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MIS Soldiers Awarded Purple Heart Medals

Twenty-nine soldiers who were killed in an Okinawa airplane crash on August 13, 1945, during the closing days of World War II, have been awarded Purple Heart medals by the U.S. Army. Five of them were MIS soldiers from Hawaii.

In a May 10 ceremony held at the Pearl Harbor National Memorial, the families of the fallen nisei received the Purple Hearts. The MISers were:

- Staff Sergeant JOSEPH T. KUWADA, Honolulu;
- Technician 4th Grade HARUYUKI IKEMOTO, Hamakuapoko, Maui;
- Technician 4th Grade KAZUYOSHI INOUYE, Lihue, Kauai;
- Technician 4th Grade WILFRED M. MOTOKANE, Honolulu; and
- Technician 4th Grade MASARU SOGI, Honolulu.

Presenting the medals was General Paul M. Nakasone, who recently retired after nearly 40 years with the U.S. Army. His last five and a half years of service were as commander of the U.S. Cyber Command, director of the National Security Agency, and chief of the Central Security Service. Nakasone's father, Edwin M. Nakasone, grew up in Wahiawa and was one of nearly 6,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry who served in the MIS. Most of them trained at the MIS Language School in Minnesota, where the general was born and raised.

In his remarks, 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." He described the 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."

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JOSEPH T. KUWADA
STAFF SERGEANT

HARUYUKI IKEMOTO
TECHNICIAN 4TH GRADE

KAZUYOSHI INOUYE
TECHNICIAN 4TH GRADE

WILFRED M. MOTOKANE
TECHNICIAN 4TH GRADE

MASARU SOGI
TECHNICIAN 4TH GRADE

Accepting the Purple Heart medals on behalf of their families were, from left: Edward Kashiwamura, nephew of Joseph Kuwada; Wilfred Ikemoto, brother of Haruyuki Ikemoto; David Fujii, nephew of Kazuyoshi Inouye; Wilfred Motokane, Jr., son of Wilfred M. Motokane, and James Sogi, nephew of Masaru Sogi.

PHOTO COURTESY PACIFIC HISTORIC PARKS.

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“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.”

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 9:00 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.

The oversight was discovered in 2022 by Mark Matsunaga, an MIS Veterans director, and Dan Matthews of Minnesota. While looking into the Naha crash, they found 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. The other 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.

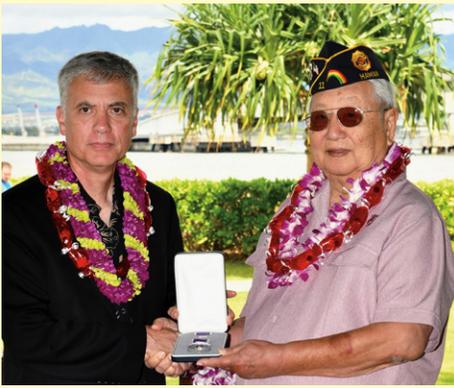
Matsunaga and Matthews spent many months scouring archives, official and unofficial online sources, books, and newspapers for information about the crash and its victims. The military routinely investigates aircraft incidents, especially ones this costly, but an official report of this investigation 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. 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. 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.”

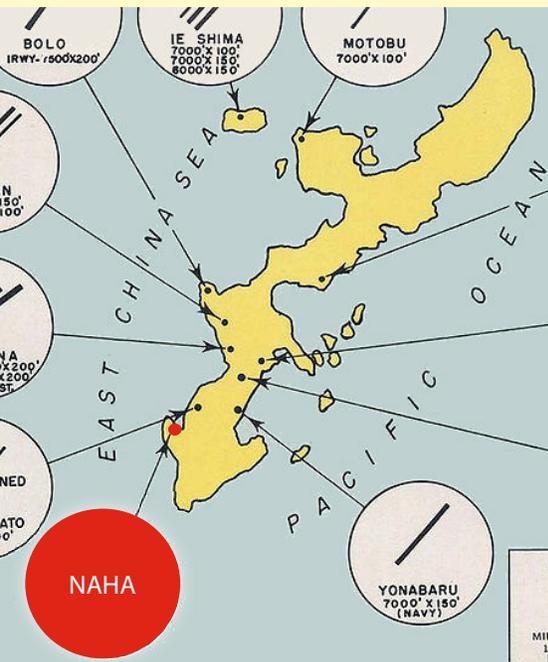
The May 10 ceremony was organized by Pacific Historic Parks, MIS Veterans Hawaii, National Park Service, and U.S. Army Pacific, particularly the 500th Military Intelligence Brigade-Theater. For a complete list of the Purple Heart recipients, visit the news section of the MIS website.



