



# Where and who have been Nisei soldiers: the war memory without gender?

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# Where and who have been Nisei soldiers: the war memory without gender?

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A typical example of categorizing people according to the attributes of their group, rather than treating them as individuals, can be found in periods of external wars. Then, in people's memory or recollection, where were they and what did they do? In particular, how collective identity of being "nationals of a country," images of soldiers, and the strong gender role segregation among soldiers are associated with war memory? Today, I will put my focus on how the war against Japan has been remembered and is recalled regarding Japanese-American soldiers, by covering three key topics. I consider that examining the occupation era in Japan, which directly followed the time of battlefield experience, allows interesting and profound consideration.

## 1. what does the topic of Japanese-Americans during World War II remind people of?

The first topic is "what a theme of Japanese-Americans during World War II reminds people of."

The National Museum of Japanese History, located in Sakura, Chiba Prefecture, is a leading research institutions in the field of Japanese history, but it was only in March 2010 that the museum started the permanent exhibition of contemporary history. Exhibitions of contemporary history, particularly if they are about a war, often can't provide shared assets of the academic societies. However, this museum, which serves as an indicator of the current situation on historical recognition in Japan, held a large scale special exhibition titled

“Hawai’i: 150 Years of Japanese Migration and Histories of Dream Islands” from October to December last year. One of the pillars of the exhibition scheme was that the migration to and settlement in Hawaii were viewed as a part of the global migration in the 19th and 20th centuries. In addition, while big-H History, such as Japan’s colonial rule and external wars, formed the key axis, cultural studies including media formation in Asian communities after World War I were another object of interest.

A lot of historical materials owned by University of Hawai’i were exhibited as well, and many facts were discovered.

Then, how did the exhibition outline World War II and the postwar period for the Japanese-Americans community? In the press release, the “history” after “December 8th” was described as follows, quote.

“After the Pearl Harbor attack, Hawaii was placed under martial law and, at the same time, more U.S. military personnel started to stay in Hawaii.

In that situation, while some Japanese nationals and ethnic Japanese were incarcerated in concentration camps as enemy aliens, many Nisei Japanese Americans started to serve in military as American nationals. Some of them were sent to the European Front. Some of them were mobilized to implement the strategy against Japan or the occupation of Japan since they understood Japanese. After the Pacific War and World War II, from the late 1940’s to 1950’s, Hawaii experienced substantial changes, including an upsurge of labor movements, a change in political situation which was referred to as a democratic revolution, and becoming the 50th state in the United States of America,” unquote<sup>1</sup>.

In Japan, the fact that Japanese-Americans in Hawaii experienced “internment,” as is the case with their peers in the mainland U.S., had not been written even in recent monographs or publicly known. In addition, it

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1 <https://www.rekihaku.ac.jp/outline/press/p191029/index.html>

was the first full-scale introduction in the studies of contemporary history in Japan on the rise of social movements in Hawaii after World War II ended<sup>2</sup>. Here I would like to pay attention to the fact that the experience of Japanese-American soldiers, who performed “military duties” by means of their language proficiency, existed in the continuity of the war against and the occupation of Japan, particularly from the perspective of war memory. Studies in the Japanese language on Japanese-American soldiers in the war against Japan have been accumulated from the perspective of intelligence media activities by the U.S during World War II. In particular, Nisei=Kibei who received higher education in Japan were selected from concentration camp inmates to undergo training at the Army’s Military Intelligence Service, or M.I.S., to become military linguists, and played “an active role” in the battlefields during the Asia-Pacific War. As they achieved good results in interrogation to Japanese prisoners of war, information gathering from captured documents, and cipher analysis, they gradually became to be placed in the frontline, which boosted their presence. Actually, as the Cold War progressed during the period of occupation of Japan, the demand for intelligence activities by such military linguists increased. Then, what did their linguistic communication proficiency obtained through diligent training mean in the occupation of Japan?

## 2. the memories and records on Japanese American soldiers in occupied Japan.

So, let’s move on to the second topic, the memories and records on Japanese American soldiers in occupied Japan.

