

New exhibit sheds light on Japanese after onset of World War II

By Chevel Johnson
The Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — After Japan's naval and air forces attacked Pearl Harbor and the Philippines in December 1941, life for seven-year-old Lily Imahara and her family changed forever.

They were among hundreds of thousands of Japanese Americans who were forcibly moved from their homes on the west coast to internment camps by the U.S. government.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt's February 1942 order gave the War Department the power to declare any part of the country a restricted military zone and exclude anyone from such an area. The next month, orders to move were posted for people of Japanese ancestry in Washington, Oregon, California, and southern Arizona. More than 60 percent were American citizens.

What followed for the Imaharas — as well as Japanese Americans who fought for the United States during World War II — is the focus of "From Barbed Wire to Battlefields: Japanese-American Experiences in World War II," an exhibit on loan from the Smithsonian Institution and on display through October at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans.

Lily Imahara Metz, now 80, of Baton Rouge, often visits high schools in the Baton Rouge area to discuss her family's past and said the artifacts are must-see history.

"American people need to know," she said. "This is part of American history. You



BARBED WIRE & BATTLEFIELDS. Pictured is a folding ironing board that was handcrafted and polished by Himeko Fukuhara in New Orleans. Nearly 120,000 Japanese-American men, women, and children were sent without trial to 10 internment camps soon after the United States entered World War II. The board was lent by the Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, Kenneth E. Behring Center for an exhibit at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans — titled "From Barbed Wire to Battlefields" — about life in the internment camps and the Japanese-American soldiers who fought for the United States. (AP Photo/Janet McConnaughey)

the 33,000 Japanese Americans who served in the United States military. On display is Jimmie Kanaya's diary, which he wrote while a prisoner of war in Germany. Kanaya enlisted in the Army at age 20 in April 1941 and fought in Italy and France. He was captured in October 1944.

Also on display is a Congressional Gold Medal, one of the nation's highest honors, that was presented to Tokuji Yoshihashi, 91, of San Gabriel, California, for his World War II service.

Yoshihashi was drafted in 1944 at age 21 and served in the Army's 100th Infantry Battalion, 442 Regimental Combat Team — two years after being sent to an Arizona relocation camp with his family.

Before he was accepted into the service, he had to answer a loyalty questionnaire that asked whether he would pledge allegiance to the United States.

"I was born here," he said, "and decided I should fight for the country of my birth."

Associated Press writer Janet McConnaughey contributed to this report. To learn more, visit <www.barbedwiretobattlefields.org/home>.

can't erase it. I know it's on the shameful side of history, but you can't ignore it."

Some show barbed wire encasing the camps and their guard towers. Others show the suitcases interned people brought to the camps — families were allowed only one. And then there are the images of Japanese Americans in U.S. military uniforms preparing for battle.

The Imaharas were housed at the Rohwer Relocation Center in Desha County, Arkansas. The camps were well-maintained and functioned much like small towns, said Walter Imahara, Metz's younger brother.

"We had our own schools and baseball

games and dances and music," he recalled. "We just couldn't go anywhere. What was tragic was that the older people, like my parents, lost everything when we were moved."

Museum curator Kimberly Guise said the exhibit touches on the lives of about 120,000 people who lived in the camps. About 6,000 babies were born in the camps. "There are a lot of people still around who experienced that," she said.

Guise said she hopes the exhibit draws a broad spectrum of visitors, and creates conversations. "Was what happened just? Was it fair?"

The exhibit also recognizes the service of



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