

Bruce I. Yamashita. *Fighting Tradition: A Marine's Journey to Justice.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003. 237 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-2410-5; \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8248-2745-8.



Reviewed by Monroe Little (African American & African Diaspora Studies Program/Department of History, Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis)

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The Marines Are Looking for a Few Good (White) Men

Captain Bruce Yamashita wanted to be a Marine officer. His quest began in 1989, when he enrolled in USMC officer candidate school at Quantico, Virginia. Ten weeks later, Yamashita was “disenrolled” by a review board of Marine officers who concluded that he did not have what it took to join the ranks of the few and the proud. Our story would have ended there, but Bruce Yamashita loved the idea of being a Marine officer and believed too much that the United States was a color-blind society to accept the review board’s decision. Thus began a five year administrative, congressional, and legal battle that culminated in Yamashita’s finally being commissioned a captain in the Marine Corps reserve in March, 1994. His personal struggle to wear a Marine captain’s bars is told in excruciatingly painful, gut-wrenching detail in *Fighting Tradition*.

Yamashita’s story typifies the few existing first-person narratives of nonwhite officers in the U.S. military. He describes how his decision to attend OCS was triggered by friends and acquaintances who were military officers. Of particular importance for his decision

were classmates at Georgetown University Law School who were military officers. It was they who first “planted the idea of doing a tour with the military” in his mind. “After being cooped up in a classroom, I liked the thought of being both a lawyer and an officer,” he recalled. And of all the military branches, the one which held the greatest attraction to him was the U. S. Marine Corps. It becomes clear to the reader that Yamashita was not only attracted to the Corps because of its mythical reputation as an elite fighting force, but also his conviction that unlike other branches where officer training was considered “a two week charm course” “you earn your bars” (pp. 8-9). Such a message resonated powerfully with the son of Japanese-American immigrants who believed that becoming a Marine officer would validate his own status as a U.S. citizen.

Much to Yamashita’s dismay, however, Marine OCS was a whole lot more than he expected. The brutality of OCS “boot camp” was bad enough, but he was also subjected to ethnic taunts by the noncommissioned training officers “whether on the parade deck, during PT, or

in the courtyard.” Harassing him became “a sport, each sergeant seemingly trying to outdo the others” (p. 34). Most distressing to Yamashita was that many of these taunts came from the platoon’s African-American drill sergeant. During the following weeks, the verbal harassment continued along with repeated negative “evals,” or evaluations, and warnings that he was not making sufficient progress in the program. The day of truth came on the afternoon of April 7, when he was ordered to report to battalion headquarters for a final review. The assembled officers informed him that he was disenrolled. Adding insult to injury, the commanding officer, Colonel C. W. Reinke, remarked loudly “with a mocking smile, ‘I heard you flunked your bar exam.’ The rest of the staff broke out in laughter” as Yamashita exited the room (p. 108).

Like any nonwhite who has run head-on into the brick wall of racial prejudice and discrimination, Yamashita was stunned and confused. What had happened to him was at such variance with his own vision of America that he needed a while to understand events completely. “Although I didn’t know it at the time, I was slowly having to accept what I had ignored for years: that discrimination is real,” he confesses. “At Georgetown University I had studied landmark civil rights cases. I had interacted with minority students clamoring for justice. But it had always been abstract. It had always been difficult for me to relate. It had always been someone else’s battle” (p. 95).

Realizing that one has been a fool their entire life about the saliency of race in the United States is the first step towards genuine wisdom; it is to Yamashita’s credit, that his racial epiphany did not result in behavioral paralysis but energized him to fight for justice. Encouraged by friends and family members, Yamashita began the long, slow, and painful process of challenging the Marine Corps’ decision. Like countless victims of discrimination who have preceded him, he found individuals—both military and civilian—shocked and appalled by the treatment he received at Marine OCS. The Marine Corps bureaucracy, however, had a quite different reaction. It responded to his request for a review of his case with a carefully orchestrated campaign of deception, deceit, stonewalling, and the proverbial whitewash. The Marine Corps brass thought Yamashita would eventually become weary of his struggle and just fade away. They miscalculated, and by the time the smoke of battle cleared, Yamashita had enlisted the support of Senator Daniel Inouye and the entire Hawaiian congressional delegation as well as the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, the Japanese American Citizens League, American Civil Lib-

erties Union, National Council of La Raza, the Puerto Rican Coalition, and the NAACP in an all-out assault on the Marine Corps’ white supremacist officer training policy. Finally, on March 18, 1994—before an audience that included his family and other supporters—Bruce Yamashita was commissioned as a captain in the United States Marine Corps.

