

## VETERANS DAY

## NISEI SOLDIERS: REKINDLING THE SOUL OF FIRE

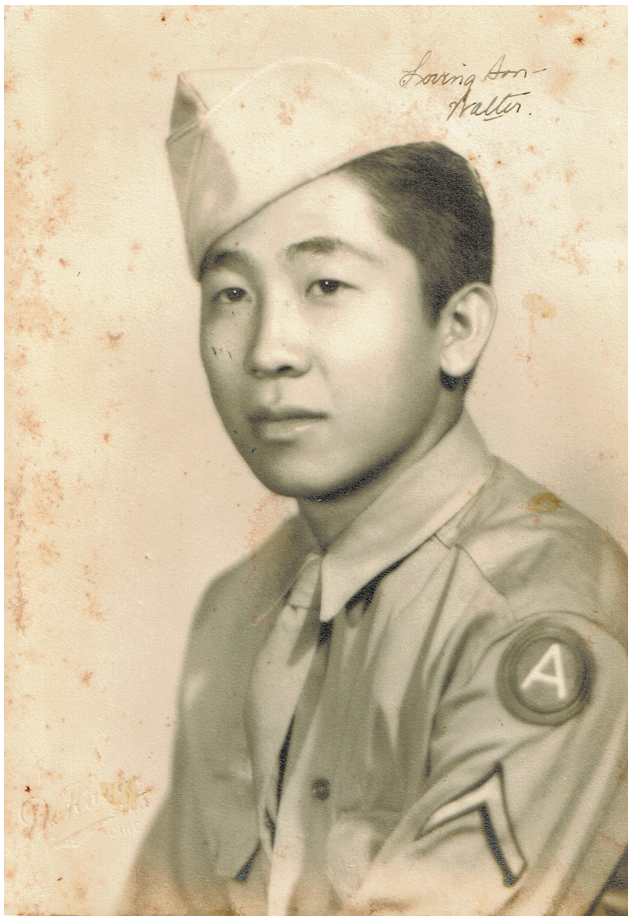
Lynn Heirakuji

*Special to The Hawai'i Herald*

We all have moments in our lives when we have a flash of insight that sets our lives on an unplanned path. A switch is turned on inside of us, a lightbulb goes on and there is an awakening. It could be something someone says or does that connects us back to our core values and gives us new direction.

Several years ago, during my swearing in ceremony as Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Personnel Oversight, Manpower & Reserve Affairs, for the U.S. Army Secretariat at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., I shared remarks with my awaiting staff and other senior Army officials. It was the first time I had been called upon to speak publicly and formally about my personal history and career. And it seemed fitting that, as I was about to join the Army civilian ranks, I would reflect upon my father's service as a Nisei soldier in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. I was able to cobble together a suitable narrative and went on to talk about how my father was 19 when he volunteered to serve, was seriously injured in battle in Italy, and was everlastingly proud of his Go for Broke patch. However, in preparing my remarks, it became embarrassingly apparent to me that I knew very little about his war experience and next to nothing about the storied sacrifices and accomplishments of Hawai'i's Nisei soldiers as a whole.

There were other epiphanies during my career with the U.S. Army. Those who came into my office, where I had hung my father's Eisenhower jacket, were quickly drawn to the Go for Broke torch symbol on the jacket's sleeve. Army officers immediately knew what the torch stood for, and the history and story of the sacrifices behind it. I was always amazed at how much these Army soldiers and civilians knew about the Nisei soldiers — certainly, much more than I did. I decided then, in my moment of insight, that when I returned to Hawai'i post-career I would do what I could to learn about this great generation of Nisei warriors and how to promote their legacy.



Walter Itsuki Heirakuji, 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team, K Company.

My father, Walter Itsuki Heirakuji, volunteered to serve in the 442nd, but rarely spoke about his World War II military service. I've learned over the years that this was typical of the Nisei men of that generation. As a result, my sister and I didn't have the benefit of learning about the Nisei soldiers while growing up.

Yes, we went to 442nd picnics and parties with our parents but those events were more about socializing and less about their remarkable history. It seemed that the soldiers of my father's generation simply didn't feel the need to exclaim much about their exploits to others, although later in his life he was always willing to share when we asked.

My father was just 19 years old when he volunteered to serve in the 442nd, leaving his parents and siblings and the comfort of his multi-ethnic plantation home in Hāwī, Kohala on Hawai'i island. He recalled being on the S.S. *Lurline* for five days on the Pacific Ocean along with hundreds of other local 442nd recruits and being assigned KP (kitchen police or kitchen patrol) duty because he was caught smoking — his first and last run-in with Army discipline.

