

Never playing war games again

Kids in Newport called the Portuguese who came in from Middletown "farmers" and "greenhorns." My mother wore a big hat when she picked potatoes to keep her skin as fair as possible, the fashion during the 1930s. She hated her Azorean hair — thick, dark and wavy.

My father was of German descent, the Mixmaster of life, whipping me into an acceptable-looking American.

Not so my friend Kae. Kids called her "Moonface," and her eyes were slanted. Her mother was Japanese and her father, Italian. She lived at the end of our block in a tiny aqua ranch house. It was the only rental on the street, and no family lived there for more than a couple of years because it was rented out to enlisted Navy personnel, like her father.

We had a big field behind our house, overgrown with grasses and milkweed, wildflowers and trees and hidden corners of blackberries. We played War in this field.

After World War II, our family, like many others in Newport, had a healthy store of surplus matériel including Army helmets and ammunition belts and canvas knapsacks. My toy box was chock-full of toy pistols and rifles that shot caps, ping-pong balls and suction darts.

Soon after we met, I outfitted Kae in a metal G.I. helmet with leather chinstrap and a plastic rifle complete with a waggling rubber bayonet and we waded into the field.

"OK," I said. "I'll be the American soldier and you'll be ... the Japanese one."

"OK," she said cheerfully.

After a few skirmishes, history dictating that she had to be killed each time, she shocked me by bluntly suggesting, "This time, you be the Jap, and I'll be the American."

"OK," I said uneasily. Not only would it mean my death, but it felt almost like agreeing she could be a boy and I had to be a girl.

Rifle aloft, she hightailed it into the tall grass. I crouched low, stayed quiet. Suddenly, she burst out behind me.

"Raah!" she screamed, ramming the bayonet end of her rifle into my back, knocking me over.

"You dirty Jap!" she yelled. "I gonna kill you! You rotten, stinking dirty Jap! I hate you! I gonna kill you to death!"

I rolled out of the way and jumped up. Kae started crying and my mother came running out of the house. Kae threw down her rifle.

"What's wrong, sweetheart? Did he hit you?"

She shook her head. "I a dirty little Jap."

My mother hugged her. "No. You're a beautiful girl."

After Kae stopped crying, we went inside and had Popsicles. When Kae was ready to go, my mother insisted that I walk her home. She was waiting for me when I got back.

"Kae is special," said my mother. "She looks different so mean kids

pick on her. I don't ever want you to do that, do you understand?"

"I don't pick on her."

"And that makes your mother happy. I just want to make sure you never do. And I don't think you two should play War anymore. Maybe it's time for you to stop playing War altogether."

"But Mom. The Japs attacked Pearl Harbor. They started it!"

"That little girl did not attack Pearl Harbor. Don't make her suffer. Listen to me. I'm your mother. Tell me you understand."

"I understand."

"Good. Who knows? Someday you may go to Japan. Maybe you'll marry someone who's Japanese."

"I'm not gonna get married!"

"Oh, nobody knows what the future holds. Be nice to people. You never know what can happen."

When our holiday of V-J Day (Victory over Japan) rolled around, my mother re-christened it D-J Day, threw "South Pacific" on the Victrola and she and I and Kae sang and danced around the living room.

Not long after that, a moving van pulled up in front of the little aqua ranch house. Kae was moving to California. We said goodbye and tapped our foreheads together, a friendship move we'd made up, and something you can't do wearing a helmet.

And then she floated away, a happy memory.

— Charles Pinning, an occasional contributor, lives in Providence.