To serve as interpreters for Caucasian officers, many Japanese American

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2 Kosuke.Harayama ,Kaori.Akiyama,Koichi.Matsuyama:Social exclusion and inclusion of Japanese in Hawai’i during and after the Pacific War,The front of Japanese history Vol.22,2020.3,National Museum of Japanese History.

soldiers were assigned to tactical troops which started to land in and “advance into” various areas of Japan directly from the battlefields in the Asia Pacific region from around the end of September in 1945.

Kayoko Takeda, a scholar specializing in the culture and history of translation, states that some 5000 Nisei military linguists served during the occupation of Japan when thousands of interpreters were required. Among them, Kibei and MIS graduates were regarded as the elite, and in reality, interpreters were insufficient in quality and quantity.

In Japan, there are many compilations of people’s testimonies on war memory, except for those about the occupation period, which are very scarce.

In addition, the occupation period as defined by political history is from September 1945 to April 1952, but the U.S. troops were still stationed in various places on the Japanese mainland in the mid-1950’s, because the epoch-dividing Korean War started in June 1950 and the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty was concluded.

For those reasons, when citizens are interviewed on their memories of the occupation period, they often emphasized the existence of Japanese American soldiers engaged in intelligence activities locally, as members of CIC, or Counter Intelligent Corps, which had been expanding since the start of the Korean War. Indeed, MIS related materials owned by University of Hawai’i showed that intelligence officers who had previously served in MIS were stationed in Maizuru, Kyoto Prefecture, which was the base for repatriation from the Soviet Union, and many of those officers were from Hawaii. Under the Cold War, a repatriation port, especially one at which vessels from the Soviet Union arrived, was a place for information gathering.

On the other hand, the recent interest of the studies on Japanese American soldiers both during the war and the following early occupation periods, is expanding into local studies. For example, details of K. Arima (1920 to 1982) were unearthed by the History Compilation Team of Tottori prefecture.

Arima was promoted to an officer during the occupation period and took a leadership role in the local occupation policy. Still now, his name brings back memories of the occupation period, which directly followed the war.

I also encountered the existence of this person, who served as the Civil Information and Education Officer for the Tottori Military Government Team. In my studies, Arima is an important person who demonstrated leadership in dealing with “an incident involving the removal of a Hoanden from a primary school” which happened in a local area during the occupation period. His name appears in documents of the CIE Section of GHQ/SCAP, materials of the Tottori Military Government Team, and in Japanese official documents. After World War II, the principal of the primary school made his students remove Hoanden, or a monument to worship the Emperor, which was located in the vicinity of the school.

He was later condemned for it and punished. A history book of the school written in 1970’s criticized this Officer of the occupation forces as autocratic.

I concluded that it was because his actions conflicted with local conservative nationalism. The memories of “having been occupied” leave mixed feelings among the local conservative class.

However, the local press in the same period commented on him in a different tone. In the first place, I overlooked the fact that he was a Japanese-American Officer. The media (local Japanese newspaper in Tottori) in this period was supportive of policies carried out in cooperation between the local MG and the Prefectural Government, and was trumpeting Arima’s competence as a Japanese-American Officer.

Even his marriage with a Japanese woman was reported by the press. In this way, the local citizens including the press highly evaluated the ability of Japanese-American Officers to serve as an intermediary between people of different languages and cultures as well as their political and social roles, such

as contacting with citizens regarding the occupation of the area and performing occupation reforms.

I've tried cultural history approaches mainly by reviewing literature in the studies of air raids and civil defense policies and the studies of the occupation period as concrete materials for my study theme, namely "war memory". However, on rare occasions, I could interview survivors of the periods and encountered many situations where I could actually feel that the existence of Japanese American soldier s was memorable for them. I would like to show two examples.

The first one is a more general case, regarding air raid documentation written after World War II. Right after the war, from October to December 1945, the United States Strategic Bombing Survey was created. In particular, the section of "The Effects of Strategic Bombing on Japanese Morale", written by the Moral Division, was based on interviews directly conducted with local citizens in several cities about the effects of air raids.