Yamashita’s book joins a small, yet growing number of personal memoirs by military officers-of-color such as Benjamin O. Davis Jr., Jesse Johnson, and Frank E. Petersen.[1] Each of these memoirs is a personal narrative of individual success in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. As such, they are simply racial variants of the legendary late-nineteenth-century Horatio Alger stories which support the American myth that pluck, persistence, and hard work inevitably lead to the brass ring of upward mobility and personal success. In the case of Johnson’s, Davis’s, and Yamashita’s narratives, however, it is not poverty which they must overcome, but white racial prejudice and discrimination in the most hierarchical and undemocratic of all societal institutions—the military.

Yamashita’s book is more than a mere recounting of his five year fight for justice against the Marine Corps, though. He also provides readers with numerous vignettes of life for second and third generation Japanese-Americans in Hawaii. Ostensibly, his purpose in doing so is to help the reader understand his own family background, his personal reaction to the verbal abuse and racial prejudice he encountered at Marine OCS, as well as his subsequent efforts at legal redress. What Yamashita describes is a story of Asian immigrants striving in the face of racial exclusion and discrimination. Despite his training as an engineer at Purdue University in the 1930s, for example, Yamashita’s father had a difficult time finding employment in Hawaii. The same was true of his mother, who was denied employment at the University of Hawaii until 1949. Faced with internment in so-called “relocation camps” after Pearl Harbor, Yamashita’s uncle Daniel sought to prove his patriotism by volunteering for service in the 442nd RCT of the U.S. Army’s 100th Battalion, which “distinguished itself as the most highly decorated unit of its size during the war” (p. 21). Then too, there is Yamashita’s discussion of his voyage of self-discovery during a brief visit to family members, as well as a year long stint as a male office worker in the old country, where he came face-to-face with Japanese history, culture, and a belated recognition of his dual Japanese-American identity.

Ultimately, *Fighting Tradition* is only partially successful at elucidating the complexities of race in the racially charged atmosphere of the late-twentieth-century U.S. military or American society. His book is best as a coming-of-age memoir when he discusses his family's history and strivings as well as personal recognition, and recounts his own appreciation of his Japanese heritage and his lengthy struggle with the Marine Corps for justice. It is least informative when he attempts to construct the political meanings of Japanese American identity or accurately depict race relations in Hawaii. Yamashita writes, for instance, that his parents never told their children of their own encounters with discrimination. He attributes this reaction to their "sense of powerlessness reinforced by the Japanese phrase *shikata ga nai* or 'it can't be helped,' " their lifelong goal of assimilation, and their desire to protect "us from the harsh realities of the world" (p.27). Although Yamashita clearly does not intend to do so, this explanation draws, at least in part, upon stereotypes of Asian stoicism which have been a part of western thinking for centuries. But perhaps there is more operating here than the constraints of traditional Japanese culture, shielding children from the emotional trauma of racial discrimination or Japanese immigrants' efforts to be accepted as full-fledged Americans. In fact, the behavior of Yamashita's parents resembles that of war veterans who find it difficult to share their combat experiences with the uninitiated because "such things," as one World War II veteran confesses, "were too horrible and obscene even for hardened veterans." [2] Racial discrimination traumatizes veterans of America's lengthy race war, too, and leaves psychological scars which never completely heal.

Nor does Yamashita fully resolve the seemingly inexplicable behavior of Staff Sergeant Brice. This African-American noncom is portrayed as one of Yamashita's chief tormentors, who made the aspiring Marine commissioned officer "his favorite whipping boy" (p. 28). Yamashita attributes Brice's behavior to the general competition between Asians and African Americans in the 1980s over educational and employment opportunities as well as political power in the United States. Yet the drill instructor's behavior could just as easily be explained as his acceptance of the Marine Corps' own institutional culture of ethnic and racial debasement in which a loose thread on a uniform is referred to as an "Irish Pennant," or a Marine who exhibits symptoms of psychotic behavior is viewed as going "Asiatic." If Brice singled-out Yamashita for especially harsh treatment, then why was he the only officer on the OCS staff who attempted to warn

Yamashita about the racial dynamics of white male power in the Marine Corps? In either case, the absence of any direct testimony by Brice to explain his actions makes it difficult, if not impossible, to resolve this issue.

