

Japanese American Soldiers in World War II

Notes for the CHICAGOPEX Jury
(November 2025)

Scope: This exhibit begins with a prologue that provides historical context for the origins of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team (RCT) and Japanese American (Nisei) participation with the Military Intelligence Service (MIS) in World War II. It ends with the deactivation of the RCT and their active presence in the occupation of Japan. It covers all major activities of Nisei soldiers from 1941 to 1947, including basic training, transit to the European Theater, fighting in Italy and France, and beginning of the postwar period.

For the section on MIS linguists serving both stateside and in the Pacific Theater, coverage includes language school training, presence with Army and Marine units throughout Asia, and examples of captured documents translated by the soldiers. The exhibit also provides examples of the postwar occupation in which Nisei linguists oversaw civil censorship of the mails. A small section highlights Sgt. Arthur Komori, who served on General MacArthur's staff in Australia and was present as an official translator during the formal surrender at Tokyo Bay.

Treatment: The exhibit is divided into two broad sections; European Theater and Pacific Theater. Each section develops chronologically, beginning with stateside training, then service overseas. Both overseas sections are organized by geography. The campaigns throughout Europe present themselves in the order they occurred.

Importance: The exhibit documents the important historical role played by Nisei soldiers during World War II while their siblings, parents, and grandparents remained incarcerated under armed guard behind barbed wire fences. Their achievements as linguists helped shorten the conflict in the Pacific Theater. More, their military accomplishments led to significant postwar acceptance of Japanese Americans into the mainstream of American life. Their heroism in the Pacific and European Theaters eventually resulted in the awarding of 31 Medals of Honor.

The exhibit shows the importance of the Army Post Office in documenting the movements of the Nisei soldiers, the campaigns they fought in Europe, and their broad geographic spread in the Pacific. To highlight the irony of soldiering while family members were incarcerated, a few poignant, soldier-to-internee covers make the point.

Having taken more than 30 years to assemble, the exhibit is likely the best example of the subject for its completeness. It certainly cannot be duplicated easily.

Research: This exhibit is an extension of a 30-year study of the incarceration of Japanese Americans. My publications appear widely in the historical literature based on primary source material examined at various repositories throughout the country.

As a result of my research, I have linked the historical underpinnings with their implications for postal history. I know the units they served in, where they were when particular correspondence was mailed, and the casualties they suffered. Most soldier mail in World War II looks mundane at a first glance. The address lines and APO numbers reveal a cover's historical and philatelic significance. Even the eight-digit Army serial number reveals if a Nisei soldier enlisted in Hawaii or where on the mainland. I know if an individual soldier's enlistment occurred while incarcerated with his family. Finally, knowing about individual campaigns and warfare within them, I know, for example, that a letter from 442nd RCT,

Company K posted on November 17, 1944, was written by one of the few survivors in his unit from recent heavy fighting in the Vosges Mountains of France.

I have summarized the postal history of the Nisei soldier in the book cited below.

Rarity factor: No formal census exists for the postal history of the Nisei soldier in World War II. Because families of Japanese American soldiers often retain family artifacts or donate them to cultural associations such as the Nisei Veterans Association, little of it reaches the philatelic market. As a result, the difficulty of acquisition is high. Any statements of rarity or exceptionalism on items highlighted in the exhibit are based on my own collecting experience.

Further reading:

- Louis Fiset. “Japanese Americans – Nisei Soldiers.” In: Louis Fiset. *Detained, Interned, Incarcerated: U.S. Enemy Noncombatant Mail in World War II*. (Chicago: Collectors Club of Chicago, 2010.)

JAPANESE AMERICAN SOLDIERS IN WORLD WAR II

Purpose and scope: The purpose of this exhibit is to show a comprehensive selection of covers of World War II Japanese American (Nisei) soldiers who served in the European and Mediterranean Theaters of Operation; as translators and POW interrogators with the Military Intelligence Service (MIS) in the Pacific Theater; and intelligence operators on the U.S. mainland. The presentation includes incoming and outgoing mail generated from 1941-1947 covering all major aspects of the Nisei soldier experience, while highlighting the units in which they served.



**"Go for Broke"
442nd RCT Logo**

Background: The 442nd Regimental Combat Team (442nd RCT) was an all-Nisei infantry unit that participated in six campaigns throughout Europe. In the Pacific Theater, Nisei linguists translated captured documents, interrogated POWs, and served with the occupation forces in Japan. Some were assigned to both Navy and Marine units or loaned out to other Allied countries desperate for soldiers proficient in Japanese. Both volunteer and drafted Niseis from Hawaii and the mainland participated. Most mainlanders were conscripted from government relocation centers where they had been incarcerated with families, and prewar friends and neighbors on the basis of their race. The significant efforts of these highly decorated soldiers helped subdue negative attitudes toward Americans of Japanese ancestry, facilitating their entry into the nation's mainstream in the years and decades after the war.

Plan of the Exhibit

- 1 Antecedents
- 2 Stateside Training
- 3 Combat in Europe
- 4 Military Intelligence Service
- 5 Occupation of Japan
- 6 Conclusion

Importance: To my knowledge this is the first exhibit on the subject. It is based upon historical underpinnings and personal study of the units in which the soldiers served, as well as their activities and accomplishments.

Difficulty of acquisition: Although more than 18,000 Niseis served in World War II, surviving correspondence seldom comes on the philatelic market. Families tend to hold on to it or donate to museums. As a result, it took more than 30 years to acquire the material shown in this exhibit. It cannot be duplicated easily.

Key items: Items of special philatelic or historical note are bordered in red and annotated in bold.