



Prejudice and Patriotism:

*Japanese American History
at the Presidio of San Francisco*



John L. DeWitt, who was the commanding general of Western Defense Command in the 1940s. Member of the first class of Japanese American students at the Military Intelligence Service Language School, Presidio of San Francisco, 1941. National Japanese American Historical Society Archives. Aerial view of the Presidio with Golden Gate Bridge. National Park Service.

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It has been said that “The Japanese American experience [in World War II] has implications beyond their own group. Theirs was an experience which ought not to be repeated in America.”* A half-century ago, the Presidio of San Francisco was center-stage in events that overturned the lives of over a hundred thousand persons of Japanese ancestry.

Last year the National Park Service (NPS) entered into a partnership with the National Japanese American Historical Society (NJAHS) to enhance programming relating to Japanese American history at the Presidio. The tangible resources and the story of the Presidio's impact on

Japanese Americans during World War II remain relevant today, particularly to the on-going public dialogue about the meaning of citizenship, prejudice and patriotism. Thus we hope to jointly work to preserve those resources and to use them to educate local, national and international visitors at the most heavily-used park in the entire National Park system.

The strategic location of the Presidio placed it at the crossroads of the “Pacific Rim” long before the term was fashionable. Indeed, as early as 1925, the San Francisco Chronicle recognized that “It is here in the Pacific

*From *Due Process: Americans of Japanese Ancestry and the United States Constitution*, National Japanese American Historical Society.

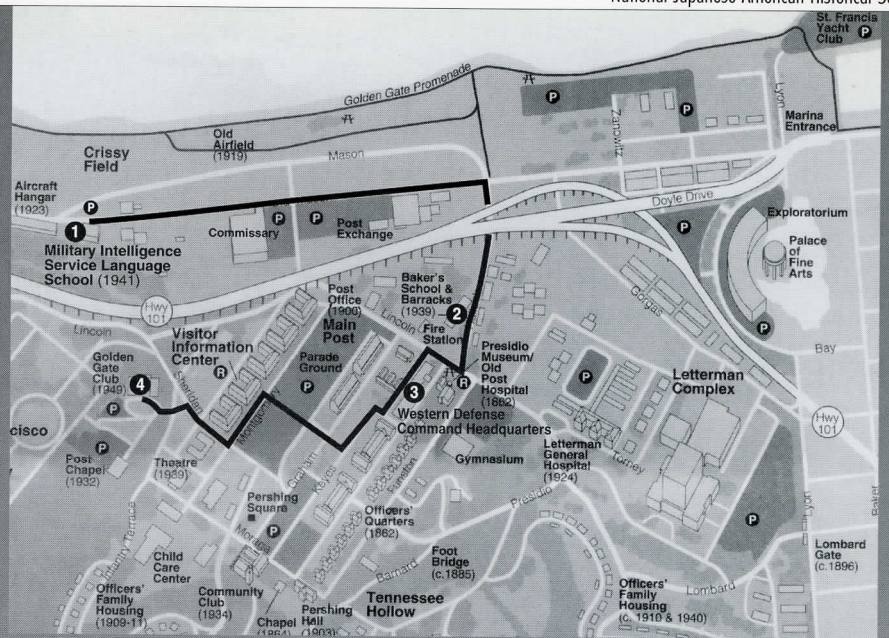
that the future drama of our expansion-commerce will be enacted. The play of rival forces now finds the Pacific for its stage.”

Twenty years later, as those rival forces fought to an awful climax in World War II, the Presidio was the stage from which events played out which were central to the collective experience of the Japanese American community. Here, the Western Defense Command, headquartered at the Presidio, was responsible for implementing the forced “relocation” of all people of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast. At the same time, the Nisei soldiers of the Military Intelligence Service (MIS) Language School prepared in secret for their wartime duties in the Pacific Theater as translators and battlefield interpreters.

As World War II drew to its close, San Francisco was the site of the United Nations Conference, held at the War Memorial Opera House. It is a little known-fact that, at the time, President Harry S Truman offered the Presidio to the United Nations as the site for its headquarters.

On September 8, 1951, the wartime allies and their recent enemies reconvened in San Francisco to sign the formal Treaty of Peace between the United Nations and Japan. That very same day, in the Presidio, the United States and Japan signed a Joint Security Pact at the Golden Gate Club (also known as the Enlisted Men's Service Club). Thus, nearly fifty years of increasing hostility between two superpowers of the Pacific basin had come full circle, and a new era in international affairs can be fairly said to have begun at the Presidio.

