

JAPANESE AMERICANS

A nisei vet recalls a war on two fronts

Fought the Nazis, and U.S. prejudice

By Annie Nakao
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

Wendy Hanamura grew up with her father's war stories — but they always seemed to leave something unsaid.

"I only heard the really funny stories, never the ones about death

or pain or loss," she recalled.

The faithful reunions with his World War II buddies were another puzzle to her.

"My father had this deep feeling for these men, something I'd never seen in him outside of his family," she said. "I always wondered what that bond was all about."

It wasn't until Haruo Howard "Howe" Hanamura turned 75 last year that his daughter, a KPIX-TV reporter, was able to retrace the

[See VETERANS, A-12]

◆ VETERANS from A-1

A memoir of war, and honor

years that forever changed the lives of her father and his soldier comrades and affected generations of Japanese Americans to come.

The elder Hanamura is a veteran of the all-Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat Team and the 100th Battalion — which together became the most decorated units in American military history. That much his daughter knew.

But like many children of 442 vets, she didn't know the very human story behind those battle citations that made Gen. Mark Clark call these men the "best goddamn fighters in the U.S. Army."

That is, until her father wrote down his memoirs nearly 50 years later and handed them to her.

That story forms the basis of "Honor Bound," an hourlong documentary of the 442/100th, as told through the eyes and heart of former Staff Sgt. Hanamura.

On Thursday, 100 Japanese American veterans will be honored at the film's premiere at the AMC Kabuki 8 Theaters in San Francisco. Co-produced by the National Japanese American Historical Society and KPIX, "Honor Bound" will air on Channel 5 on March 5.

Stories, treasures

To Wendy Hanamura, the project was a dream come true. Once she read her father's memoirs, she felt she had to tell his story.

"It's a feeling that every child has, that your father's stories are

such treasures," said Hanamura, executive producer of the project.

Besides, she said, "I knew a good story when I saw one."

Stories of the famed 442/100th have long been the subject of books and films. But Hanamura's story is the first to be told by children of the veterans. Hanamura was a "nisei," or the American-born second-generation child of immigrant parents. His daughter, Wendy, is a "sansei," or third generation.

"I think it's really unusual for kids to ask their parents, what did you go through and why am I here?" said Eric Saul, co-founder of the National Japanese American Historical Society and archivist with the Holocaust Oral History Project. "So this is a unique perspective. This is a sansei woman connecting with her father, her family."

Now 76, Hanamura, who lives in Oakland, is like hundreds of other 442 vets — modest, sensible family men of few words who just did what they had to do.

"It was all my daughter's idea," said a resigned Hanamura, who called himself a simple "foot soldier."

"When you're fighting, you only see 50 yards to the right and 50 yards to the left," Hanamura said. "We don't see war like the commanders do. We just did what we had to do. It never dawned on us that we would become famous or anything like that."

Victims of prejudice

Before the war, Hanamura's immigrant parents raised a family of four in Alameda. Prejudice was open and hostile.

"We weren't served at certain restaurants, and we couldn't go swimming at Neptune Beach," Hanamura said.

He did well in school, graduating from UC-Berkeley in 1941. When the bombs fell at Pearl Harbor, he was working at the Colgate Palmolive warehouse — one of the few nonfarm jobs Japanese American college graduates could get.

Like 120,000 other Japanese on the West Coast, the family was put in inland detention camps. The Hanamuras were sent to Topaz, Utah.

Hanamura already had been drafted, and when the segregated all-nisei unit, the 442, was formed in February 1943, he became part of it. Five months later, the all-nisei 100th Battalion was created in Hawaii, where more than 10,000 signed up to serve.

