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(Page B-7)

The heroes among us | This Army unit's toughest enemies were prejudice and mistreatment

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'Pearl Harbor' (the movie) is currently in production and scheduled for release next Memorial Day. With a budget of \$145 million, it promises to be the loudest and most costly film ever made. It has an all-star cast, including Ben Affleck, Alec Baldwin, Cuba Gooding Jr., and Gene Hackman as President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

We Americans enjoy these big-budget, guts-'n-glory movies that masterfully fuse special effects with fast action and Hollywood actors uttering clever one-liners to pit good against evil. This formula may sell popcorn, it usually conflicts with reality.

No stronger evidence is there than the 120,000 U.S. citizens of Japanese ancestry who became the forgotten victims of Pearl Harbor through a propagandist campaign launched against them by their own government. Executive Order 9066, signed by President Roosevelt in 1942 called for their imprisonment. Most remarkable is that in spite of this degradation, the men who were recruited from internment camps to serve in the Japanese-American 442nd Regimental Combat Team distinguished themselves as the most decorated unit, not just in World War II, but in all of U.S. military history.

Here in San Diego, most Japanese-Americans had never heard of Pearl Harbor before the Dec. 7, 1941 attack. Nevertheless, they stood accused with radios blasting warnings: "Japanese farmers have infiltrated every strategic spot including dams supplying water to San Diego, the Southern Pacific Railroad and the Oakland Airport. The very fact that no sabotage has taken place is an indication that it will."

Local Japanese-American families learned of the government's plans to relocate them to internment camps from the radio and posters that blanketed the city. Many old-timers can still vividly recall the FBI raiding their homes and confiscating short-wave radios, guns and cameras after obtaining their names and addresses from the U.S. Census Bureau.

"Evacuation Sale" signs appeared everywhere as these U.S. citizens were pressured to liquidate their assets before reporting to the Santa Fe Train Depot in April 1942, taking only what they could carry. Entire families were transferred to the Santa Anita Racetrack for processing and then

transported one more time to their final destinations at camps fortified by barbed wire and armed guards in Idaho, Arizona, New Mexico, Arkansas and New York.

Shortly after arriving, young Japanese-American men were greeted by military recruiters enlisting language specialists to support U.S. Naval Intelligence in the Pacific. Later, the officers returned to recruit volunteers for combat in Europe. The Japanese-American 442nd Regimental Combat Team was officially activated Feb. 1, 1943.

We are privileged here in San Diego to have among our neighbors, several veterans of the 442nd.

Jim Matsumoto of Encinitas was drafted the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor, and listed Cucamonga as his place of birth. "Where in Japan is that?" he was asked. Matsumoto would go on to become a sergeant with K Company at the bloody three-day rescue of the Texas Lost Battalion, the battle that inspired the 1951 movie "Go for Broke" starring Van Johnson.

During that conflict, the 442nd was ordered to use their bayonets to charge Nazi soldiers armed with submachine guns and automatic rifles. When it was all over, the 442nd freed 221 survivors of the Army's 36th Infantry Division at a cost of 800 of their own men. All commissioned officers in Company K were killed, leaving Sgt. Matsumoto the highest-ranking officer. Matsumoto recalls the confusion among the Nazi soldiers as they surrendered, wondering why no one had informed them that the Japanese had won the war and were invading Europe.

For their efforts the men of the 442nd were awarded Bronze Stars and Purple Hearts. After the war ended, the 36th Division launched a drive to declare all members of the 442nd "Honorary Texans."

Lloyd Ito, his brother-in-law, Frank Wada, and friend Abe Takehara, were recruited into the 442nd from an Arizona internment camp in May 1942.

Admonished by many of their peers, they were driven by their desire to bring honor to their families and defend the United States, which, after all, was their only home. Abe was adamant that if his Caucasian friends and schoolmates back in southeast San Diego had to go to war, so did he. The determination of these men, and others of the 442nd, to thwart prejudice by giving it their all inspired the motto: "Go for Broke."

During basic training at Camp Shelby, Miss., Lloyd, Frank and Abe were unable to take furloughs like Caucasian enlistees, and frequently were the object of remarks such as, "Here's our chance to kill a couple of Japs." All men went on to become decorated war heroes, with Lloyd and Frank participating in the vicious house-to-house fighting that took place during the Battle of Bruyeres. When the 442nd liberated Bruyeres, even the French thought they were being invaded by the Japanese.

Despite their valor, prejudice awaited the 442nd stateside in jobs and in housing. Jim recalls being unable to get service in a restaurant after being discharged from the military in Los Angeles. For Lloyd Ito, discrimination struck closer to home when the only barber in his hometown of Encanto refused to give him a haircut, chastising him, "Your people killed my son." When Lloyd explained that he had just returned from Europe after spending three years in the U.S. Army, the barber accommodated him

