NATIONAL JAPANESE AMERICAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

1333 Gough St., D-10
San Francisco, CA 94109
30 March 1995

Mrs. Guyo Tajiri
192 Fairlawn Drive
Berkeley, CA 94708

Dear Guyo Tajiri:

Thanks for your letter of March 27th and the enclosed article by Larry and Ruth Hall in the 12/20/47 issue of the *Pacific Citizen*.

At the Historical Society (NJAHS) archives we have large file (actually boxes) on the 100/442 Regimental Combat Team. We also have a large collection of Army and private photos taken of this regiment's actions and personnel.

In 1981, this organization (then known as Go For Broke, Inc.) put on a photo exhibit of the 100/442 at the Presidio Army Museum in San Francisco. Later that year similar exhibit on the Military Intelligence Service (MIS) Japanese Language School was shown.

The organization changed its name to the National Japanese American Historical Society (NJAHS) in 1983. This was necessary in order to attract women and Sansei into the organization. Our exhibit *East to America, 1885 to 1985* was shown at the former Angel island immigration station building in May 1985.

Our other popular exhibits have been *U.S. Detention Camps, 1942-1945, Children of Detention Camps, Strength and Diversity: Three Generations of Japanese American Women*. The last mentioned is currently traveling throughout the U.S. as a Smithsonian Traveling Exhibit. We are currently working on the exhibit: *Latent August: The Legacy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki* which will open at Fort Mason this coming July.

The article you sent us will be stored in the 100/441 RCT file in our archives. Thanks.

Sincerely yours,

Clifford Uyeda

Clifford Uyeda.

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NJAHS

National
Japanese
American
Historical
Society

March 30,1995

Guyo Tajiri
192 Fairlawn Dr.
Berkeley, CA 94708

Dear Mr. Tajiri,

On behalf of the National Japanese American Historical Society, I would like to thank you for your donation of the news article, "A French Town Remembers Its Nisei Liberators", from Pacific Citizen. We are, indeed, very happy to add it to our archives of 442nd RCT materials. Donations such as yours make it possible for us to continue in our important task of documenting as fully as possible the experiences and culture of Japanese Americans.

Again, thank you very much for your kind donation.

Sincerely,

Kara Paw-Pa

Kara Paw-Pa
Collections Manager

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Story of Bruyeres

A FRENCH TOWN REMEMBERS ITS NISEI LIBERATORS

By Larry and Ruth Hall

Paris, France

THERE IS a small parcel of land deep in a mountain forest of France that for all intents and purposes belongs to all Americans of Japanese ancestry.

A rustic fence surrounds the plot, which is by a roadside. In the center of the carefully landscaped spot is a granite stone Fastened to that is a bronze tablet.

The road is an important one for Nisei for it represents part of the route they are following toward recognition by other groups of their rights as American citizens.

For a time, in the fall of 1944, the road was little used because it represented a line of battle. On one side of it—the side toward the top of the mountain—German Panzer troops were firmly entrenched in elaborately constructed earthen machine gun nests, artillery emplacements and foxholes. On the other, American soldiers were scattered through the dense growth of towering pine trees. For almost a month shells and bullets screamed across the road from both directions. It was a month of heavy casualties on both sides; of small advances and equally small retreats.

About the middle of October that year the American soldiers on that battleground were reinforced by the 442nd Regimental Combat team. An attack was mounted, the Nisei pushing around the mountain side in one direction and other units completing the pincer move from the other direction. The objective was Bruyeres, a small Vosges mountain town of 3,000 inhabitants which had been under the German yoke for four years. On the other side of the mountain from where the granite stone now stands, the road completes its circuit and wends down toward the town, about a mile and one-half away. In back of the town another mountain rises. In a century-old tower on top of it the Germans had an artillery observation post, the most strategic spot for miles around. On the sides of the same mountain and at its foot heavy German guns were placed against any kind of attack.

Before the 442nd jumped off, American artillery battered the mountain top and the gun emplacements for more than two hours. Then, through ankle-deep mud and under the worst possible conditions for warfare, the foot soldiers began to move. Inch by inch, muddy yard by muddy yard, they blasted a path forward. Foxholes, empty machine gun clips, broken K-ration cans and the graves of German soldiers now mark their route. American soldiers died too, but they were buried in military cemeteries and many bodies have since been returned to the United States. The American soldiers joined forces on the other side of the mountain and started down the road to Bruyeres. Some edged along the road proper while others slipped through the pine woods which extend to the bottom and which were full of enemy snipers and machine guns. But the Nisei kept on moving as did their comrades in arms.