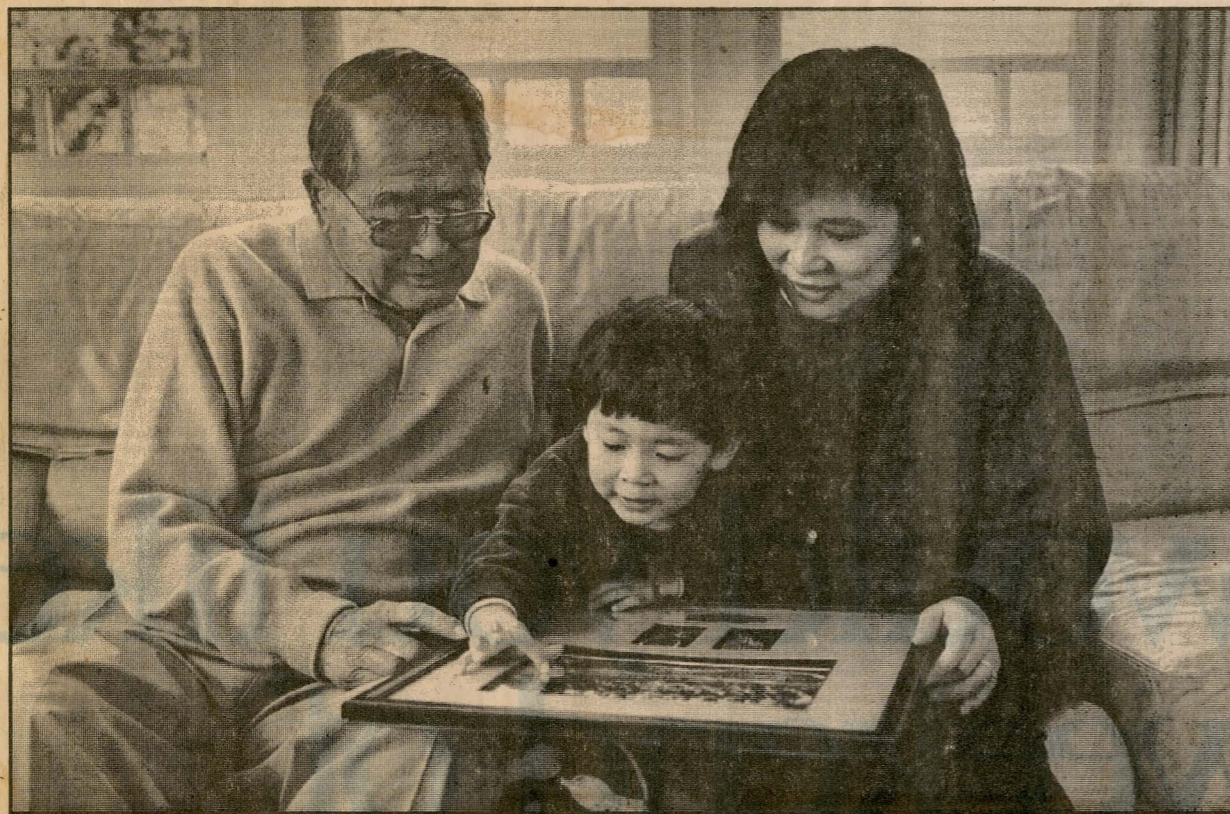
The two units eventually combined in Europe, where they were known as "The Purple Heart Battalion." They were awarded 18,143 individual decorations for bravery.

Unlike those from Hawaii, mainland nisei soldiers fought under a double burden. They had to prove their loyalty while their families remained in the camps.

It made for "unbelievably motivated" soldiers, Saul said.

'There were two wars'

"They knew that if they screwed up, it would reflect on the entire Japanese American community sitting in those concentration



EXAMINER/BOB McLEOD

Haruo Hanamura, left, grandson Jonathan and daughter Wendy check his Bronze Star and Purple Heart.

camps," Saul said. "So it wasn't just a war. There were two wars, one against prejudice and the other against the enemy."

"I think we all had a sense within our hearts of why we were there," said Shig Kizuka, of Watsonville, a private first class in Hanamura's Company L. "We just didn't talk about it."

Among their exploits: the liberation of the French town of Bruyeres, an SS stronghold and the last defense against an invasion of Germany.

Ten days later, they rescued the "Lost Battalion," the 36th Division of Texans trapped behind enemy lines in France's Vosges Forest. The 442 saved 211 Texans. Some 800 nisei soldiers were killed or injured.

Later, they were sent to break through Italy's "Gothic Line," a series of mountainous fortresses held by 2,300 German machine gun nests.

"It was impenetrable," said

Wendy Hanamura. "So the commanders of the 442 came up with this daring plan. They decided to go up a face of rock so steep that the Germans would never expect them to try it. They did it wearing full battle gear, in the dark. They were instructed to be very quiet, their dog tags were taped to their chests. Even if you fell, you couldn't cry out. Three men did fall, silently."

The 442 scaled the cliff and, within 36 hours, punched through the Gothic Line.

Hanamura was shot in the leg in that campaign. Three weeks later, the war was over.

Last October, the Hanamuras had revisited that peak. Awestruck at the sight, Howe Hanamura had said: "I guess we were young and strong and foolish."

Wendy Hanamura and many others say the 442 helped lessen prejudice against not just Japanese Americans but all Asian Americans in later years.

"Civil rights for Japanese Americans began in that forest in France, when they rescued the Lost Battalion," she said. "All of us minorities owe this tremendous debt to these men."

Despite such acclaim, most 422 vets are modest.

"When I ask them if they changed the course of history, they just laugh or shake their heads," Wendy Hanamura said. "But I think that yes, they feel it in their bones now that what they did mattered. But they'll never tell you."

"Because there's this feeling in the Japanese culture that if you talk about your own actions, somehow that diminishes them and it diminishes you. That is the key to my father's whole reluctance to tell the story. But in the end, he did it, for his grandson, my son, Jonathan Haruo. I think he wanted his grandchildren to have a record of what happened."