

# NISEI DRAFT RESISTERS

by Clifford Uyeda

It is only within the past few years that the Nisei draft resisters of fifty years ago have seriously entered the consciousness of the Japanese American community. Up until now the community had generally accepted the story as portrayed by the past leaders of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL).

A brief chronological history is as follows: Soon after the outbreak of World War II, many Nisei were summarily discharged from the Army. Those of draft age were classified as 4-C, enemy aliens. Then, the basic rights of the U.S. Constitution were denied to Japanese Americans, as they were imprisoned in detention camps.

After two years of imprisonment, the draft was reinstated for Japanese Americans. A group at Heart Mountain, called the Fair Play Committee, refused to obey draft notices until their constitutional rights were restored. They were not the so-called "No-No Boys." The government acknowledged that they "were loyal citizens of the United States...that they desired to fight for their country if they were restored their rights as citizens." Among the draft resisters were many with physical handicaps who would never have passed the induction physical examination.

At the mass trial of the first 63 defendants at the federal district court in Cheyenne, Wyoming, all were sentenced to three years in federal penitentiary (6/26/44). Eventually, 315 Japanese Americans

from ten detention camps were convicted of violating the draft law. Their ages ranged from teens to over thirty.

The resisters had many sympathizers within the camps but none from the leaders of their community who labeled them "unpatriotic" and "un-American." The only open support came from a Nisei journalist, James Omura, the English editor of

had come from the farms. Few were urban Nisei. Their instruction in U.S. Constitution was no greater nor much different than what other Nisei were taught. What, then, made them take such a drastic step? What made them defy the popular concept of Nisei as obedient and submissive citizens?

The initial response to the draft among Nisei in camp was not that of overwhelming acceptance. The concept of thousands of Nisei volunteering enthusiastically for the Army from behind the barbed wire fence is of recent origin. Compared to Hawaii, where there was no mass internment, the initial response to call for volunteers for the Army from camp was very low--less than a thousand (Over 10,000 volunteered in Hawaii). When the draft was reinstated for Nisei in January 1944, there was widespread resentment within the camps.

The U.S. was mobilized for war. The Nisei leaders of the time called for total compliance to government orders. Nisei began volunteering for the Army and later accepting draft calls. It was the thing to do, to be uniform during wartime, although restricted in the field of service.

Other considerations entered the



the Rocky Shimo in Denver, CO.

The story of the Nisei draft resisters of the 1940s is the story of fifty years of ostracism from their own community.

## WHAT PRINCIPLES DROVE THE NISEI RESISTERS?

Most of them were still in their teens just out of high school, and

earlier draft resister's final decision. Told by their community leaders that resisters would face a possible twenty years in prison and/or a \$10,000 fine, many felt they had no choice. They changed their minds about resisting and entered the Army.

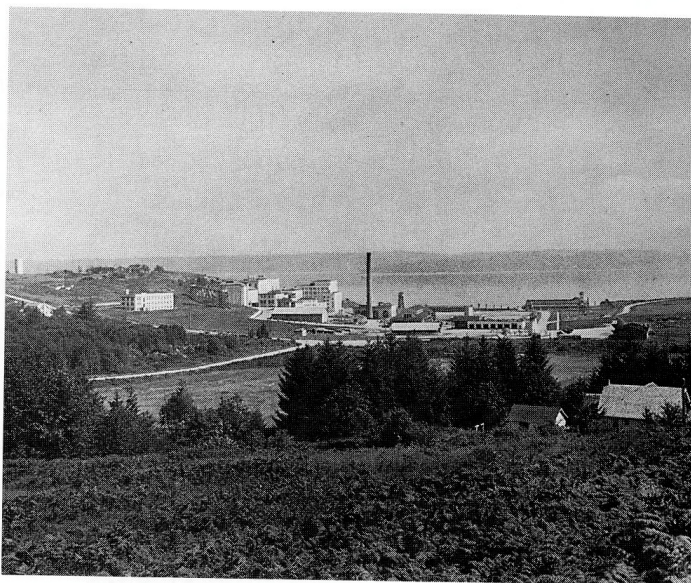
But what of the few who resolutely refused induction? They were a special breed of Nisei. Their conviction was that the U.S. Constitution must apply equally to all its citizens, including Japanese Americans. If they were to be excluded from their birthright, then, they were convinced, they had no choice but to protest. Their protest was to refuse to take the induction physical examination. They knew the consequence -- imprisonment and ostracism. It was a very difficult decision for Nisei.