Each of 3153 responders in 58 municipalities was asked 41 questions. It is stated as "the street interview" in the survey report, but in reality, interviewees were asked by their Prefectural governments or other Japanese administrative authorities to come. The interviews were conducted face-to-face within buildings. I obtained some tapes with sound recordings of the interviews, in which a voice is recorded saying "please have a seat." The interviewer was a Nisei soldier who "underwent secret training for questioning." Without their language proficiency, such a huge number of interviews could not have been carried out. Some municipalities, such as Yokohama City and Fukuoka City, translated these sound sources and published them with the aim of preserving the records of local air raids.

In the tapes I obtained, three Japanese speakers, who are thought to be Nisei soldiers, interviewed 15 people in certain city<sup>3</sup>. That was a long

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3 This is the figure for Kyoto City. Although there were no large-scale air strikes on the city center in Kyoto, a postwar survey was conducted.

interview, taking about 30 minutes per one interviewee. The level of Japanese proficiency of the interviewers varies. Judging from the ratio of the number of the interviewers to that of the interviewees, it was likely that at least 100 interrogators were involved in this survey.

Next, I'll show you another example related to the existence of Japanese-American soldiers as well as Kobe University. The current Rokkodai 2nd Campus of Kobe University stands on a site that was requisitioned by the American Army in 1946 and was developed to build Dependent Houses.

The area was known as Rokko Heights and was used until 1958, when the land was released from requisition. Even after the occupation period ended in a narrow sense, the site was transferred from the occupation troops to the stationed troops. Students or faculty members of our university, or other people, except for U.S. military personnel, were not allowed to enter into the site. In addition, multiple facilities of Kobe University built before the war were requisitioned as well.

In the auditorium, parties were held and films were screened for the residents of the Dependent Houses. According to many people, when they looked up from the bottom of the hill, Rokko Heights always looked bright with glaring lights and their roofs were painted red or yellow.

Then, who could enter into the area as exceptions?

Those who worked or visited there could.

I interviewed two of such Japanese women. One is a woman who used to work as a household employee there<sup>4</sup>. She was living in a dormitory nearby. During the interview, she told me that the servicemen who lived in Rokko Heights were enlisted men and many of them were Nisei soldiers. There were some Quonset huts in Rokko Heights, but she was working at a Dependent House. Its structure was simple and had no entrance hall. Its structure was

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4 Interview Date: January 5, 2017 in Kakogawa, Hyogo, Japan



simple and had no entrance hall. The residents could bring their families to their Dependent House, even though they were not high-ranking officers. Her words supported what reviews of literature had suggested. She also made me aware that Nisei soldiers with the ranks of enlisted men lived in Rokko Heights along with their families.

The other woman I interviewed visited Rokko Heights many times as a teacher of Japanese flower arrangement, or ikebana<sup>5</sup>. She cheerfully told me that she had a personal relationship with a Japanese-American couple from Hawaii who lived in Rokko Heights. The man was a commissioned officer. She revealed me that the couple drove her to the PX in the base, or Kobe Base, which was relocated to Koshien after the Korean War started. She said that the Nisei enlisted man was an army dentist and the family was relocated from Kobe to Asaka in Saitama prefecture, or Camp Drake.

According to a Japanese official document, three Quonset huts were moved from Kobe Base in to Rokko Heights when Kobe Base was closed. Kobe base was once located in Kaigandori, a seaside district in Kobe, and was relocated to Koshien in 1951.

I could finally confirm these facts by examining official documents of Japan and the U.S. The fragmentary memories of Rokko Heights shared by these senior women were correct. In this way, through research on the occupation period of local areas, the existence of an individual and concrete “Japanese-American” is always obvious and their presence is strong even if we don’t pay special attention to it. It should be especially noted that what people still remember is not their appearance or origins, but their individual communication proficiencies. The woman who taught ikebana had conversations and exchanged letters with the Japanese-American family in Japanese.

After World War II, for residents in the Japanese mainland, Nisei

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5 Interview Date: October 20, 2016 in Kobe Univ.

Soldiers were the people they could communicate with through the medium of Japanese. This fact shows the importance of linguistic and translation competence when we consider how war memory has been retained.