A more serious failing of Yamashita's narrative is his description of racial and ethnic relations in Hawaiian society. He describes the Hawaii of his youth as a multiracial and ethnic paradise where Chinese, Korean, Filipino, Native Hawaiian, and Caucasian lived in respectful harmony with one another. This perspective of Hawaii, according to Jonathan Okamura, "as having especially tolerant, harmonious, and egalitarian race relations has continued to be advanced from the 1940s to the present." Advanced by scholars such as sociologist Andrew Lind, the Hawaiian Islands were "presented as an exemplary model with valuable lessons to offer other ethnically/racially divided societies in managing their conflicts and problems resulting from ethnic and racial diversity." [3] Indeed, even today the notion of the "spirit of *aloha*" is so widespread that many long-time residents categorically deny that racial discrimination exists in Hawaii. A decidedly different picture of Hawaiian society in the 1960s is supplied by Lieutenant General Frank Petersen, the USMC's first African-American aviator, however. He writes, "The fact that we were in Hawaii, and considering the makeup of that population, I didn't anticipate a problem finding a place for my family and me to live. A problem finding housing? You've got to be kidding, I told myself. I was as wrong as the proverbial two left shoes." [4] Hawaii in the 1960s was quietly discriminatory. And the hell of it was that it wasn't just the whites who were doing the discriminating. Hawaiians didn't really mingle with anyone else. The Japanese had their own community. It all was a definite eye-opener. The web of discrimination may have existed quietly, but it became a cacophony when someone tried to pierce it. [5]

Yamashita cannot resolve his idyllic description of Hawaiian racial and ethnic relations with Petersen's because it has little, if any, connection with the reality of race in Hawaii. In fact, Yamashita's idealization of race relations obfuscates this connection by obscuring the highly unequal structure of race relations in the islands and the ongoing ethnic political struggle in post-World War II Hawaii to redistribute power and privilege among Chinese, Japanese, and whites over native Hawaiians, Filipinos, and other ethnic groups in the islands. Thus, Yamashita unwittingly creates an over-idealized portrait of race relations that actually ignores the linkage between individual rights and racial-ethnic group power

in Hawaii and the rest of the United States.

These caveats aside, however, *Fighting Tradition* is well-worth reading. Bruce Yamashita deserves our thanks—not only for baring his heart and soul, but also for waging his long and lonely battle for justice. His story serves to remind each and every one of us that that freedom is indeed a constant struggle.

Notes

[1.] See, for example, Benjamin O. Davis Jr., *American: An Autobiography* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991); Jesse J. Johnson, *Ebony Brass: An Autobiography of Negro Frustration and Aspiration* (New York: The William Frederick Press, 1967); Frank E. Petersen, *Into the Tiger's Jaw: America's First Black Marine Aviator, The Autobiography of Lt. Gen. Frank E. Petersen* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1998).

[2.] E. B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.

260.

[3.] Jonathan Y. Okamura, "Race Relations in Hawaii During World War II: The Non-Internment of Japanese Americans" in *The Japanese Historical Experience in Hawaii*, ed. Jonathan Y. Okamura (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 2001). Also see: Romanzo Adams, "The Unorthodox Race Doctrine of Hawaii" in *Race and Culture Contacts*, edited by E. B. Reuter (New York: McGraw Hill, 1934); A. W. Lind, *Hawaii's Japanese: An Experiment in Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946); Lawrence H. Fuchs, *Hawaii Pono: A Social History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961). For a somewhat different perspective on Hawaiian race relations, see Lloyd L. Lee, "A Brief Analysis of the Role and Status of the Negro in the Hawaiian Community," *American Sociological Review* 13 (1948): pp. 419-437.

[4] Petersen, p. 107

[5] Petersen, p. 111

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