

★ OUTLOOK

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Nation welcomed war bride a soldier's family would not

By Debra Tsuchiyama Baker

My father was a career Army soldier who spent his life defending our country. Sgt. Maj. Linwood Baker fought in the Korean War and World War II and was part of the Army of the United States that led the Allies in the occupation and rehabilitation of Japan. He was a highly decorated combat veteran, receiving Bronze Stars and many other medals for his dangerous missions in enemy territory, where he was frequently under fire and subject to ambush by enemy forces.

For many years, he was stationed away from all that was familiar, living a soldier's existence in foreign lands to protect the United States and ensure the liberty of our people. During his time in Japan, he met Masako Tsuchiyama, a young Japanese woman who danced in USO shows to support her family members, who had lost everything in the war. She became his military wife, my mother, and ultimately, a U.S. citizen.



When my father finally returned to the United States with a Japanese war bride, he was accepted as a hero, but the family he had acquired along the way was not accepted. The hatred of the Japanese was still too raw, and my parents had a mixed-race baby when that was simply not accepted.

To say that my mother and I were not welcome or included in our neighborhood is an understatement. We looked different than everybody else. In fact, we looked just like the people who had killed the fathers, sons and husbands of the American people. We were the face of the enemy. And we had moved right into their neighborhoods.

My father did his best to protect us. We tried our best to fit in. But as a child, all you know is that the other kids in the neighborhood are not allowed to play with you, that you are not invited to any birthday parties and you are not welcome in their homes. You don't know why, what you did wrong or how to fix it. You just know you are different – and not in a good way. Being excluded is something you never forget. It feels bad.



The good news is that as I grew up, and the world began to change. Desegregation happened and suddenly there were a whole lot of new kids in my school. No one would play with them either. But I would, and I now had a bunch of new friends who would play with me. For the first time, I was included. It felt good.

When my father died in 1990, we were told that he could be buried in his North Carolina hometown with his parents, but that my mother would not be welcome when her time came. Only “whites” were allowed in the Baker family cemetery.

Thankfully, Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia, near Washington, D.C., welcomes our veterans and their military wives, regardless of race. Both my father and mother are interred there, and the United States gave them each an amazing military funeral.

I could not help but acknowledge the irony that our government would welcome the Japanese-born wife of a veteran into their most hallowed burial ground, even though they had once been at war with her country, when his own family would not. Good for our country.



As we honor our veterans on Nov. 11, let us also pay tribute to the military families who support, sacrifice and bear the burdens that can come along with military service and the impacts of war. I think of my father and mother every single day and as their Asian-American child, I am grateful to our country for honoring them both with a place of rest at Arlington National Cemetery where their names will live on forever.

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