**Letters from Joe**

By Zandra Edwards

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------September 15, 1942

Dear Frank,

How are you doing? I sure miss all you guys. Did you find somebody else to play tag football with? Bet they aren't as fast as me. How is Rascal? I wish he could have come too, but they said no dogs allowed. He likes to be brushed sometimes. Thanks for taking him. Hope he remembers me when I get home.

I’m glad you came to the train station to say goodbye. I was embarrassed for you to see me wearing that stupid number tag. It was the same number as the tag on our one suitcase. Guess we are just baggage to them. Mom, dad, Grandmother and Grandfather were scared because nobody would tell them where we were going. But Kami and I were sort of excited. We never rode on a train before. The train was really crowded and had black curtains on the windows so we couldn't see out. I met some other kids my age and we played tag in the aisles. The soldiers didn't seem to mind. And guess what? They had bunk beds on the train and I made sure I got a top one. When we couldn't go any further on the train, we had to ride on a bus. At least we could see out the windows, but all that was out there was sagebrush. It was so hot that I could see waves of heat coming off the ground. When we got there, all I could see was rows and rows of tarpaper covered buildings. Our Block is number 34. Our place has one room for all six of us. It's not even as big as our living room at home. We don’t have a table or nothing. There’s just a cot for each of us, a pot bellied stove in the corner, and one light bulb hanging in the middle. You can see daylight through the holes in the walls. Five more families live in this building. We don't have water or a bathroom. Supposed to have bathrooms in the same building as the laundry and showers, but the sewers aren't done, so we have to use outhouses. The flies are everywhere and it stinks worse than dog poop.

Have to go for now. Dad needs to send a letter, too, so we are going to see if we can find the post office. Tell Rascal I miss him.

Your friend, Joe

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October 7, 1942

Dear Frank,

I got your letter yesterday. I knew Rascal was smart, but I can't believe you taught him to play dead. Sounds like you have some good classes this year. Our school hasn't been built yet, but it’s supposed to have a gymnasium so maybe I can play basketball.

This place has a big long name, but my dad just calls it HELL. Soldiers with guns stand in big guard towers and watch us all the time. It was so hot when we got here in August, me and some other big kids went over to swim in the canal that’s in camp. You would have liked my cannonball! We were having fun until a couple soldiers yelled at us to get out because we might drown. Yeah, like they care. When the wind blows, you can't see two feet in front of you and it makes everything so brown and dirty. There's no grass to play on and no trees to climb. Remember my tree in the backyard? We built a fort in it out of blankets. Your mom made us sandwiches and my mom made some lemonade. Then it rained and our blankets got so wet they fell on our heads! I laughed so hard I almost peed my pants!

At first I liked the food because we got macaroni and cheese all the time--my favorite. But, the food is crappy. Macaroni and weenies most *all* the time and dried fish the rest of the time--Yuk! Kami gets milk because she is only four. One time we ate in our dining hall then ran over to a different one and ate again. Kami gave me her milk. I sure miss those chocolate bars Grandmother use to sneak to us at the store.

It rained all of September turning everything to mud--mud up to my knees. Me and Kaito, he’s my new friend, were playing hide-n-seek with some other kids. I jumped out from behind the laundry building and yelled "Boo!" But it wasn't Kaito, it was Mrs. Satou! She fell on her butt. I didn't know a tiny lady could scream that loud. Her basket flew in the air and her clean clothes landed in the mud. They looked like marshmallows floating in a cup of hot chocolate. I tried to help her pick them up. She just shook her mud covered fist and yelled at me in Japanese. I don't know any Japanese, but I don't think she was saying anything nice. Mom was so mad and Mrs. Satou just gives me an evil eye. She is scary.

I will write soon.

