

Patriotism and Prejudice

Japanese Americans and World War II

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Presidio of San Francisco
Golden Gate
National Recreation Area



Military Intelligence Service Language School students focus on instruction in their classroom at Crissy Field.

One of the most poignant and sadly ironic home front stories of World War II has deep connections to the Presidio. Even as Presidio officers issued orders to relocate Americans of Japanese ancestry to internment camps after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December, 1941, a secret military language school trained Japanese American soldiers only a half mile away. The loyalty, sacrifice, and triumphs of the Japanese American soldiers trained at the Presidio and elsewhere were recognized at the highest levels, but their families had to endure a very different sacrifice as the army moved them to camps far from home.

MIS Language School

Events in the late 1930s in the Far East and Pacific Basin increasingly signaled the possibility of war. In response, the U.S. Army established the 4th Army Intelligence School at the Presidio of San Francisco in November of 1941. The school trained Nisei—Japanese Americans born to parents who had come to the U.S. from Japan—to act as translators in the war against Japan. The army converted a hanger at Crissy Field into classrooms and a bunk house.



National Archives

MIS Nisei interrogates a captured Japanese soldier.

The hangar looked nothing like a traditional school; outsiders were told it was a laundry. The students studied in their make-shift classrooms, played volleyball for recreation, and walked to the nearby Bakers and Cooks School in Building 220 three times a day for meals. Looking out their window in late December 1941, the 60 students could see damaged ships returning after the Pearl Harbor attack of December 7. The year-long training program was then shortened to six months.

The army sent soldiers trained at the MIS to all major battlefields in the Pacific. After the first class graduated, the school moved to Minnesota. Its 6,000 graduates interrogated prisoners, translated intercepted documents, and used their knowledge of Japanese culture to aid the U.S. occupation even after the war. General Douglas MacArthur's chief of staff said, "The Nisei saved countless Allied lives and shortened the war by two years."

War Hysteria!

Fear and war hysteria swept the country in the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor. People feared that the Japanese Imperial forces might attack the West Coast of the United States.

MIS Association of Northern California



Anti-Japanese sentiment on storefront in 1930s

There was also a widespread (but false) belief that disloyal Japanese American residents in Hawaii had assisted in the Pearl Harbor bombing.

In California, long-held racist attitudes against Japanese Americans augmented the war passions. Reacting to public pressure, California Governor Culbert L. Olson and Attorney General (later Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court) Earl Warren argued that Japanese Americans were a security risk and that those who were loyal could not be distinguished from those who were disloyal.

Internment



Lt. General John L. DeWitt



At the Presidio, Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, commander of the Western Defense Command, relied more heavily on information from civilian politicians than on military intelligence or FBI reports. Writing to Secretary of War Henry Stimson, he referred to Japanese Americans as potential enemies, and claimed that military necessity required excluding ethnic Japanese from the West Coast. Stimson urged President Franklin D. Roosevelt to act, and on February 19, 1942, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066.

From his office in Building 35 at the Main Post, General DeWitt issued orders to relocate over 120,000 Japanese Americans and Japanese immigrants from the West Coast. They were moved to 19 hastily constructed camps across the western states and as far east as Arkansas. They were given short notice to leave their homes and jobs, forcing many families to sell their homes and farms at an enormous economic loss. They were allowed to bring only what they could carry.



A young evacuee waits with her family's belongings before leaving for an assembly center, 1942.

Go for Broke!



Nisei at Manzanar pledge loyalty to the U.S. and are sworn in as 442nd volunteers in 1943.

In addition to serving as interpreters and interrogators—and despite the internment of their families—many Japanese Americans served the war effort. Nisei soldiers from the internment camps enlisted to fight, and formed a Japanese American combat unit—the 442nd Regiment—in the segregated U.S. Army. This unit joined with another group of Nisei volunteers from Hawaii who had already fought in North Africa and Italy. The exploits of the 100th/442nd are the stuff of legend. They liberated towns in France, rescued other American



The 442nd marches in Europe.

soldiers, and lived up to their slogan, "Go For Broke." The regiment was the most decorated in World War II for its size and length of service.

Legacy

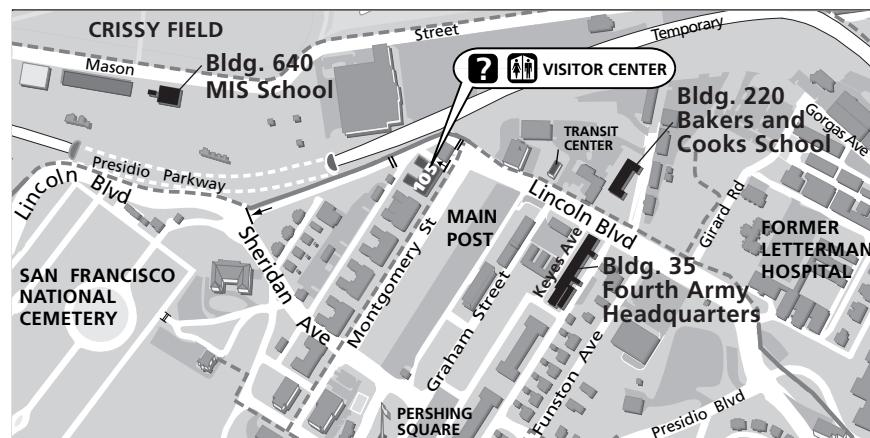
Senator Spark Matsunaga, a veteran of the 100th/442nd, said of the regiment in 1981, "In their courage and loyalty we can find strength and determination to continue our seemingly endless battle against discrimination and injustice..."

In 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed an act granting reparations to Japanese Americans interned by the United States government during World War II. Today, two internment

camps—Manzanar, near Bishop, California, and Minidoka in southern Idaho—are national historic sites where the National Park Service is preserving this difficult story in the nation's history.

Late in 2013, the National Japanese American Historical Society is opening a learning center in Building 640, the site of the MIS language school.

To learn more, visit www.njahs.org/640/



Take some time to see where the Nisei trained and ate, and the office from which the Japanese American internment was directed.