Memorial Day 2014 – Memories and Lessons  
By Dr. Richard Kelley

This past Monday, my wife Linda and I went to Fairmont Cemetery in Denver to pay our respects to members of the U.S. armed services who have passed on. At Fairmont, there is a section devoted primarily to the graves of veterans and family members. In the middle of that section, we discovered a beautiful monument honoring veterans of Japanese ancestry. Here is some background on what we saw, which today, I’d bet only a few of those under the age of 40 are aware of or really understand.

On February 19, 1942, just over two months after Imperial Japan attacked the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawai‘i, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed an Executive Order that allowed local military commanders to designate “military areas” as “exclusion zones” from which “any or all persons may be excluded.” That power was then used to exclude people of Japanese ancestry from all of California and much of Oregon, Washington state and Arizona.

Approximately 120,000 people of Japanese descent were forcibly removed from their homes and placed in 10 remote internment camps under armed guard. One of these camps was in Amache (Granada), Colorado, which is said to have had a peak population of 7,318. More than two thirds of those interned – imprisoned – were U.S. citizens and about half were children. Many of those interned had to sell homes, cars, farms and businesses at “fire sale” prices in the short time before they were sent away.

In Hawai‘i, martial law, complete with curfews and blackouts, was declared. With 150,000 Japanese-Americans, who comprised one-third of the Islands’ population at the time, internment that entire segment of the population was deemed impractical; only 1,200 to 1,800 were interned.

It should be noted that several thousand resident German and Italian nationals -- “enemy aliens” -- as well as some U.S. citizens of German and Italian background were also interned during the war, but in much smaller numbers and proportion than the Japanese. Also, unlike the Japanese, who were interned purely on the basis of their ethnicity, the German and Italian internees were selected on the basis of the perceived threat to U.S. security that each individual was believed to represent.

Soon, thousands of Japanese-Americans of military age, wishing to demonstrate their loyalty to the United States, petitioned and were given a chance to enlist in a U.S. military service. Those who applied were generally from the second generation and thus referred to as Nisei.
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to distinguish them from their first generation immigrant parents, called Issei, and third generation Sansei. (These terms come from the Japanese words for “one, two, three” – ichi, ni, san).

Most of these volunteers were assigned to the Army where they were placed in racially segregated units, such as the 100th Infantry Battalion and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, which would go on to become the U.S. Army’s most decorated unit for its size and length of service. (The late U.S. Senator Daniel Inouye, a veteran of the 442nd, lost his right arm in a heroic charge against German machine gun positions in Italy; he later won the Medal of Honor for this exploit.)

A few Nisei were assigned to the 1399th Engineer Construction Battalion. And about 6,000 served in the Military Intelligence Service where they provided vital translation, interpretation and interrogation services, particularly in the Pacific Theater. I know of at least one, Henry Gosho (“Horizontal Hank,” so named because he was often pinned down by machine gun fire), a friend of a friend, who served with Merrill’s Marauders in “deep penetration” operations behind Japanese lines in Burma. His ability to understand the enemy’s battlefield radio transmissions (which they failed to encode in the mistaken belief that the Americans wouldn’t understand Japanese) helped lead to numerous victories. He was later inducted into the U.S. Ranger Hall of Fame.

All these Nisei volunteers distinguished themselves honorably. Sadly, many thousands lost their lives in remote places while they were trying to capture bits of strategic real estate with strange names like “Hill 140” near Italy’s Arno River during World War II or “Pork Chop Hill” during the Korean War, which followed only a few years later.

Those thoughts and many more surged through my mind as I approached the Nisei War Memorial in Fairmont Cemetery and then read the inscription on the center tablet last Monday.

Plaque on Nisei War Memorial

Brothers in Valor monument in Waikiki honors the service and sacrifice of Japanese Americans in the military

NISEI WAR MEMORIAL

DEEPLY AWARE THE CLOUD OF SUSPICION HANGING OVER THEM IN THE EARLY DAYS OF WORLD WAR II COULD BE DISPERSED ONLY BY A DEMONSTRATION OF LOYALTY, AMERICANS OF JAPANESE DESCENT (NISEI) PETITIONED IN 1942 FOR THE RIGHT TO SERVE THEIR COUNTRY. AMERICA OFFERED THEM THE OPPORTUNITY, AND THE NISEI SERVED WITH DISTINCTION AND VALOR IN THE 442ND REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM IN EUROPE, IN MILITARY INTELLIGENCE UNITS IN THE PACIFIC, AND ELSEWHERE. MORE THAN 30,000 NISEI BORE ARMS IN WORLD WAR II AND KOREA, SHEDDING THEIR BLOOD ON SUCH FAR-FLUNG BATTLEFIELDS AS THE ARNO AND BRUYERES, GUADALCANAL, MYITKYIN AND PORKCHOP HILL. IT IS TO THOSE WHO MADE THE SUPREME SACRIFICE IN DEMONSTRATING THAT AMERICANISM IS NOT A MATTER OF RACE OR ANCESTRY THAT THIS MONUMENT IS DEDICATED.

The adjacent tablets list the names of those men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice. It was very moving.

In Waikiki, at Fort DeRussy, a few hundred yards from Outrigger Reef on the Beach, there is another memorial dedicated to Americans of Japanese ancestry who served our country. In a quiet, green palm grove there are four plaques remembering the World War II veterans in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, the 100th Infantry Battalion, the Military Intelligence Service and the 1399th Engineer Construction Battalion. I encourage our Waikiki ‘ohana to pay a visit to the site.

This year and into the future, as we honor those who have given their lives to preserve our freedoms, we should also strive to understand and learn from events such as those I have described above. Remember the words of philosopher, essayist and poet George Santayana who said:

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

and, he sadly added,

“Only the dead have seen the end of war.”

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