<sup>6</sup>, inspired in large part by American Memory from the Library of Congress.<sup>7</sup> Hawaii Memory will continue to share stories of Hawaii, as well as make available the thousands of photographs and manuscripts we have been digitizing, cataloging/indexing and publishing online.

Understandably, many veterans remain hesitant to turn over their personal photographs and manuscripts to the JAVC archive, especially when that includes signing over copyright to the university. They are very willing to allow us digitize their materials. The veterans then identify the materials and give us permission to publish them online. When possible, we encourage them to authorize release under the Creative Commons license.<sup>8</sup>

Open access to these primary source materials have greatly benefited many other projects. The HI Memory Project collection has provided material for a number of publications and media, including the PBS show History Detectives (Ray Nosaka's Story: Secret Dog Training on Cat Island) and a recent publication on the Doolittle Fliers (Dick Hamada's Story: Operation Magpie). We were also able to help a museum in Mississippi rebuild one of the exhibits destroyed by Hurricane Katrina and provided source material for professional

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<sup>6</sup> Hawaii Memory Project: <http://memory.hawaii.edu/>

<sup>7</sup> American Memory from the Library of Congress: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/>

<sup>8</sup> Creative Commons: <http://creativecommons.org/>

storyteller Alton Chung's Okage Sama De program. Several high-profile exhibits based on the HI Nisei Story web site were also created.

### **Conclusions**

In the HI Nisei Story, we were able to take resources that already exist, were under-utilized and under-appreciated, and re-purpose them in a way that people really respond to.

This site is storytelling with a depth and interconnectedness that gives a lot of flexibility to the participant. The user chooses their path. They choose how deeply they want to go into each story. It's flexible enough that they can keep returning again and again.

The stories are about the Issei legacy and plantation life. They tell of catching frogs and eating wasp larvae small kid time. Of having to leave school after the 8<sup>th</sup> grade to work and help support the family. Working in the sugar cane fields at the age of 12. Having your country distrust you and incarcerate your family. Going to war at only 19. Fighting and dying to prove your loyalty. Real people with stories to tell. These stories often elicit tears and laughter. They have both inspired and humbled readers. These stories are a connection with a generation most of us have never before understood or knew.

Using digital storytelling, we are building a framework for a community of memory with the Hawaii Nisei Story.

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## Addendum: Historical Note

### Attack on Pearl Harbor

On the morning of Sunday, December 7, 1941, Japan launches a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. This surprise attack prompts Congress to declare war on Japan. Hysteria runs rampant amidst charges of Japanese fifth columns and the fear of sabotage. There is a subsequent backlash against the Japanese living in Hawaii and on the mainland.

"At first I was angry. Then I was kind of ashamed that our ancestors had come. And then my parents, you could see that they were so sad, so humiliated that their ancestors would come and attack Hawaii. Later, as the FBI came around, corralling people, fear crept in. Everybody started to get scared." - Ronald Oba, Interview

### Hawaii Territorial Guard

University of Hawaii ROTC cadets are ordered to report to campus shortly after the attack. Later that day, the ROTC is converted into the Hawaii Territorial Guard (HTG). Members of the HTG are dispatched to guard buildings and installations throughout the island, armed with 1905 Springfield rifles, each loaded with only five bullets.

Six weeks later, on January 19, 1942, the Nisei members of the HTG are abruptly classified as 4-C "enemy aliens" and declared ineligible for military service.

"If a bomb had been exploded in our midst it could not have been more devastating! We were hit by the painful reality that we, Japanese Americans, were being rejected and disowned by our own country, just because we bore the face of the enemy. It never occurred to us that our status and loyalty as Americans would ever be doubted or challenged. We had been born, raised and educated as Americans all the way. To have our own country, in its most extreme time of danger, reject and repudiate our services was almost beyond comprehension. There was no depth to which our emotions sank. The very bottom dropped out of our existence!" - Ted T. Tsukiyama

### Varsity Victory Volunteers

YMCA executive Hung Wai Ching encourages the dispirited former members of the HTG to serve their country by creating a volunteer labor battalion. A petition is sent to Delos C. Emmons, Military Governor, which reads in part:

Hawaii is our home; the United States, our country. We know but one loyalty and that is to the Stars and Stripes. We wish to do our part as loyal Americans in every way possible and we hereby offer ourselves for whatever service you may see fit to use us.

The petition is accepted on February 23, 1942, and the first all-Nisei volunteer unit of World War II, the Varsity Victory Volunteers (VVV), is created. Though still civilians, the 169 VVV members are assigned to the 34<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineers Regiment at Schofield Army Base. They spend the next eleven months doing essential defense work, including backbreaking labor in stone quarries, as well as construction and road work.

## **Executive Order 9066**

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signs Executive Order 9066. This authorizes the mass removal and incarceration, without due process, of more than 110,000 persons of Japanese ancestry living on the West Coast to "war relocation camps." Two-thirds are U.S. citizens. Many families are given just 48 hours notice to sell their property and possessions. They are allowed to take to the camps only what they can carry.

Located in remote and desolate locations, the ten incarceration camps are surrounded by barbed wire fences with armed guards and watchtowers. The camps are overcrowded and the living conditions are bleak.

Military Governor Delos Emmons deflects attempts to incarcerate the 150,000 Issei and Nisei living in Hawaii. However, approximately 2,392 are detained in Hawaii or sent to incarceration camps and Department of Justice (DOJ) camps on the Mainland.

## **Military Intelligence Service**

Over 6,000 Nisei volunteer for the Military Intelligence Service (MIS). They serve in every combat theater and engage in every major battle launched against Japanese military forces. They serve individually or in small detachments assigned to the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force, as well as Allied forces. Trained as interrogators, interpreters and document translators, the Nisei serve as the "eyes and ears" of American and Allied Forces in the war against Japan.

