

Silent No More The Varsity Victory Volunteers of World A Profile of Historian Franklin Odo

by Terry Hong

Write what you know best” is the advice that writers probably hear most often. Franklin Odo, activist, academic, and museum curator extraordinaire, does exactly that. His latest title, *No Sword to Bury: Japanese Americans in Hawai'i During World War II*, takes him back to his native Hawai'i to explore the experiences of a shrinking group of Japanese American men who survived World War II as part of the Varsity Victory Volunteers (VVV).

Made up of about 170 young American men of Japanese descent, the VVV was a nonmilitary group that performed public service—mining rocks in local quarries, building roads, repairing public property—on the island of O'ahu in 1942. Although no one recalls how the group got its name, the VVV was officially designated the Corps of Engineers Auxiliary and attached to the 34th Combat Engineers Regiment of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. In spite of their American-born status, for over a year after Pearl Harbor, the men of VVV were classified as 4C: “aliens ineligible to serve in the armed forces of the United States.” More than half a century later, the VVV's legacy of loyalty and service to their homeland—the United States of America—remains a largely untold story ... until now.

Two decades ago, a Chinese American named Hung Wai Ching approached Odo about what he believed to be a very important historical project. Referred to as the “father of the VVV,” Ching played a prominent role in forming the group as well as mentoring the group's young leaders. Odo writes in *No Sword*,

In a period marked by Chinese American rage against Japan and, sometimes, Japanese Americans because of Japan's atrocities in China, he [Ching] worked aggressively for tolerance.

Decades later, Ching would be the one to insist that the group's legacy be recognized and preserved for the sake of posterity. Odo recalls: “Ching made the actual contact with me in 1984, suggesting that this was a very important topic about some important people. Of course, I had long had an interest in the experiences of Japanese Americans in Hawai'i so this was an unexplored area of that history that further fueled my interest.”

With Odo's curiosity piqued, Ching encouraged and arranged for initial interviews to be conducted with some of the local VVV still living in Hawai'i.

After two or three years, Odo recognized that the interviews clearly constituted a book in the making, and he hired a professional writer. “But the writer was just so bad, that I finally said I would do it myself,” he laughs. “I think that was back in 1987 or 1988. So the book took quite a few years to get written.”

The initial meetings grew to some 50-plus interviews, with

Odo spending a considerable amount of time with VVV members during the 1980s and 1990s. Ironically, he never felt that he developed any close relationships with them, explaining, “These men were generally quite successful—certainly in their post-World War II lives, and hence not the ‘underdog’/working-class types on which I was focusing my research at the time. Indeed, they could be considered the models for the ‘model minority myth’ that I was anxious to critique.”

Still, in December 2003, when Odo flew to Hawai'i to give a prepublication reading of *No Sword* at the Japanese Cultural Center of Hawai'i in Honolulu, more than a dozen of the VVV members were in attendance. The center's executive director, Keiko Bonk, remembers that Odo's books sold out quickly and laughs that she's still waiting for her own copy on special order. Bonk recalls: “I had always thought of the older gentlemen getting together and seeing each other regularly, but actually it was the book that brought them back together after all this time. That was surprising, but also very touching. The whole event got very sentimental. And that's the interesting part of the book, the human aspect of it—humanizing the war, humanizing the effects of the war on the Americans, in this case the Japanese Americans.” She adds: “Franklin has given us an uncharacteristically honest look at a subject that is usually viewed through the prism of ideology and patriotic myth. In doing so he helps us understand that the truth is never an enemy of real patriotism.”

Almost 60 years after the end of World War II, the VVV's loyalty in the face of utter discrimination is hardly a passive legacy. As Odo puts it: “I think one legacy is that, even in very bleak conditions of racist discrimination, ‘victims’ can fight back. In this case, the VVV did so by throwing the challenge back at the ‘establishment’ to create a venue for change. The other is that we have a responsibility to work for change through the positions we occupy.”

Post-9/11, the treatment of Arab Americans, as well as other ethnic groups that resemble the so-called enemy, including Sikh Asian Americans, has often been compared to the Japanese American experience during World War II. But Odo, at least, is partially convinced that the U.S. government will not make the same racially biased mistakes on such a massive scale: “I do think this [separation by ethnicity or even internment] will be difficult to effect anymore partly because we have gone through the Japanese American World War II experience.” He does, however, remain cautious: “But let me temper my comments by saying that they understate the critical injustice of those detained at Guantanamo because the public thinks that ‘since we are not doing this wholesale internment, that it's okay because those who are impacted probably are legitimate suspects.’ This line of thinking was, in effect, the same sort of justification used when the FBI picked up those who were detained in Justice Department camps during World War II—and all those from Hawai'i—because the FBI could say that a) the ‘suspects’ had been provided hearings (how could they prove they were not subversive?), and b) each ‘suspect’ had been individually ‘selected’ and not a victim of mass arrest.”

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In spite of the “you’re either with us or against us” mentality of the Bush administration, Odo recognizes the “huge progress in opportunities” for Asian Americans within the U.S. military since World War II. He cites Asian American military successes that have paved the way, including the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, the 100th Battalion, and the Military Intelligence Service, which all “added to the reputation of Japanese Americans as brave and loyal troops.” He also cites “the record of the 1st and 2nd Filipino Infantry Regiments fighting under General MacArthur when the U.S. retook the Philippines.” Odo says with a chuckle: “On an individual level, the military is surely far more open to upward mobility than the civilian sector, whether that be in higher education, Fortune 500 companies, the federal government and even right here in the Smithsonian!”

As the founding director of the Asian Pacific American Program at the Smithsonian Institution and the first and only Asian Pacific American curator at the National Museum of American History, Odo has dedicated his life to documenting, preserving, and presenting the histories of Americans of Asian descent. Through his books, Odo continues to give voice to those who have gone unheard for far too long. Brent Glass, director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, lauds Odo’s contributions: “Franklin Odo has been a leader at the Smithsonian Institution in the development of exhibitions and public programs that have engaged thousands of people in the history and culture of Asian Americans. He is a rare scholar who is able to translate his academic research into publicly accessible formats.”

Indeed, through writing, Odo, who has graced the halls of such hallowed institutions as Columbia University, University of Hawai’i, and University of California at Los Angeles before settling into life at the Smithsonian, retains his professorial role throughout the Asian American community and beyond. While he’s busy curating and directing in the museum world, his books continue to teach.

Last year, Odo published *The Columbia Documentary History of the Asian American Experience*, the first book that brought together the canon of documents that are of utmost importance to Asian Pacific American history. Almost two decades prior, in 1985, Odo published *A Pictorial History of the Japanese in Hawai’i 1885-1924*, which opens with the experiences of the first Japanese immigrants to Hawai’i and ends with the 1924 exclusionary laws that effectively denied further Japanese entry into the U.S. Meanwhile, Odo’s *Roots: An Asian American Reader*, which Odo wrote with Amy Tachiki, Eddie Wong, and Buck Wong in 1971, was the first bona fide Asian Pacific American breakout text.

With the addition of *No Sword* to his repertoire, Odo has plans for two books that delve further into unexplored aspects of the Japanese American experience in Hawai’i: “I want to suggest the richness available in the stories from one single ethnic group in one single location across two generations,” he explains. That should keep him busy doing what he knows best for decades to come. ■