From a historical perspective, the strategic location of the Presidio made it a premier Army post for two hun-



The Japanese American History Walk AT THE PRESIDIO OF SAN FRANCISCO

NPS and NJAHS have developed a guided tour led jointly by Park Service staff and Japanese American volunteers who are former internees or war veterans. The volunteers offer moving, first-hand testimony on the personal impact of the Presidio on Japanese Americans. The tour route presently consists of stops at four sites at the Presidio. The stops are:

- 1. Military Intelligence Service Language School (MISLS)/Fourth Army Intelligence School Hangar (Bldg. 640).** This former airmail hangar at Crissy Field was a secret Japanese language school for MIS. Nisei soldiers trained as translators and battlefield interpreters in the days immediately before and after the attack on Pearl Harbor (from Nov. 1941-May 1942).
- 2. Cooks' and Bakers' School (Bldg. 220).** Intelligence school students double-timed to this building for meals on brief breaks between studies.
- 3. Western Defense Command Headquarters (Bldg. 35).** From this building, Lt. Gen. John L. DeWitt oversaw the wartime eviction of all persons of Japanese ancestry living on the West Coast.
- 4. Golden Gate Club/Enlisted Men's Club (Bldg. 135).** The post-war Joint Security Pact was signed here, transforming the United States and Japan from bitter enemies into Cold War allies.

Also of interest: Presidio History Museum/Old Post Hospital. A NJAHS exhibition on MIS in the Pacific is on temporary display here.

Visitors' Center: Brochures, maps, slide shows and other information about the the entire Golden Gate National Recreation Area are available. Books and related items are also on sale.

Guided tours are scheduled approximately once every three months. Please call the Presidio Visitors' Center for more information at (415)561-4323 or TDD(415)561-4314. This tour can also be independently walked.

...y humiliated. Here he was, the head of the family, and he was no longer able to provide for the family.”

According to Otani, two agents came and watched over the family as they were moving out. Her sister testified that *one was an FBI agent*.

Other stories of railroad and mine workers echo the hardships endured following the firings. At the encouragement of Michi Weglyn, these innocent victims began to tell their stories over the past year.

Move for Redress

In her five-year quest for redress, Shimada collected mountains of newspaper articles, correspondence and other materials on numerous trips to universities and historical societies.

The National Coalition for Redress and Reparations in Los Angeles, instrumental in seeing the original redress bill passed, has been monitoring the situation. NCRP is organizing a trip to Washington, D.C., to ask the ORA to implement the “benefit of the doubt” clause, which can grant redress if there is enough evidence to show the probability of occurrence.

The NCRP has also consulted with the Japanese American Bar Association’s Pro Bono Committee in L.A. Attorneys expressed “strong interest” in taking on the case.

The Japanese American Citizens League has also been supportive. In July 1997, Patty Wada, district director of the Northern California-Western Nevada-Pacific JACL, convened a gathering where railroad and mining families seeking redress were able to meet for the first time to network and share their painful experience.

“I know the government ordered the firings,” declared Shimada. “I just want the federal government to admit they did it, for my dad.” ■

Victory at Last! (cont’d from p. 11)

Redress Administration said in a press statement that at least 15 workers were fired in February of 1942 because of an “unjustified perception” that they posed a security risk “solely because of their Japanese ancestry.” The ORA also stated that the federal government played a role in the firings by private employers.

The ORA went on to say that families of dismissed employees are also eligible for redress due to “constructive relocation”. The agency conceded that “the nature of the work in the railroad and mining industries required that these workers, and their families, move to, and reside in, locations solely dictated by their employers’ needs. As a result, when the railroad or mine worker was terminated, job prospects, in what often was a company town, were nonexistent, and the family was forced to relocate elsewhere to survive.”

Shimada praised key figures who aided the workers and their families in this eleventh hour struggle for justice: “If it weren’t for the NCRP and the JACL, we wouldn’t have gotten it. They wouldn’t listen to us individually.” She lauded historian Michi Weglyn for “keeping us on task. She was the inspiration that we needed to keep us going,” adding that “Andrew Russell’s paper was the final push.”

Patti Wada, JACL’s Northern California Director, added, “You have to give credit to Bill Lann Lee for taking another look at it. Ochi called Lee a “sensitive and courageous person.”

The ORA estimates that at least 15 former employees and 155 family members may be eligible for redress, although the actual number may be much higher.

Those seeking redress are urged by the ORA to file claims by April 10,

1998 to have their cases fully resolved. The redress program is scheduled to sunset on Aug. 10.

The ORA can be reached by calling 1-888-219-6900, or writing to PO Box 66260, Washington, D.C. 20035-6260. Their website is: <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ora/main.html>. ■

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dred years. This same location now offers bountiful opportunities to interact with the cultures of the Pacific Rim in a peaceful and mutually beneficial way.

NPS has been discussing several exciting educational possibilities with NJAHS. Regular tours developed with, and led by, wartime veterans or former internees deliver a powerful message first-hand. Educational signs to be placed outside the MISLS building will present the story of patriotism in the face of prejudice to numerous visitors who would otherwise pass the site by. Teacher training materials on this theme can be produced for school groups visiting the Presidio. Finally, the interest of NJAHS in the preservation of the Language School Building provides a special opportunity for the Presidio Trust to consider an adaptive re-use proposal from a potential tenant with specific historic roots to the site. As the Park Service implements sweeping improvement to the adjoining waterfront, the area of the Language School building will see increasing and diverse visitor activity.

Through partnerships such as this, NPS hopes to encourage the public to develop a sense of personal ownership and involvement with resources within our national parks which reflect our nation’s diverse heritage. The Park Service looks forward to working with NJAHS to make the most of the opportunities before us. ■