At the foot of the mountain, the road becomes the head of Bruyeres' main street and here the house to house fighting began. As often it was rubble heap to rubble heap fighting because many of the houses were just that, so intense had been the bombardment. The liberation of the city took two days and the attack continued, over the second mountain and on up the valley to other towns. The Nisei soldiers didn't have any time to lounge around in the town but the people of Bruyeres remember them well.

For three weeks during which the town was shelled intermittently, the townspeople lived in the cellars of their homes, if they had any left, or in those of their neighbors. For three weeks they lived on whatever foods they had in their homes even though they could see the potatoes and the other produce ripe in the surrounding fields. For three weeks their daily life was sweating out their liberation. Then one morning some of those who had known when they went to bed that the Boches were occupying their upper floors, peeked out to find Nisei soldiers firing from windows and doorways at the retreating Germans.

Maybe a people with less democratic ideals would have been something less than grateful for being liberated the hard way, at the expense of their homes, a good part of their town and more than a score of their fellow-residents. But this was not true in Bruyeres. The townspeople welcomed their deliverers.

And, being a democratic people, they had good reason. They remembered with loathing the four years they had been under the heel of the oppressor. They remembered seeing one of their neighbors—an F.F.I. officer—kicked to death in the square in front of the college because he would not divulge secrets of the resistance. They remembered the day their aging mayor had been deposed by a Vichy man and also the day he had openly defied the Germans by accepting the responsibility for an attack by Bruyeres civilians which killed several German soldiers. They remembered that because of his bravery, he and several other deposed public officials were released by the German commandant. They remembered the four years during which German soldiers in their city outnumbered them two to one and when the slightest meaningful glance might mean arrest by the Gestapo and possibly death.

And they remembered the fanatical storm troopers and Italian troops, brought in toward the end of the occupation, who menaced their women. With particular loathing they remembered the Milicens, the special police of Vichy, who being Frenchmen, tried to trap them into betraying their democratic principles. They remembered too the all too few instances when Allied planes would fly over some wooded spot far enough from the city to escape detection and drop arms and ammunition to the men of the resistance, the same men who served as guides for the American troops during the attack on Bruyeres and in subsequent battles.

They remembered the 40 Jewish people who once were residents of the city and who attended the little Synagogue on the Main street. They remembered that all of them had disappeared after the occupation, most of them sent to Germany, never to return. A few fortunate ones escaped and joined the resistance forces. Since the liberation of Bruyeres more than two years ago, only two of the Jews deported to Germany have returned. It is assumed by city officials that the remainder ended in gas chambers and crematoriums.

The monument on the small plot by the side of the mountain road memorializes the action of the 442nd in rescuing the 1st Battalion, 141st Infantry Regiment, 36th division on Oct. 30, 1944. This action took place a few miles east of Bruyeres, deep in the Vosges, where the "lost battalion" had been surrounded by the Germans during four days. The two and one-half mile battle, much of it uphill and in the face of heavy fire, was typical of the "Go For Broke" regiment of Nisei troops. But to the people of Bruyeres, who are well aware of the rescue action, the monument honors the Nisei as their liberators.

To white-haired, gentle mayor Louis Gillon, now back at the post he held before the occupation, the little spot in the forest is a reminder to the people of his town that Bruyeres is free only because of the heroic action by the men his fellow-townsmen affectionately termed "les petit Hawaiians." In his drafty office at the Town Hall, the back entrance of which is piled with the rubble of bombardment, the softspoken man looked slightly amazed when asked if the town could arrange for the plaque dedication ceremony in two days. Afterwards, when his adjutants and other public officials were working feverishly to prepare for the ceremony, he smilingly remarked that they were doing the job "like Americans." At every stage in the preparations and throughout the actual ceremony his only concern was whether or not the representatives of the J.A.C.L. were pleased.

