



May 10, 2024

Army awards Purple Heart medals in 1945 crash

PEARL HARBOR – The Army has awarded Purple Heart medals to 29 soldiers who were killed in a plane crash on Okinawa as World War II ended nearly 80 years ago, and the first of those medals were presented today at the Pearl Harbor National Memorial to families of five Japanese language specialists from Hawaii, members of the U.S. Army Military Intelligence Service.

In a ceremony at the Pearl Harbor National Memorial this morning, General Paul M. Nakasone, who recently retired as America’s senior cyber and intelligence warrior, presented Purple Hearts to the families of Staff Sgt. Joseph T. Kuwada of Honolulu and Technicians 4th Grade Haruyuki Ikemoto of Hamakuapoko, Maui; Kazuyoshi Inouye of Lihue, Kauai; Wilfred M. Motokane of Honolulu, and Masaru Sogi of Honolulu. Kuwada and Motokane were postal clerks, Sogi worked in construction for the federal government, Inouye worked for Lihue Plantation, and Ikemoto was a University of Hawaii student before they volunteered to serve.

In presenting the Purple Hearts Nakasone said, “The medal not only honors individual courage, it also serves as a symbol of gratitude for the nation, recognizing the sacrifices made by its service members and the heavy price of freedom.”

The five were among 31 soldiers aboard a C-46 transport plane that crashed while trying to land at Naha, Okinawa, during an air raid alert on August 13, 1945. Everyone died in the crash. Some received the Purple Heart, which is awarded to service members who are wounded or killed in battle. However, most did not. After the discrepancy was brought to its attention, the Army reviewed the matter and recently awarded the Purple Heart to all who were killed in the crash.

“To the Army’s credit, once it realized a mistake was made, they did the right thing and corrected it, after all these years,” said Wilfred M. Motokane Jr., who was seven years old when he and his mother learned his dad had died. “Of course, we’re grateful to the researchers who discovered the discrepancy and brought it to the Army’s attention.”

The flight was part of a massive airlift of U.S. troops from the Philippines to Okinawa in preparation for Japan’s imminent surrender. The twin-engine C-46 was carrying members of the 11th Airborne Division as well as 10 nisei language specialists, a five-man counter-intelligence team and four crewmen from the 6th Troop Carrier Squadron. The plane was nearing the end of its five-hour flight close to 9 p.m. when an air raid alert was declared at Naha. That prompted

ships in the adjacent harbor to emit protective smoke screens, and the airfield to be blacked out. The C-46 made two attempts to land in poor visibility and went around for a third, only to strike a cliff, killing everyone aboard. Two days later, Japan capitulated, ending World War II.

Today's ceremony at the Pearl Harbor National Memorial took place against a historic backdrop of the USS Arizona Memorial and Battleship Missouri Memorial. History also links General Nakasone to the five soldiers who were honored today. Nakasone served nearly 40 years in the Army, the last five and a half as commander of U.S. Cyber Command, director of the National Security Agency and chief of the Central Security Service. His father, Edwin M. Nakasone, grew up in Wahiawa and was one of nearly 6,000 American soldiers of Japanese ancestry who served in the Military Intelligence Service in the Pacific. Most of them trained at the Military Intelligence Service Language School at Camp Savage and Fort Snelling, Minnesota.

Addressing the crowd of family members and military and community leaders, Nakasone described today's ceremony as "a way to uphold the values of service, sacrifice, and duty that are essential to the military and our nation as a whole."

"The five Soldiers we honor today are part of the 806 men Hawaii lost during World War II. These nisei linguists represent an incredible contribution, sometimes forgotten, from what was then a territory and is now our 50th state," Nakasone said. "Their devotion was marked as members of the Military Intelligence Service, an extraordinary chapter in American military history, showcasing the profound impact of linguistic skills and cultural knowledge in international conflict."

In 2022, a pair of researchers looking into the Naha crash discovered a puzzling difference in the way the victims of the crash were treated. The twelve who were members of the 11th Airborne Division were classified as "killed in action," which entitled each of them to receive the Purple Heart, an award reserved for those who shed blood for America. The other crash victims were classified "died non-battle," which brings no decoration. They all were killed in the same manner, so the disparity was inexplicable, if perhaps understandable amid the tumult of that time.

