ASIAN AMERICAN PACIFIC ISLANDER HERITAGE MONTH

May 2020
The Department of Defense joins the nation in paying tribute to the Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Native Hawaiians who demonstrated selfless service and sacrifice in the U.S. Army, Army Air Forces, Marine Corps, Navy, Coast Guard, National Guard, and the home front during World War II.

This presentation shares a brief introduction to the entry of the United States into World War II, Asian American/Pacific Islander military service, the American Samoa Fita Fita Guard, Corporal Terry Toyome Nakanishi, and Sergeant Domingo Los Banos.
The United States joined World War II as a response to the bombing of Pearl Harbor in Hawaii by the Japanese on December 7, 1941.

World War II brought Asian Americans to the forefront of our society. For some it provided opportunities, for others, it caused loss and disillusionment.
On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 with the intention of preventing espionage on American shores.

There was a generalized fear that the Issei (Japanese immigrants to North America) and Nisei (first generation Japanese Americans born in the United States) would join forces with their country of origin to plan more attacks against the nation.
More than 120,000 men, women and children of Japanese descent were sent to incarceration camps in the interest of national security.
Despite this, a large number of Nisei volunteered for service in the U.S. Army.

The volunteers were assigned to a segregated Japanese-American unit, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and the 100th Infantry Battalion. These Soldiers served with great honor in the European and North African campaigns. Their feats of courage, particularly in the Italian campaign, are legendary.

For its size and length of service, the 442nd became the most decorated unit in U.S. military history. In total, about 14,000 men served, earning 9,486 Purple Hearts. The unit was awarded eight Presidential Unit Citations.
Other Asian-American groups also answered the call to duty and served with distinction in the European and Pacific theaters many taking part in the liberation of their ancestral homelands.

More than 20,000 Chinese Americans, or one out of every five in the United States, served in the U.S. Armed Forces.

For Filipinos, the call to serve in the organized military forces of the former American colony came from President Roosevelt on July 26, 1941. More than 260,000 Filipino and Filipino American soldiers served during the war.
Asian-Pacific-American women first entered military service during World War II. The Women’s Army Corps (WAC) recruited 50 Japanese-American and Chinese-American women and sent them to the Military Intelligence Service Language School at Fort Snelling, Minnesota, for training as military translators.

Of these women, 21 were assigned to the Pacific Military Intelligence Research Section at Camp Ritchie, Maryland. The women worked with captured Japanese documents, extracting information pertaining to military plans, as well as political and economic information.
In 1899, U.S. Navy Commander Benjamin F. Tilley was assigned to Pago Pago Harbor in Samoa to become the first commandant of the new naval station. One of his first requests to the Navy Department was for permission to enlist Samoans as landsmen in the U.S. Navy. He was authorized to enlist 58 men for four years.
By World War II the Fita Fita (Samoan for soldier) counted 100 men in its ranks. Samoans regarded the Fita Fita as an elite group, and the men served with pride and dignity.

Most reenlisted, making the Navy their career. They served as seamen aboard the station ship, radiomen, crewmen for small boats, guards and orderlies. When the Navy left American Samoa after World War II, most of the Fita Fita transferred to Hawaii.
Corporal Terry Toyome Nakanishi’s decision to join the Women’s Army Corps during World War II, represented a unique path taken by some Nisei women to assert their American patriotism.

In 1945, Nakanishi was among the first Nisei WACs to be sent to the Military Intelligence Language School in Fort Snelling, Minnesota.
Nakanishi and her Nisei comrades challenged the World War II stereotypes about Japanese Americans and women.

By pursuing a nontraditional path in military service, these WACs proved that Japanese American women could play an important role in protecting the nation’s interests and maintaining peace.
Domingo Los Banos, Jr. was born in Wahiawa, before Hawaii officially entered into statehood. He was raised on Kauai's pineapple plantation fields along with his siblings.

In 1944, he joined his brother Alfred in U.S. military service. Three of the Los Banos brothers served in World War II, and were deployed in the Philippines, Korea, and Vietnam.
In 1945, as a 19-year-old U.S. Army Sergeant, Los Banos was one of the 300 recruits from Hawaii that made up the First and Second Filipino Infantry Regiments. General Douglas MacArthur deployed these men in retaking the Philippines from the Japanese, as part of the United States’ retaliation for the bombing of Pearl Harbor.
In interviews given in his later years, Los Banos said that during the war, he prayed that if he was kept out of harm’s way, he would become a teacher to educate fellow Filipinos.

He went on to become a Fulbright scholar, Hawaii’s first Filipino principal, and then served as a Hawaii State Department of Education district superintendent for Leeward – the first Filipino to hold this position.
LEGACY

The service of Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Native Hawaiians before and during World War II, paved the way for future generations of men and women to join what would become in 1948, a desegregated U.S. military.

The United States remains forever indebted to the World War II veterans, who demonstrated selfless service and sacrifice in defense of global peace and security.

We remember the legacy of the “Greatest Generation” by Honoring the Past, Securing the Future.
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