

THE PURPLE HEART

A Story of Love & Courage



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THE PURPLE HEART, a historical novel of the Japanese American experience during WWII, has had a profound effect on me and forced me to search for underlying reasons on why I reacted the way I did. I am a veteran of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and my entire family was uprooted and confined in a relocation camp while I fought for the United States of America. This book has been a remarkable personal awakening. The anti-Japanese American hysteria on the West Coast was founded on the possibility that there might be sabotage and support for the Japanese aggression after the US declared war against Japan following the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The book tells a story of the unjust racial discrimination and evacuation of all Japanese Americans on the West Coast into relocation camps and the formation of the segregated Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat Team. The story is told as a love story of two young Nisei (second generation Japanese Americans) who meet in an internment camp and fall in love. The young husband then volunteers to serve in the 442nd against the wishes of his new young wife but felt that he would return home safely because the love he had for her was that strong.

The barrack life was sobering but since I was only able to visit my parents and sisters in the Rohwer Relocation Camp, I did not fully experience confinement and though I was aware of the conditions, I did not feel the direct effects of their long term confinement. What moved me deeply, which I came to realize only after reading "The Purple Heart," was the obvious injustice of the discriminatory uprooting and my naïve acceptance of this action. However, rather than slack off and serve in the Army with less than full commitment, I was more determined to do my best, to go all out and show that Japanese American soldiers were loyal and patriotic. It still seems strange that I and all of my close colleagues behaved in this way. Perhaps it was the natural instinct of patriots who only wanted to, during a time of war, defend their home, America. It was not that we believed we were any stronger Patriots, nor that we were unusually courageous or brave, or that our performance would right the wrong that was done to the Japanese American community. There was, however, an underlying feeling of adventure and an intoxicating feeling of the risk in taking part in active combat. We were young men at the time and acted as such.



To understand this feeling further, I have been desperately searching my childhood upbringing by my parents who indoctrinated me with the traditional Japanese high esteem of military service, which I seem to have carried into the US Army. Perhaps, some of my comrades had similar feelings or reasons of their own but the end result was that there was total acceptance of the orders on the battlefield and our willingness to carry them out. This is the major impact of "The Purple Heart" on me, in understanding the unwavering sense of duty carried by me and my Japanese American brothers-in-arms.



As a Motor Sergeant, it was clear that I would be in a relatively safe area of battle. My dear mother was pleased that I was not in a high risk position and pleaded that I not put myself in any dangerous situation and to come home safely even if it meant that I become an objector. In spite of this wish, I volunteered for a position to become a forward observer, which turned out to be one of the most high risk roles during combat. I of course, never told my mother of my chosen position and felt invulnerable as did Hiroshi, the main male character in "The Purple Heart" and strongly believed that I would return home-which I did. I confess that I saw a lot of myself in the young Hiroshi and the comrades that he fought alongside with. He reminded me of the many young men who gave their lives in service to our country.

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With Love & Courage, Journey Through the Japanese American Experience

During the battle of the Rescue of the Lost Battalion, my forward observer crew of three men and me were attached to "I" Company of the third Battalion of the 442nd, which was the lead Company. The fighting was intense and we suffered extremely high casualties. Our battles were nightmarish to say the least. By the time we pushed through the heavily fortified German lines and rescued the 36th Division Infantrymen, who numbered less than 200 men, our company was down to eight riflemen without any commissioned officers remaining. All in all, about 200 of my comrades lost their lives and another 800 or so were wounded. None of my forward observer crew were killed or even wounded. To this day, I still get chills and Goosebumps as I recall this harrowing and memorable battle.



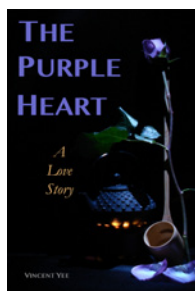
Someone was looking after us or we were just very fortunate. I did however, at my mother's request, carry a Senninbari (a cloth sash with a thousand stitches) that traditional Japanese soldiers in battle carried with them to assure their safe return. As an added item, I carried a small bible with a metal shield in my front chest pocket of my jacket, whose front cover read, "May This Keep You Safe From Harm."



Shortly after returning from the war, I married my wife Minnie, a Nisei who was interned in a relocation camp. She shared my life for 64 years until her unexpected death in 2012. We raised 4 wonderful children and have 5 precious grandchildren. I took full advantage of the GI Bill, completed my college and graduate studies and after a long academic career, retired as Emeritus Professor from Harvard Medical School.



I hope that someday, a movie of "The Purple Heart" may be considered so that a wider audience may be informed of 442nd's patriotic duty and service to our great country. Despite them being treated so unjustly and inappropriately during WWII, the men, my brother-in-arms performed patriotically. There isn't that many of us left these days to tell our story, less than a hundred I believe.



by Vincent Yee

At 93, I'm still finding out about my time in WWII and "The Purple Heart," in its amazing story about love and courage has given me another opportunity to explore that part of my life, from an entirely new and fresh perspective.

Given another opportunity, I think that I would choose exactly what I did during this period of my life and could not wish for anything else. May God Bless America.

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