Your friend, Joe

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November 14, 1942

Dear Frank,

Wish I was home and playing with you guys. It's almost Thanksgiving and so cold the ground is frozen. Guess that's better than the mud, but it's too cold now to play outside much. There isn't enough coal to go around. Me and Kami have been finding sagebrush and pieces of wood from the construction to burn in the stove. We can use the bathrooms now instead of those stinking outhouses. They aren't heated so I sure don't stay in there long and still no hot water. Mom has us bring back wads of toilet paper to fill the holes in the walls.

The soldiers just finished putting barbwire all around the camp so we are locked in. Everybody in camp is mad. Why? What have we done to have to live here? Dad says we are Americans just like your family. Grandmother and Grandfather came from the old country, but they had their grocery store in Seattle for lots of years. Mom and Dad were born here and went to college at the university. It isn't fair! I hear them talking after they think I am asleep. They are scared. Dad said he might have to fight in the war. The government is also making all the grownups fill out this paper and if they answer some of the questions wrong, they will be sent to a worse camp. Because I am only twelve, they think I don't understand, but I do and I’m scared too.

Kaito and I went to the back edge of camp and the fence wasn’t all done so we sneaked out beyond the posted signs. We got to see some real cowboys. Well, maybe they were sheep boys since they were moving sheep, except they sure looked like cowboys. Maybe I'll be a cowboy when I grow up.

Dad said he heard the cook in our dining hall got fired today because he had a party for some friends and cooked a bunch of chickens that were for us. Hope the new cook is better because lunch was really bad today. We had wieners and sauerkraut and soup. The sauerkraut was rotten and the soup was so greasy nobody ate either one.

It's getting cold in here again. I have to go find some more sagebrush for the fire. Grandmother isn't doing too good and she gets really cold. The new school opens in two days. I will write more next time and tell you about it. Tell Rascal I miss him.

Your friend, Joe

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------December 20, 1942

Dear Frank,

I haven't heard from you. I sure hope everything is okay. We didn't get our new school like we were supposed to. They just moved some people out of one of the barracks and that's where we go to school. We don't have any books, no desks and hardly any teachers. We have to sit on wood planks and use dining room tables. We don't even have a blackboard. I thought it would be warmer in here, but it's just like our place. The wind and the snow blow in through the holes in the walls. There are forty-five kids in my class. My teacher, Miss Tanaka, is not very old for a teacher. I think she is scared because there is so many of us. One good thing about school starting is Mom and Dad are both teaching even though they have never done it before. Dad is teaching at the high school and mom teaches third grade. They don't get paid very much but mom says it will help. While they are at work, Kami goes to the nursery.

Night times are the hardest. I hear mom and dad talking about the war. Mom cries a lot and dad keeps telling her it will be okay. He says they won't send him to fight now because they need all the teachers they can get. But I know he is still worried. Grandfather whispers to Grandmother in Japanese but she never answers him. The baby in the third apartment cries most of the night. Nights are the hardest. I can picture home, the green grass, the tall tree in our back yard, and all the red, yellow and blue flowers mom had planted around the house. I miss color. I miss Rascal and you.

There was this old man who had been missing for three days. Men and the older boys had gone out in a search party, but couldn't find him. An airplane circled over camp looking too. Yesterday they finally found him two miles from camp, but he was dead. I wonder why he wandered off in this cold.

Mom was excited last night when she got home. They told the teachers each room was getting a big Christmas tree. She was so disappointed when the trees arrived this morning and they were scrawny, shrunken and looked like a branch off another tree. Why do these people make promises they never keep? Don't know what Christmas will be like this year. We are making decorations for the dining halls in each Block. The little kids are making tree ornaments from egg shells and orange peels and covers off of cupcakes. Us bigger kids are making wreaths out of sagebrush and wood shavings. I am making a surprise for Grandmother and Grandfather. Kaito's dad makes furniture and I asked if he would help me make two chairs. Kaito helped me find nails. Most of them are bent but we straightened them out. I have never built anything before and I only hit my thumb twice. Tell Rascal I miss him. Your friend, Joe

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January 10. 1943

Dear Frank,

I didn't get to mail my last letter so now you have two you can read. Grandfather loved his chair. Grandmother actually smiled. She still isn't talking, but I am pretty sure she liked hers too. They both have been sitting in them all day long. Mom and Dad said they are proud of the good work I did and want one too. On Christmas Day, Santa gave out candy and presents in the dining hall. Kami got a tiny stuffed, yellow haired doll and I got some marbles.