Despite widespread doubt about their loyalty, the Nisei in the MIS employ a most effective weapon – knowledge of Japan's complex, difficult language. According to Major General Charles Willoughby, "The Nisei shortened the Pacific War by two years and saved possibly a million American lives."

## **100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion (Separate)**

In May of 1942, members of the 298<sup>th</sup> and 299<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiments of the Hawaiian National Guard are selected to join the newly created Hawaii Provisional Infantry Battalion. On June 5, 1942, at midnight, the 1,432 men leave Honolulu Harbor for California, where they are officially activated as the "The 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion (Separate)." The 100<sup>th</sup> is an "orphan" battalion as it is not assigned to a regiment.

After extended training in Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, the 100<sup>th</sup> departs for Oran, North Africa, on August 21, 1943. Initially assigned to guard duty, they eventually join the 34<sup>th</sup> "Red Bull" Division of the American Fifth Army in Italy under the command of Lt. Gen. Mark Clark.

"When the 100<sup>th</sup> Battalion landed at Salerno on September 22, 1943, it had 1,300 men. Now – five months later – it could muster only 521 effectives. War correspondents had watched and admired and written about the 100<sup>th</sup> Battalion during this devastating campaign, and in the United States it had become known as the Purple Heart Battalion. For their endurance and pluck and bravery in the face of insurmountable odds, they were hailed as "the little iron men." It was a description



that would also be given later to men of the 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team." - Lyn Crost, *Honor by Fire*

### **442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team**

Franklin D. Roosevelt authorizes the formation of an all Japanese American Regimental Combat Team on February 1, 1943. In Hawaii, more than 10,000 answer the call and 3,000 are accepted.

"On April 4, 1943, the men board the *S.S. Lurline*, where many pass the time shooting craps. Walter Matsumoto estimates that "about a half million dollars in currency was floated in the games" with high rollers betting \$1,000 per roll. This "go for broke" spirit becomes the regiment's motto and the code by which they fought." - Dorothy Matsuo, *Boyhood to War*

The men arrive at Camp Shelby, Mississippi, on April 13, 1943, and begin training.

### **Military Service**

The 442<sup>nd</sup> is deployed to Europe on May 1, 1944. They travel as part of a large convoy of ships. The trip takes 28 days, as they zigzag across the Atlantic, avoiding enemy submarines.

Most of the 442<sup>nd</sup> land in Naples and proceed to Anzio, where they are assigned to the 5th Army and attached to the 34th Red Bull Division. The 442<sup>nd</sup> heads out to Civitavecchia, northwest of Rome, to join the 100th.

### **100<sup>th</sup>/442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team**

Almost all of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 442<sup>nd</sup> had been sent earlier as replacements to the 100<sup>th</sup>, with the remainder held back at Camp Shelby as the 171<sup>st</sup> Cadre Training Battalion to train new recruits. The 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion is formally combined with the 442<sup>nd</sup> RCT as the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion in June 1944. By order of Chief of Staff Gen. George C. Marshall, however, it is allowed to retain its original designation as the 100<sup>th</sup> Battalion in honor of its outstanding record of service.

The 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion (Separate) had blazed the trail in Italy. They won over General Mark Clark, who tells his superiors: "They are some of the best damn fighters in the U.S. Army. If you have more, send them over."

The 100<sup>th</sup>/442<sup>nd</sup> RCT stepped up and "went for broke," becoming "the most decorated unit for its size and length of service in the history of the United States."

"The 4,000 men who initially came in April 1943 had to be replaced nearly 3.5 times. In total, about 14,000 men served, ultimately earning 9,486 Purple Hearts, 21 Medals of Honor and an unprecedented eight Presidential Unit Citations." - Go For Broke National Education Center

## End of War

These heroes return home to a country still rife with bigotry and anti-Japanese sentiment. The parents of Distinguished Service Cross recipient Kazuo Masuda, who had sacrificed his life to save his men, wanted to bring his body home. The California town of Westminster barred them from burying their son in its cemetery. Earlier, vigilantes had warned the family, who had been incarcerated in Poston, not to return to Orange County.

Hearing of this incident, General Joseph Stilwell personally visits the Masuda family and later expresses his outrage over the treatment of Japanese Americans at a large rally in Santa Ana:

"The Nisei bought an awful big hunk of America with their blood. We cannot let a single injury be done them without defeating the purposes for which they fought." – General Joseph Stilwell

In August of 1988, President Ronald Reagan signs the Civil Liberties Act, admitting that a wrong had been committed against the Nikkei, with an apology and a token payment as redress. Robert Asahina argues:

"So in the end, it was the Japanese Americans in uniform whose heroism had shamed their own government into doing the right thing. After fighting their way up the slopes of the Vosges, the 100th/442nd had unarguably occupied the moral high ground."

## The Nisei Legacy

The late Senator Spark Matsunaga, who devoted his career in pursuit of world peace, once warns: "The fight against prejudice is not confined to the battlefield, alone. It is still here and with us now. . .we who 'fought against prejudice and won' ought not to sit idly by and tolerate the perpetuation of injustices." Decades later, his words still ring true today.

"In America's post-September 11, 2001 days, we have become hyper-vigilant about the possible harmful actions of people about whom we know very little. This was the situation of the Nikkei in Hawaii and on the mainland during World War II, and especially in the case of the Issei, who were all assumed to have unfathomable loyalties toward an enemy nation.

Castigating an entire group on the basis of religious affiliation, national origin, ethnicity, race, or other social categories rather than on individual behavior could again result in draconian measures taken in the name of "national security" and "military necessity." - Tetsuden Kashima, *Judgment Without Trial*