My father went through basic training at Camp Shelby, Mississippi. He and his Hawai'i buddies would get into fights with the *kotonks* — Japanese Americans who were born and raised on the mainland — who were also in training as part of the 442nd who volunteered to serve from incarceration camps.

A weekend trip with a fellow Hawai'i soldier to Camp Rohwer in Arkansas turned into an unexpected opportunity to get a glimpse of an incarceration camp and what the mainland Japanese were going through at the time. That understanding helped to ease tensions between him and the *kotonks* at Camp Shelby. He said he felt sorry for their situation and was able to get along a whole lot better with them after that sobering experience.

My father was deployed to Europe in 1944 with the 442nd. Early into the war in Italy while digging a foxhole, he was hit by enemy fire and suffered shrapnel wounds to his body and a debilitating injury to his right arm. He was

strapped to the front fender of a military jeep with a Red Cross sign and after a harrowing journey during which the vehicle was fired upon, was able to make it to a big medic tent. While lying in the tent, he asked the medic if he could please try to save his arm. My father spent the next two and a half years in Italy and the states undergoing a total of 16 operations many requiring skin grafts from other parts of his body. The war injury permanently and seriously compromised his ability to use his right arm and he lived the rest of his life as a disabled veteran though I never heard him complain once about his loss.

He told my sister and me a story about going to a bar in California with two Caucasian Army friends while he was recovering from his wounds. My father was in his Army uniform and his arm was in a sling. Clearly, he was an American soldier with an injury. Even though the bar had no other patrons, no one waited on them. His friends were angry at the thought that they were being refused service due to my father being Japanese and were ready to throw punches, but then upon reflection, they decided to just leave. They had already fought enough for a lifetime.

After my father returned to Hawai'i from the war, he met and married my mother, Sally Hisami Kawamura in Honolulu. They had two girls: my sister Lei and me. My father was a regular guy with average ambitions and his post-war jobs included selling insurance and later liquor. I think he preferred selling liquor; always good at telling stories, he was a perfect salesman.



Walter Heirakuji married Sally Hisami Kawamura in December 1950.

My mother could speak Japanese and was an excellent karaoke singer of old Japanese songs — including "Itsumademo" and "Koko Ni Sachi Ari" — and a masterful *minyo* (folk) dancer. After war was declared with Japan, she shared sadly how her family had gathered all the Japanese articles in their home and burned them. They did so because they were afraid of what would happen to them as Japanese Americans now that we were at war with Japan. Nevertheless, after the war, she was instrumental in helping to restore Japanese pride, culture, and customs in our family.

When the Nisei Soldiers returned home after the war, they worked with many others to help



Lynn Heirakuji hangs her father's Eisenhower jacket (aka the "Ike jacket") with a Go for Broke patch as a reminder of the sacrifices made by Nisei soldiers. (Photos courtesy of Lynn Heirakuji)





When Walter and Sally Heirakuji visited their daughter Lynn, Walter was presented a flag in an informal ceremony. Lynn knew nothing of the ceremony her staff had planned and treated her father, their fellow soldier, with great honor and respect.

change Hawai'i into a more democratic and equitable society. A few did it in prominent ways, others through simply living honorable lives. They returned home with a fire in their soul, ready to create a better life. They had lost friends in the war, they had seen the horror and sufferings of battle, and they were determined to make sure their efforts were not in vain.

I was working in Washington D.C. when the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, happened and I remember that day like it was yesterday. Experiencing that traumatizing event is probably the closest many of us will ever come to understanding how those who experienced the Dec. 7, 1941, Japanese attack on our homeland must have felt. I went on to become part of the effort to start up the newly created U.S. Department of Homeland Security during a time of great national turmoil and resolve, and later was offered an appointment to serve with the U.S. Army.

My parents would visit Washington, D.C. during my time there and on one of their last trips wanted to come to the Pentagon to see where I worked. Unbeknownst to me, my staff had arranged for a U.S. flag to be flown over the Pentagon specifically for my father. They placed the flag in a wood-framed case and presented it to him during an informal ceremony, all without my direction. My staff treated my father, their fellow soldier, with great honor and respect.

I know that my father was deeply touched by the gesture, as was I. And I suspect that he might have been thinking how incredulous it was for him to be standing in the Pentagon, the seat of this country's formidable military power, being honored for the service he had youthfully rendered generations ago.

While I don't know for sure if this is what he was thinking at that moment, I knew with unshakeable certainty what was running through my mind. That it was only because of what he and thousands of other Nisei soldiers had done to step forward and bravely serve this country both on and off the battlefield that I, myself, was standing there beside him. That it was through their collective and relentless efforts to prove their loyalty and to continue to strive for liberty and justice on home turf that the doors of opportunity had been pried open for me.