School hasn't been going too good. We still don't have any books. Some of the boys don't come to class and they are hanging out with some of the high school kids. They are starting gangs and fighting with kids from other Blocks. They smoke in the Recreation Hall and say bad words when they are asked to stop. Kaito's older brother, Masou, is one of them. Kaito stole one of Masou's packs of cigarettes and I brought matches, and we hid behind Block 39 where the guards can't see us. We smoked the whole pack. I swear, Kaito turned green and neither one of us could quit puking. Mom thought I was coming down with some sickness and made me go to bed. I'm NEVER going to smoke again.

We have some new snow so a bunch of us were having a snowball fight out in front of the school. Tomo (he’s in eighth grade) missed and accidently broke a school window. It was an accident but now snowball throwing is banned. Isn't that the stupidest thing you ever heard? Better get this mailed before dark.

Your friend, Joe

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March 2, 1943

Dear Frank,

I am sorry your dad got drafted. I couldn't read your entire letter because some of it was blacked out. Mom and Dad get letters that only have one or two lines that aren’t blacked out. I hate it here! They will probably black-out this too but I don’t care. Things seem to be getting worse. The food is so bad we just can't eat it. They feed us fish three times a week and most of it is so bad you can't even stand the smell. We have to stand in line outside in the cold waiting for our turn to eat. Poor Grandmother and Grandfather. I don't sit with mom and dad most of the time and Kami sits with her friends. My parents and hundreds more signed a petition asking the Supervisor if they would change the dining room to family style setup. Of course the answer was “no.”

One of the guards killed a man they said was trying to escape, but he wasn’t. He was inside the fence. Lots of people protested and the guards shot at them. Two people had to go to the hospital. I don't think the guy was trying to escape at all. The soldiers just hate us. Last week, Kami and I went to the store and walked past two soldiers with rifles. The tall one said, "Hey kids, why don't you run over there to the fence. I need some target practice." He and his buddy just laughed and walked off. Kami was so scared she was shaking. I told her, "Not all soldiers are bad. Remember Masou. He's going to be a soldier and he is nice." She just clung to me and wouldn't quit crying. Masou just turned eighteen and volunteered for the Army. Masou said that it had to be better than here. Our newspaper says there is a special division called the 442 Infantry that is just Japanese soldiers. Guess that will show everybody we are Americans.

Remember the crying baby I told you about. His mom and dad took him to the hospital here in camp but they couldn’t make him better. We all went to the funeral and to the burial, except Grandmother. There were already over a hundred graves. I didn't know so many people had died.

The only good thing to tell is we finally got some books. They are old and used from some schools in California but it's better than nothing. Write soon and tell me how Rascal is doing.

Your friend, Joe

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April 23, 1943

Dear Frank,

I haven't received any letter from you for awhile. Maybe you didn't get my last one. Maybe they stopped it at the post office because of the stuff I wrote. I will be nicer in this letter.

The weather is getting warmer, which is great, but the ground has turned to gooey, sticky mud. They are putting some gravel around the front of our apartments and on the roads. Hope that helps. Mom spent some of her money for seeds out of the Montgomery Catalog. She is going to plant a miniature garden out front and she is helping plan the camp garden. Miss Tanaka, my teacher, said there are ten thousand people living here. It will have to be a gigantic garden.

Kami and I helped Mom dig up two sagebrush plants and a tumbleweed to plant by the front door. When it dries out we will bring her some big rocks for her garden. Mom also bought some extra blankets to hang from the ceiling between the beds. It’s not like a wall but now I can get dressed without making everyone shut their eyes. I don't hear mom crying so much at night. Even Grandmother came outside and sat on the steps for a little while. When mom showed her what she had planted and told her about the garden she said, "Good." That's the first word she's spoken since we got here. Grandfather just leaned against the tarpaper wall and smiled. He has spent all his time looking after Grandmother. Now maybe he will go fishing in the canal.