By the way, in films and TV programs based on testimonies of those who served in MIS and other Nisei Soldiers, their personal stories are often featured, including the birthplaces of them and their Issei parents, and how they met and got married to their wives in the occupation era. GHQ/SCAP recommended, in its policy, that Nisei soldiers should marry Japanese-American women rather than locals, and many of them wed their “compatriot” “colleagues” in Japan during the occupation periods.

Where were Nisei Japanese American women during the war against Japan and following period under occupation policies?

### 3. Records and Memories regarding Nisei female recruits

Here comes my third topic, “Records and Memories on nisei female combatants”. In the stage of total war, the boundaries between the frontline and the home front become blurred. During World War I, many colonial soldiers were mobilized to battlefields. During World War II, military mobilization of women became a reality, though there were discussions regarding whether women should be allowed to wear military uniforms and how differences in races or ethnic groups should be dealt with. Recent history studies have a keen interest in arguments about female combatants not limited to socialist countries<sup>6</sup>. Scholars of Feminism, which is sounding an alarm on emphasizing either equality or difference, are also interested in this topic. In the United States, the Women’s Army Corps, or WAC, was established in May 1942. It

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6 “FightingWomen” during and after the Second World War in Asia and Europe, 2013.5, NIOD (Netherlands Institute for War Documentation) ed.,; <https://www.niod.nl/en/news/conference-fighting-women-asia-and-europe-during-and-after-world-war-ii>.

was just an auxiliary unit, but some 150,000 women were enlisted.

Women of Japanese ancestry, who were regarded as “enemy aliens,” were mobilized later than their male peers. Japanese-American women were allowed to join the Army Nurse Corps, or ANC, in February and the WAC in November 1943. Based on reports submitted from a field officer of WAC to the army executives and on newspaper articles, the study by Brenda L. Moore revealed the detailed process of how ANC switched its policy. At first, WAC did not recruit Nisei women, while they accepted women of Italian or German ancestry. However, their policy was later changed and some Nisei women were even recruited from concentration camps.

Nisei women showed their enthusiasm to join the Corps, but the procedure took a very long time. The induction of Japanese-American women into WAC was reported by the media, which created a synergy. The media repeatedly reported on the first enlisted Japanese-American woman from the Milwaukee state, on the first nisei college student joining the Corps, and so on.

However, in reality, the total number of Japanese-American women volunteered join WAC up until October 1945 was no more than 142, so a unit consisting of only Japanese-American women wasn’t organized, which was different from the case of Japanese-American men. It has been pointed out that one of the reasons why such volunteers remained a minority was due to the families’ views on women serving in the military. Was the situation the same in Hawaii?

According to a book for general readers, women in Hawaii were mobilized and organized to serve local air-raid defense duties as members of the Women’s Army Volunteer Corps, or WAVC<sup>7</sup>. In addition, some specific cases where Hawaiian women joined WAC have been discovered. Furthermore, Japanese-American women in Hawaii had different circumstances to those

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7 Pierre oulin, *A history of Fort De Russy* , (U.S. Army Museum of Hawaii,2007).

on the mainland. According to Moore, in a newspaper interview, some stated “I want to serve the country,” or “I want to do something for my country.” Moore pointed out some desired to travel to the mainland U.S. and others had husbands or other relatives serving in the armed services.

On the other hand, local government officials didn’t want the local female workforce to move to the mainland. In responding to them, the War Department insisted that “the women of Hawaii should not be discriminated against in any way” and “should have the same opportunity.”

By December 1944, sixty-two women from Hawaii had been admitted into the Corps. They had various ethnic backgrounds, including Chinese, Filipino and Korean, but the most of them were of Japanese ancestry as in the case of the mainland.

According to Moore, quote, “a newspaper article reported that all of the women were well educated, having completed at least two years of high school,” unquote. Here again, their language acquisition competence was deemed important for the war against Japan and the occupation, in the same way as male soldiers. Although they were few in number, Japanese-American

women from Hawaii joined WAC and received training in MIS. It was not until November 8th 1944 that Nisei Wacs joined Nisei males at MSILS, a school for linguists.