An interesting statement has been made recently by a 442nd veteran (Eji Suyama) who was one of the few survivors from Company K in the rescue of the Texas "Lost Battalion" in the Voges forest of eastern France. Commenting on the Japanese values of loyalty, stated Dr. Suyama, "We in the 442nd fought by the idealistic bytes from a distant and medieval world...The draft resisters stood fast on constitutional principles...They thus were more American."

## FEDERAL PENITENTIARY EXPERIENCES

At the first trial of the Nisei draft resisters from Heart Mountain detention camp, the young Nisei sent to McNeil Island federal penitentiary in Washington were surprised to find Gordon Hirabayashi already there. They be-

came cellmates. The older Nisei, sent to Leavenworth, found themselves in the midst of hardened criminals. Some Mafia bosses even promised jobs to Nisei when they were released.



*McNeil Island federal penitentiary, 1946. Younger Nisei draft resisters from Heart Mountain were sent here in 1944. They served two of the three year sentence, and were released. President Truman cleared their record in 12/47. Photo courtesy of Mits Koshiyama.*

Kenji Shinta was in a hospital with pulmonary tuberculosis prior to being sent to Heart Mountain. As a member of the Fair Play Committee he refused to take his physical examination which came with induction notice. He was sent to McNeil Island Penitentiary, and was later transferred to the Leavenworth penitentiary hospital until his release in 1946. He was one of several Nisei who never would have passed the induction physical examination. But standing together with his fellow protesters was important to him.

Life in the penitentiary was routine and uninspiring. But in their hearts they knew the significance of their actions. They knew they were not the "disloyal Americans" as labeled by leaders of the Japanese American community. They had indicated

their willingness to serve as soon as the rights taken away from them were returned. They knew that they were not "cowards," as some of their fellow Nisei called them. During wartime, it was much harder to say "no" to induction than obey the law.

As they left the detention camps, instead of waving flags and cheers from their friends, the resisters were sent off with cold stares from neighbors and weeping family members. They were the "anti-heroes" of the time. Instead of being the proud "Blue Star Mothers" in camp, their mothers became the targets of neighborhood whispers and silent treatment when in the company of others. The son's "shame" was transferred to the family. Only families with fellow inmates in the federal penitentiary could seek solace with each other.

## RESETTLEMENT

The sentences were irregular for the same "crime," depending on the judge who heard the case. Sentences ranged from a few months to several years. Some resisters, therefore, were released from federal prison during wartime.

With a prison record of violating the selective service act, a federal offense, it was almost impossible to obtain jobs outside the camp during wartime. The War Relocation Authority (WRA) also refused to let them reenter the camp. The released Nisei had no place to stay or work. Many accepted jobs, any job, where the boss did not ask any questions. One such job was hauling coals dumped outside the camp. Noboru

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Iaguma was one of them. Released from the Tucson prison in Arizona after serving nine months, he returned to Granada Camp and was refused reentry.

Noboru was cold, hungry and alone. He became homeless, seeking any shelter near the camp where he used to live. He was able to re-establish contact with his family still in camp. He formulated a plan where he could get some food. Under the cover of night, he timed the rotating search light so that he could be flat on the ground behind a ditch or a construction pipe. When the light was off of him, he would dash to the next planned hiding place. Eventually he reached a barbed wire fence. With planned precision, he crawled beneath the barbed wire to gain entry into the camp. In a series of hidings and dashes he reached the barrack where he used to live. Inside, he gulped down a few items his mother had saved from the community mess

hall.

He could not stay all night because some one would surely see him and the camp authority would learn of his return without authorization and arrest him again. He had to repeat the hide and dash maneuver to get himself out of camp before dawn.

Noboru grew weary from his existence as a "fugitive" in order to secure his meals. He again approached the WRA to let him return to join his family in camp.

"Yes, you can return to camp," he was told, "if you renounce your American citizenship."

Noboru entered the Santa Fe internment camp. He was told that he would be shipped to Japan as soon as the war was over. Noboru pondered his fate. He did not regret that he had protested the Army induction while already imprisoned in camp. "Someone had to protest," he said, and felt he had to be one of

them.