Somebody cut the barbwire over behind the barracks and they pulled out some fence posts. It was probably one of the gangs trying to get another gang in trouble. Nobody was missing from camp, but they electrified the fence! The soldiers and the supervisor both said they didn't do it but the supervisor had it shut off. However, it just makes more trouble between us and the soldiers.

Our weekly newspaper, *The Minidoka Irrigator*, lists the soldiers from our camp killed in the war. The number grows with every edition. Sadly, Masou was killed in Italy and Kaito's family got a letter saying he died bravely and will get a medal. His name will be on the new Honor Roll sign they are building over in Warehouse 20. It will have all the names of the camp's inmates who are in the military. It will have an ornamental garden around it to make it beautiful.

When the ground dries out we are going to build a baseball diamond behind the barracks. It has been so long since I played ball. Are you going to play this summer? There are so many kids here we will probably have a bunch of teams. Even if I play ball, I still want to do something besides sitting around. I don’t care what. I’ll even help feed the pigs or chickens. Write soon please. I miss your letters.

Your friend, Joe

June 11, 1943

Dear Frank,

Still no letter from you. I hope everything is okay. It is really hot here already which means the dust is back. It blows all the time. There is dust in our food, our clothes, and no matter how hard Mom and Grandmother try to keep it clean, the apartment is always covered in dust. I have been busy as bee. Mom has made a beautiful garden in front. Dad and I borrowed a wheelbarrow and got her some mammoth black rocks and Kami and I found some smaller ones that make it look great. We have to be careful because the snakes are out. There are little flowers starting to bloom already. We have to carry water every day to water them, but it's worth seeing mom smile. Grandmother helps takes care of it. The big garden is all planted and everyone in camp is looking forward to fresh vegetables for a change. Work is being done on an enormous food cellar to keep the vegetables so we can have some even when it gets cold. Several of the men are being allowed to leave camp to work on farms in the area. Many of the farmers who hire them are threatened by the community. No matter what we do to show we are Americans, there are people who hate us anyway.

High school boys and some of their dads helped build a baseball diamond. It turned out great. One of the churches from town donated our equipment. Five or six other Blocks are working on building a diamond too. We have been practicing and will have our first game the 4th of July. Write soon.

Your friend, Joe

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August 5, 1943

Dear Frank,

I keep checking the Post Office but still no letter. I wonder what is going on. Everything here is hot and dry. It’s scorching today. Everyone has been trying to cool off in the canal, but it is so swift. Two boys drowned last week. The military is making a swimming hole with big equipment and they’re going to use water out of the canal to fill it. It should be done in a couple of days. In the meantime they are trying to keep everybody out of the canal.

We won our first game against Block 4 and 5. Over a thousand people came to watch us play. We are having at least two games a week.

Twenty six guys were drafted the middle of July, but refused to go. The soldiers arrested them and took them away. Dad said they would send them to prison because they weren’t “loyal Americans.” There isn’t much of this that makes any sense to me.

I have to go for now.

Your friend, Joe

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Aug 15, 1943

Dear Frank,

I am so sorry about your dad. We just found out. Mrs. Yamauchi brought over several newspapers from home to see if our family would like to read them. Mom found the clipping about your dad being killed in New Guinea. I don’t know what else to say. I guess this why I haven’t gotten any letters from you. I'm sorry if you don't like me anymore. Can't you remember the fun things we use to do, like when I went camping with your family and we put up our own tent? We swam in the lake and you caught a fish. That night we roasted marshmallows and told ghost stories. We had so much fun. You will always be my best friend. Dad says your dad died fighting the "Japs" but we aren't "Japs." We are American just like you. Please write to me.

Your friend, Joe