Wildred M. Motokane, Jr., right, accepted his father’s Purple Heart from recently retired General Paul Nakasone, who was the keynote speaker.



MIS Veterans director Mark Matsunaga, left, and Dan Matthews of Minnesota were the researchers who discovered that victims of the Okinawa airplane crash received varying treatments.



Graphic indicating location of Naha airfield, Okinawa. Based on Map No. 49, Airfield Locations, December 31, 1945, OCE GHO AFAC Monthly Report for December, 1945. Public domain.



Joseph Kuwada's family

Right, Lawrence Enomoto, former MIS Veterans president, served as master of ceremonies for the May 10 event.



Family of Kazuyoshi Inouye



Ceremony on Kauai



Haruyuki Ikemoto ohana

A second Purple Heart for Kazuyoshi Inouye was presented to Sarah Date, his niece, who was unable to attend the Oahu ceremony. The medal was presented by MIS veteran Norman Hashisaka, who knew Inouye, at a ceremony held on Kauai. Attending were Inouye family members, State Representative Nadine Nakamura, and MIS director Carolyn Morinishi, who organized the event. Photo courtesy Carolyn Morinishi.



Masaru Sogi family

Photos courtesy Ann Kabasawa and Clyde Sugimoto, unless otherwise noted.



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Joint Memorial Service Slated for September 29

The MIS Veterans Education Society will join the 100th Infantry Battalion Veterans and 442nd Regimental Combat Team organizations to resume the Joint Memorial Service this coming September.

The service, which was renamed the Nisei Soldiers Memorial Service when the Nisei Veterans Legacy assumed leadership of the event several years ago, has been held annually for 18 years. However, the NVL notified the veterans groups last October that it would no longer organize the service.

The 100th Infantry board determined that it would organize the service, with the support of the other veterans groups, as well as restore the event's original name. The by-laws of the 100th require the organization to participate in a memorial service on the Sunday closest to September 29, when the first member of the 100th Infantry, Sergeant Shigeo "Joe" Takata, was killed in action. The 442nd will take the lead next year.

Key dates have been set:

- Saturday, September 28, 8:00 a.m.: gravesite decorating
- Sunday, September 29, 9:30 a.m.: Joint Memorial Service, National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific (Punchbowl). Setup at 7:30 a.m., cleanup until noon.

Details will be announced in the months to come, including calls for volunteers.

Pacific Historic Parks to Preserve MIS Oral Histories

Pacific Historic Parks, a nonprofit organization that supports national parks in Hawaii, Guam, and Saipan, is providing staff and financial assistance to preserve the oral histories the MIS recorded during the past 20 years.

The oral history project was begun more than two decades ago by a number of MIS Veterans Club members, led by Jimmy Tanabe and including, at various times, Tanabe's wife Yoshie, Yoshinobu Oshiro, Yoshiaki Fujitani, Ted Tsukiyama, Glenn Masunaga, Edgar Hamasu, and others. They interviewed the veterans, recorded the talks on video and audio tapes, transferred the footage to DVDs, and forwarded the media to the Japanese American Veterans Collection at the University of Hawaii's Hamilton Library.

The video and audio quality of the original oral histories is being enhanced by a commercial video firm contracted by PHP. Subsequent work will include editing the oral histories and posting them on a website designed for this purpose, to be managed by PHP.

This work will ensure that the words of the veterans will be preserved for decades to come in keeping with the original goal of the project, rather than remain unseen and unheard.