Noboru was able to remain in the United States because Attorney Wayne Collins of San Francisco fought his deportation on grounds of

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duress to force him to renounce his American citizenship. With Collins' help, he was paroled to Seabrook Farms in New Jersey. Noboru was one of the many Japanese Americans who had benefited from the ceaseless work of Wayne Collins for the beleaguered Japanese Americans.

After the war was over, the camps closed. Some people were forced out of camp when their barracks were padlocked, and they were put on board the train with orders to let the WRA know where they had settled so that their few belongings could be shipped to them.

Other former resisters were all released after serving their sentences. In December 1947, President Truman granted full pardon to all 315 Japanese American draft resisters so that their records could be cleared.

Some returning Nisei veterans still harbored resentment toward the draft resisters. They approached their bosses and urged their firing



Heart Mountain draft resisters, just released from McNeil Island federal penitentiary. Wearing government-issued suits. December 25, 1946. National Archives photo.

because "they had refused to serve their country in time of war."

## FIFTY YEARS LATER

The subject of the Nisei draft resisters of half a century ago is still a controversial subject in the Japanese American community. This comes as a surprise and a disillusionment to some Japanese Americans. There seems to be a clear generational difference.

Many Nisei focus on the brilliant military records of the 100/442nd in Europe and the Military Intelligence Service (MIS) linguists in the Pacific theaters. Many have little sympathy for those who would not serve in the military. Most of them, however, have not distinguished the draft resisters from the "pro-Japan" elements in the camps.

The Sansei/Yonsei group in general remember the other wars more clearly--Vietnam, Panama, Grenada, Gulf War, etc. These were not "popular" wars.

Have the wars taken on a different meaning? Or have people changed? Since time immemorial, old men at home have sent young men to die in distant battlefields. The divine rights were claimed by both sides.

Ironically, both Roosevelt and Hitler rose to power a day apart in the depth of the Depression, and they died within 18 days of each other in April 1945. Within their political lifetime, 50 million people vanished in the violent war. Of the 70 million soldiers, men and women, 17 million were killed.

World War II was no different from many other vicious wars in history. All parties were guilty of atrocities. The Chinese people were the first victims of Japanese massacres. The enlisted Japanese

soldiers treated other Asians the same way their own superior officers had treated them. As the Japanese Imperial forces faced certain defeat, they began killing their own comrades in arms and took their own lives in gruesome acts of suicide.

Many American soldiers expressed regret that Japan surrendered. Their goal had become killing rather than simply winning, even after the war ended. Elliot Roosevelt, the president's son, said that the United States should continue bombing Japan "until we have destroyed about half of Japanese civilian population." Vice Admiral Arthur Radford said, "Japan will eventually be a nation without cities--a nomadic people." A front line marine told of shooting a terrified Okinawan woman and dismissing her as "just an old gook woman." Many soldiers had resigned from the human race. They just wanted to kill.

The more recent generation seem to have a more humane sense of wars. They see war as having become too dangerous to be an instrument of political agenda. Possibly this has become the greatest difference between the Nisei and the Sansei/Yonsei generations. The draft resisters were Nisei and held to the Nisei concept of war, but the act of their refusal to be inducted while already imprisoned only because of race has taken on an added glamor in today's world.

## THEIR PLACE IN JAPANESE AMERICAN LEGACY

The Nisei have been dubbed the "Quiet Americans." They were typical of the oppressed minority. They remained quiet in the face of injustice and discrimination. They did not complain. It was their survival

tactic.

It took fifty years for Japanese Americans to realize the significance of the Nisei draft resisters' action. Once consigned to dishonor by their community leaders, the former resisters have stepped out of the shadow of oblivion. Today, they are seen as courageous defenders of American ideals. The courage it took to make their stand in the face of opposition from their own community and from their own country cannot be underestimated. It was a most difficult thing for a Nisei to do in the 1940s.

Today, we note, their action is a source of amazement, especially in the Nisei community which well remembers the wartime difficulties.

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There were many leaders in this historic episode. To name only a few is to ignore the others. What we need to remember is that there were hundreds of Nisei who were willing to be imprisoned for constitutional principles. They were real patriots. Their patriotism should be judged on their individual acts of protest in the face of a constitutional wrong. ❖