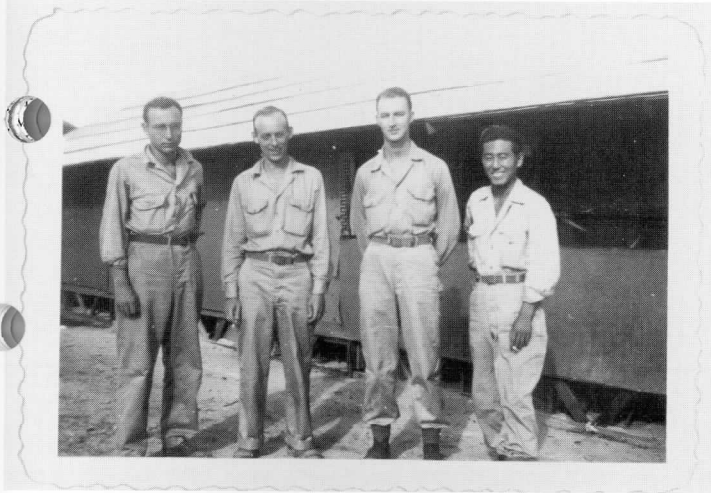


MIS-takened As The Enemy

by Rosalyn Tonai

In May of 1944, in the jungles of New Guinea, a small group of Japanese American Military Intelligence Service (MIS) linguists were attached to the U.S. Army 158th Regimental Combat Team (RCT)-known as the Bushmasters. (term came from the Australian outback or "bush.") Gene Uratsu, Harold Nakamura, Reynold "Smiley" Muranaka and Robert Nakamura were assigned to work with the 158th RCT and its related command organizations.



L to R: At Headquarters: Dick Hunter, Russ Dunlop, Billy Rawls, and Gene Uratsu, Bushmasters Headquarter, Noemfoor Island, 1944. Courtesy of Gene Uratsu.



Gene Uratsu and Bob Nakamura in front of the POW stockade, New Guinea, 1944. Courtesy of Gene Uratsu.

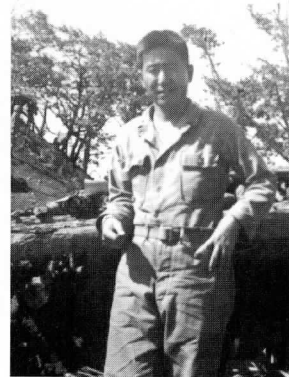
They were responsible for translating captured documents, letters, diaries and for interrogating Japanese prisoners of war. At times they would volunteer for dangerous operations to talk desperate Japanese soldiers into surrendering. They would approach the caves, call out to the men inside, and attempt to convince them in Japanese that they would be safe if they surrendered. When there was no response, the MIS soldiers would continue to negotiate, sometimes leaving their sidearms on the ground, and proceed to enter the cave unarmed.

Risking their lives, they used their knowledge of Japanese language and culture to secure successful capture, and obtain strategic intelligence. As Americans of Japanese ancestry, they lived in constant danger of being mistaken as the enemy by their own GIs. The linguists were subjected to misunderstandings and were stopped many times by sense GIs. Caucasian bodyguards were assigned to the Nisei linguists for their

protection. In some cases, the bodyguard was absent, resulting in perilous situations. This episode of mistaken identity happened to Gene Uratsu. One of the first graduates of the secret Army language school at the Presidio of San Francisco, Uratsu was one of the advanced students who eventually volunteered for overseas assignment in the Pacific theatre of war.

As Gene explained in his autobiography, "It happened when I picked up some kind of dermatitis all over my body. Traditional medical treatment did not work. The medics finally told me that the only cure was to go swimming in [the ocean's] salt water every day and bake myself in the hot tropical sun." Without his bodyguard, Gene was apprehended by two Bushmaster GIs, while swimming at Sarmi, New Guinea. Ignoring his protests in fluent and colorful English and his demands to check his dogtags, the GIs marched him back to RCT headquarters, naked and humiliated.

It was not "until an officer recognized poor Gene Uratsu..[that] I was then released," he noted. To add to the irony, he later learned that his "captors" were rewarded with a vacation to Australia for being alert.



Courtesy Gene Uratsu

Gene Uratsu is a founding officer of the MISNorCal Association of Northern California and the MIS Fellowship Program Committee, a joint project of MISNORCal and NJAHS, formed to gather and disseminate oral histories, biographies on the MIS. Gene Uratsu along with other first graduates participated in the National Japanese American Historical Society's Park Partnership Ceremony to interpret the Presidio of San Francisco's historic ties to the Japanese American experience of World War II on Sunday, May 4, 1997.

Sources:

Autobiography of Gene Uratsu, 1997, p.6-7.

NJAHS MIS Oral History interview, July 31, 1981.

Arthur, Anthony, *Bushmaster: America's Jungle Warriors of World War II*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1987, pp. 194-197.

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