Gillon was mayor when the Germans arrived at Bruyeres in 1940. Before the invading column reached the city, an order arrived saying that the townspeople should salute the German officers. Gillon quickly announced that he would be the first to disobey this command and openly told the German commander he would appeal to superior authority. The order never was carried out. After he was deposed in favor of a Vichyite, Gillon became one of the first men in the region to join the resistance. Despite the fact that as many as 8,000 German troops at a time were stationed in barracks on the edge of Bruyeres, the townspeople managed to slip away to the forests for resistance meetings. Allied airmen, shot down in that region, were hidden in farmhouses and transported by F.F.I. and maquis to the English Chan-

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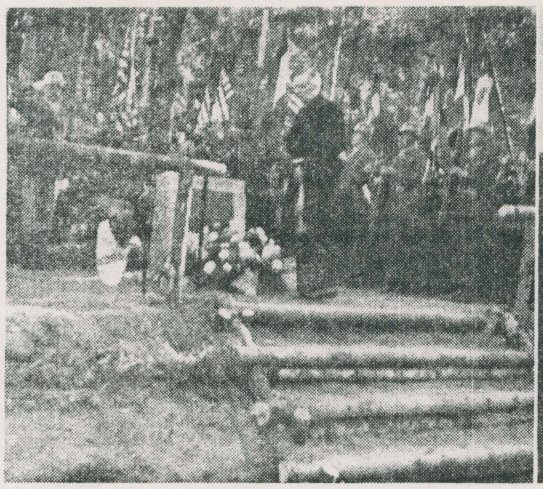
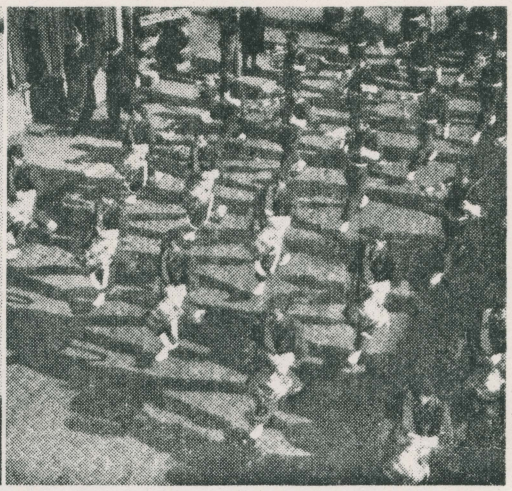
Above: The townspeople of Bruyeres, along with French and American army units, marched up the hill to the site of the Japanese American memorial. Youngsters scampered alongside the train of marchers.

Bruyeres school children line up in the center of town, preparatory to taking part in the march up the hill to the Memorial site.

Right: This photograph, loaned to the Pacific Citizen by Mayor Louis Gillon of Bruyeres, was taken on the day when infantrymen of the 442nd regimental combat team entered and liberated the town. Here a Nisei soldier is surrounded by an admiring group of townspeople.





A French Town Remembers Its Nisei Liberators

(Continued from page 17)

nel and thence to England. Secret radios kept the townspeople informed of the real progress of the war.

As soon as Mayor Gillon had approved the plan for holding the plaque dedication ceremony a party was sent to the battlefield to select a site. The spot chosen was on relatively level terrain—that is no decided slope up or down the mountain for a distance of about 50 feet back on each side of the road. It was just about in the center of the battlefield and directly across the road from the remains of an American tank. When the site was selected it was nothing but a piece of forest floor free of foxholes. By the end of the following day city workmen, aided by former German prisoners of war who are now free workers, had leveled the monument area and erected a fence around it. An opening in the fence led to four steps down to the road. Underbrush on all sides was cleared for spectators. That same day the mayor issued a proclamation saying the observance would be held and inviting the townspeople of Bruyeres to attend. A French policeman, mounted on a bicycle and with a drum slung over his shoulder, rode with the proclamation to the center of the city. After beating a long roll on the drum to attract attention, he read the mayor's message. Then he continued down the street, repeating the performance at each intersection until all of the town was covered. To be doubly sure everyone knew, the officer made the same rounds the following day.

By Wednesday night, the eve of the ceremony, practically all official efforts of the town were directed toward the events of the following day. French and American soldiers had arrived and their officers had conferred on maneuvers. The mayor completed his speech. The monument was set in place.

Thursday morning was as sparkling and clear as the day of the rescue three years before had been sullen and wet. Every flag in Bruyeres was on display. Several American banners had been borrowed from Epinal, the nearest city, to supplement those of the town. A day earlier city officials had estimated that 1,000 people would attend the ceremony. Although it was a regular day off in the schools, they explained, many working people probably would not be able to attend. However, as the parade began to form in the town's central square, more and more shops closed, more and more working places gave their employees a half-holiday.

By 1 p.m., the scheduled time for the beginning of the parade, the spacious square was thronged with people and the line of march, along the same main street by which the liberators had entered the city, was packed three and four deep with spectators.