I kept a copy of my remarks from that day that the Assistant Secretary of the Army swore me in as a Deputy Assistant Secretary. After describing to the audience my father's service during World

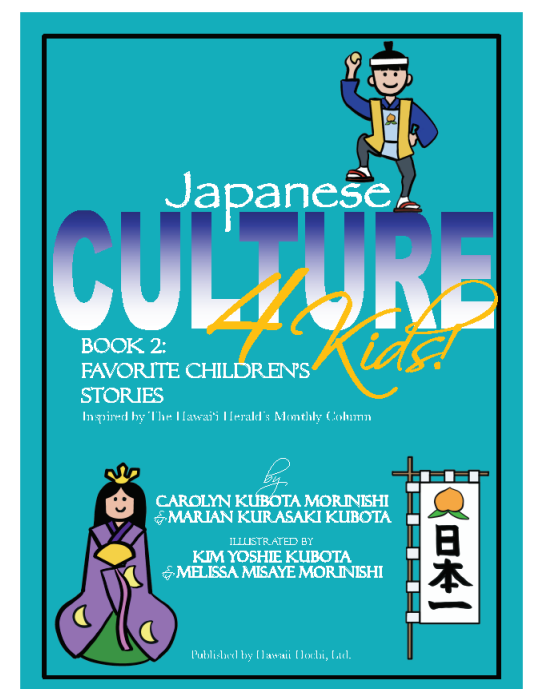
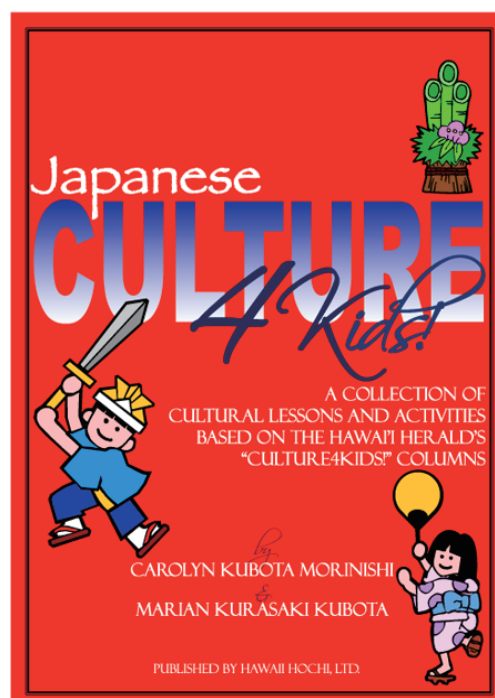
War II as a Nisei soldier, I said, "This is actually a full circle generational moment for me." I closed by saying that because of his service, "working for the Army is personal for me ... and a high honor and privilege."

I consider supporting the Nisei Veterans Legacy a continuing honor and privilege. It is my personal way of honoring the actions my father and thousands of other Nisei soldiers, both men and women, took to step into that larger narrative. It is also a privilege and responsibility to have a genuine platform for keeping history alive and relevant so that future generations can carry on the move toward liberty and justice for everyone.

It's never too late and it's never enough. Never too late to honor those who came before us, and never enough to humbly thank them for their service. **HH**

*Lynn Heirakuji is president of the Nisei Veterans Legacy. The NVL's mission is to preserve and share the legacy of all the Nisei soldiers of World War II through educational outreach. She worked in Washington, D.C. for 30 years and served as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Personnel Oversight, Manpower & Reserve Affairs, for the U.S. Army Secretariat. Prior to joining the Army team, Lynn was a member of the Senior Executive Service serving as the Deputy Director of the Office of Human Capital Management for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. She also served in senior staff and leadership positions at the U.S. Departments of Homeland Security, Housing and Urban Development, and Commerce. Lynn holds a doctorate degree from Howard University, a master's degree from the University of Denver, and a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Hawai'i.*

## JAPANESE CULTURE4KIDS! BOOKS 1&2!



**A GREAT GIFT YEAR-ROUND!**

**"JAPANESE CULTURE4KIDS!" \$14.95 plus tax**

**"JAPANESE CULTURE4KIDS! BOOK 2" \$19.95 plus tax**

**Call (808) 845-2255 or email [cultur4kids@thehawaiihochi.com](mailto:cultur4kids@thehawaiihochi.com).**

**Inquire about discounts for subscribers**

**Published by Hawaii Hochi, Ltd.**