The researchers –Mark Matsunaga of Honolulu and Dan Matthews of Minnesota – spent months scouring archives, official and unofficial online sources, books and newspapers for information about the crash and its victims. Among the soldiers killed in the crash was 1st Lt. George E. Skau leader of the 11th Airborne's reconnaissance platoon that helped rescue 2,100 civilians and military internees in the brilliant raid on the Los Baños internment camp near Manila in February 1945. The military routinely investigates aircraft incidents, especially ones this costly, but an official report of this investigation could not be found.

The researchers' fathers both served in the Occupation of Japan, Matthews' with the 11th Airborne Division and Matsunaga's with the Counter-Intelligence Corps (CIC). After months of research, they submitted their findings to the Awards and Decorations Branch of the Army's Human Resources Command in hopes that the Army would address the disparity in the treatment of the crash victims. Hawaii Congressman Ed Case added his support to their request.

Ultimately, an Army review confirmed the award of only two Purple Hearts. Others may have been awarded, but confirmation could not be found. The Army concluded that the Purple Heart should have been awarded to everyone who perished in the crash. That oversight has been corrected and medals officially awarded for all.

“This was not a racial issue. Most of the men killed in the crash were Caucasian,” said Matsunaga. “The Purple Hearts for the Hawaii men are being presented first because we were already in contact with the families and the Army processed them first.”

In addition, Matthews recently located the niece of the senior officer aboard the plane, Captain John H. Norton, of Marion, South Carolina. And she will soon be presented the Purple Heart for Norton, a 1943 West Point graduate who led the counterintelligence team that was attached to the 11th Airborne Division, which was preparing to spearhead the occupation of Japan.

“We hope that news of this ceremony and the one to be held soon in South Carolina will help other families pursue the Purple Heart medals that their loved ones earned with their lives,” said Matthews.

Today’s ceremony was presented by Pacific Historic Parks, MIS Veterans -Hawai‘i, the National Park Service and U.S. Army Pacific (USARPAC), particularly the 500th Military Intelligence Brigade – Theater.

ELIGIBLE FOR POSTHUMOUS PURPLE HEART MEDAL

Next of kin of the others who were killed in the crash are encouraged to contact Dennis Christensen at the Army Awards and Decorations Branch in Fort Knox, Kentucky, at 502-613-8419, or 502-613-9126, email: usarmy.knox.hrc.mbx.tagd-awards@army.mil Website: <https://www.hrc.army.mil/content/Awards%20and%20Decorations%20Branch>

6th Troop Carrier Squadron

2nd Lt. Sam Brashear, Grandfield, Okla.

2nd Lt. Donald L. Keep, Ontario, Calif.

Sgt. Loren H. Carroll, Mexia, Texas

Cpl. Fred R. Nostrand, Bronx, N.Y.

11th Airborne Division

2nd Lt. David R. Donaldson, Washington, D.C.

Pvt. Leonard Setterstedt, Great Falls, Mont.

Pvt. Daniel F. Flynn Jr., Essex, Mass.*

1st Lt. Raymond C. Shaw, Medway, Mass.

Pvt. Chandler J. Krause, Minneapolis, Minn.

1st Lt. George E. Skau, Westport, Conn.

T/4 John W. Majka, Chicago, Ill.

Pfc. Burl A. Thomas, Los Angeles, Calif.

Pfc. Lewis H. Murphy, Springfield, N.J.

Sgt. Ronald G. Williams, Sioux Falls, S.D.

1st Lt. Henry J. Reid, Hampden City, Mass.

Pfc. Kenneth D. Wismer, Cleveland, Ohio*

11th Airborne Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC) Detachment

Sgt. Roy C. Allmond, Atlanta, Ga.

Capt. John H. Norton, Marion, S.C.

Cpl. Gail A. Gaines, University City, Mo.

Cpl. Donald R. Soper, Bar Harbor, Maine

Master Sgt. Oscar W. Keys Jr., Baltimore, Md.

U.S. Army Forces Pacific, G-2, Allied Translator and Interpreter Section

T/4 Shunichi B. Imoto, Harding, Wash.

(AWARDED TODAY)

T/4 Joe Y. Kadoyama, Kent, Wash.

T/4 Haruyuki Ikemoto, Hamakuapoko, Maui

T/4 Satoshi B. Kurokawa, Santa Barbara, Calif.

T/4 Kazuyoshi Inouye, Lihue, Kauai

Sgt. Masaki Nakamura, Gold Harbor, Wash.

Staff Sgt. Joseph T. Kuwada, Honolulu

T/4 George T. Yamaguchi, Portland, Ore.

T/4 Wilfred M. Motokane, Honolulu

T/4 Masaru Sogi, Honolulu

* Purple Heart previously awarded

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