After a salute to the dead of two wars and inspection by Maj. E. R. Werner McCabe, representing the American Embassy in Paris, and Colonel Ragot of the French army, the parade began. The municipal band headed the line of marchers. Then came the firemen, resplendent in their dark blue uniforms and bright silver helmets. Lines of school children, their dress representing the athletic organizations to which they belonged, followed. The 80-piece French army band headed up the street followed by a unit of French infantrymen. The American soldiers, a firing squad composed exclusively of combat troops and headed by Capt. James P. Cahill, swung into line. The city officials plus Major McCabe and Colonel Ragot followed. Behind them came the French veterans organization.

Suddenly the spectators who had been watching the parade wind by took to the street and became a part of it themselves. Mothers who couldn't leave their babies pushed carriages in front of them. Whole families joined and people filled the street until the line stretched all the way through the town, one-third of a mile of marching people.

At the beginning of the climb up the dirt road to the site, no one hesitated—the baby carriages were pushed ahead, people old and young continued the march.

At the monument the municipal band was assembled in the road on the left side. To the rear the French infantrymen took up positions while the school children stood in the forest on the right facing the road. The American soldiers stood at rigid attention within the enclosure on either side of the monument. The French army band took its stand in the road to the right of the enclosure. The officials stood in a semi-circle in the road immediately in front of the monument area while the spectators—2,500 of them—filled the forest on all sides.

At about 2 p.m.—exactly three years after the first elements of the 442nd reached the "lost battalion"—Mayor Gillon began his speech. As he told his people of the debt they owed to the 442nd and other American soldiers, residents of Bruyeres nodded their heads in earnest agreement. When he finished, M. Robert Valantin, first adjutant to the mayor, read a French translation of a speech prepared by Col. V. R. Miller, former commander of the 442nd. The original then was read in English by M. Marshall, a resident of Bruyeres. Col. Ragot then praised American fighting men in general and the 442nd in particular, citing especially the fact that the Nisei troops were fighting for their own civil rights at the same time they were fighting for their country.

Major McCabe, who had not prepared a speech, then addressed the gathering in French. Noticeably moved, he added his praises of the 442nd for their having to fight two battles at the same time and thanked the French people for their wonderful reception.

While the French army band played the Star Spangled Banner and the Marseillaise, school girls placed wreaths of flowers on the monument. A French bugler sounded taps. As the last note died away, Captain Cahill snapped orders to the American troops and three salvos of rifle fire split the stillness. The ceremony was over.

But the people of bombed out Bruyeres will not forget it. The city plans to outline the square plot of ground with evergreen shrubs and to preserve the monument indefinitely. There will be more flowers placed there in autumns to come.

Bruyeres is struggling back, slowly and against the terrific odds of near economic collapse in the country. Along the main street, piles of new cinderblock and other building materials are almost as frequent as piles of rubble. But with labor scarce and held to a wage of about 40 francs per hour (about 30 cents at the legal exchange but closer to 20 in buying power) the job is difficult and will take long.

Before the war Bruyeres had a brewery, two furniture factories, five clothing factories and a large sawmill. Most of them have been destroyed or damaged. The buildings on five nearby farms were burned by the Germans, in most cases in retaliation for the capture by resistance forces of five Wehrmacht soldiers. Of the 494 homes in the city proper before the war, 23 were destroyed and 342 damaged, the latter to the extent of making them 30 per cent uninhabitable. Official American army estimates place the number of artillery shells which fell in the commune, which includes adjoining lands, at 35,000 of which 15,000 fell in the town itself. Twenty-one townspeople were killed during the shelling and more than 70 were injured.

But the people of Bruyeres were more than willing to pay the price for their liberation. In his speech at the plaque dedication Mayor Gillon sounded the sentiments of his neighbors when he described the attack:

"Each shell burst made our hearts with hope, for at last, we are going to be delivered from the oppressor—who during four long years held us under the yoke."

With people like Gillon—and all other townspeople who did all they could to make the dedication ceremony one of the most outstanding in the history of the town—Bruyeres will find the way back.

Above left: Mayor Gillon of Bruyeres stands before the flowerbedecked plaque dedicated to the men of the 442nd combat team.

Center: A closeup of the stout Bruyeres mayor, who led French resistance units during the Nazi occupation.

Right: The French army band was an impressive unit of the town's parade to the site of the Japanese American memorial.