Fig.1 UH at Manoa Lib's collection

The number of Wacs was 48 in May 1945 and peaked at 51, among which 18 and 29 were Japanese Americans from Hawaii and the mainland, respectively. Some of the latter were from concentration camps. These women learned to read and write in Japanese in order to be translators and interpreters and received training on “heigo, or Japanese military technical terms”. However, the Japanese Army had no female combatants, even in an auxiliary unit. Heigo was extremely important in interrogation to prisoners of war, but was it meaningful to learn it as a part of the training for military linguists?

Now let’s look at their duties in the occupied Japan. Studies on the occupation of Japan have indicated that they were engaged in postal censorship in Tokyo, Yokohama, Fukuoka or other large city areas. Such duties are usually kept invisible. Actually, in November 1945, 13 Japanese-American women from Hawaii arrived in Japan with the rank of civil service officer, but they had undergone censorship training.



Fig.3 UH at Manoa Lib's collection



Fig.4 UH at Manoa Lib's collection

This was earlier than when many WAC Women arrived in occupied Japan in 1946 and such “female units” started to be covered by the Japanese media. In January 1946, the story of the 13 WACs who departed for Japan was widely publicized in the English speaking countries.

A newspaper article on January 18th 1946 introduced 11 Wacs traveling from Hawaii to Tokyo along with their photo. The title of the article, “Nisei To

Be Mannequins Of Democracy,” had a great impact.



Fig.2 UH at Manoa Lib's collection

These women graduated MISLS and served as clerks, secretaries and translators of the occupation forces. 11 of them were Nisei and 4 were from Hawaii.

Nisei Japanese-American female combatants were, especially during the occupation period, required to emphasize their femininity through their clothes, appearance, and other aspects, so that they could give an atmosphere of “soft-landing” as main actors of the occupation administration of Japan, rather than serving in the same line as traveling or operational units.

In the way, Japanese-American women belonged to WAC and received MIS training. Particularly during the occupation period, these WACs appeared in the media outside Japan.

It is consider that they were expected to play a role to impress on the readers in the home country that “democratization of women” was progressing in Japan.

Of course, those women were an absolute minority, and their military

duties were of secret nature in the first place. As the aforementioned Takeda states,

quote, ---(unquote).

She points out the logical inevitability of risks carried by “interpreters” who play the key roles in intercultural communication during wartime. However, from the viewpoint of memories, it is found that an existence that had no contact with people could be “airbrushed out”.

At least, if we look at both the wartime and the succeeding occupation period continuously, noticeable structural differences are found in the roles of Nisei Japanese-American men and women and in their degrees of contact with residents in occupied Japan.

Through the course of my studies, I also came across the testament of a WAC woman who was born in Hawaii.

She received training in MIS, married her compatriot Japanese-American man whom she met in Japan, and went back Hawaii in 1978. She revealed that she was engaged in censorship duties for 11 months in the occupation period. After having served as an interpreter-aide, she lived with her husband working at the U.S. base along with their children as a full-time homemaker. The fact that she underwent training at MISLS, and, even that she was an ex-Wac who was engaged in censorship duties during the occupation period wouldn't have been disclosed outside the couple if she hadn't left any testimonies.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, there is no right answer as to whether the active roles played by these Nisei soldiers require a place in public memory. However, it is evident that these are overwhelmingly fewer testimonies of Nisei Japanese American female recruits compared with the volume of testimonies and images of their male peers left by the male soldiers themselves as well as others, and

accordingly, the existence of such women is not widely known. Moreover, it is quite difficult to obtain people's testimonies on those women. On the other hand, the existence of MIS and MISLS, a school for linguists, had been a military secret until 1979. It was 2011 when Japanese American soldiers who served in MIS, and in Japanese American units fought in the European Front, namely the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and the 100th Infantry Battalion. The ex-pilots of the Women Airforce Service Pilots, consisting of Caucasian women, received the same prize in 2010.

There remain problems regarding the order in which this award should be given to these men and women who are very advanced in age, how we should views groups that were not given this award, and how we should consider such groups as part of the issue of war memory.

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