

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

Medal Honor
June 21, 2000

For Immediate Release

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AT CEREMONY HONORING
ASIAN AMERICAN MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENTS

South Lawn Pavilion

4:45 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Chaplain Hicks; distinguished members of the Senate and the House who are here in large numbers; Secretary and Mrs. Cohen; Secretary and Mrs. West; Secretary Shalala; other members of the administration who are here, I thank all of you for being here on this profoundly important day.

In early 1945, a young Japanese American of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team lay dead on a hill in southern France -- the casualty of fierce fighting with the Germans. A chaplain went up to pray over him, to bless him, to bring him back down. As the Chaplain later said, "I found a letter in his pocket. The soldier had just learned that some vandals in California had burned down his father's home and barn in the name of patriotism. And yet, this young man had volunteered for every patrol he could go on."

In a few moments I will ask the military aides to read individual citations, detailing the extraordinary bravery of 22 Asian American soldiers -- some still with us, some to be represented by family members. We recognize them today with our nation's highest military honor, the Medal of Honor. They risked their lives, above and beyond the call of duty. And in so doing, they did more than defend America; in the face of painful prejudice, they helped to define America at its best.

We have many distinguished Americans here today -- members of the Senate and House, including at least one Medal of Honor winner, Senator Kerrey. We have former senators and House members here. But there is one person I would like to introduce and ask to stand because, in a profound and fundamental way, he stands on the shoulders of these whom we honor today, and all those who have worked for 50 years to set the record straight. Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to recognize the Chief of Staff of the United States Army, General Eric Shinseki. (Applause.)

Immediately following Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans in the United States military were forced to surrender their weapons. National Guardsmen were dismissed; volunteers were rejected; draft-age youth were classified as -- quote -- "enemy aliens." Executive Order 9066 authorized military commanders to force more than 100,000 Japanese Americans from their homes and farms and businesses onto trains and buses and into camps, where they were placed behind barbed wire in tar-paper barracks, in places like Manzanar, Heart Mountain, Topaz. I

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am sad to say that one of the most compelling marks of my youth is that one of those was in my home state.

One resident of the camps remembers his 85-year-old grandmother standing in line for food, with her tin cup and plate. Another remembers only watch towers, guards, guilt and fear. Another has spent years telling her children, "No, Grandfather was not a spy."

The astonishing fact is that young men of Japanese descent, both in Hawaii and on the mainland, were still willing, even eager, to take up arms to defend America.

In 1942, a committee of the Army recommended against forming a combat unit of Japanese Americans, citing -- and I quote -- "the universal distrust in which they are held." Yet, Americans of Japanese ancestry, joined by others of good faith, pressed the issue, and a few months later President Roosevelt authorized a combat team of Japanese American volunteers.

In approving the unit FDR said, "Americanism is a matter of the mind and heart. American is not, and never was, a matter of race or ancestry." That statement from President Roosevelt, so different from the executive order of just a year before, showed a nation pulled between its highest ideals and its darkest fears. We were not only fighting for freedom and equality abroad, we were also in a struggle here at home over whether America would be defined narrowly, on the basis of race, or broadly, on the basis of shared values and ideals.

When young Japanese American men volunteered enthusiastically, some Americans were puzzled. But those who volunteered knew why. Their own country had dared to question their patriotism and they would not rest until they had proved their loyalty.

As sons set off to war, so many mothers and fathers told them, live if you can; die if you must; but fight always with honor, and never, ever bring shame on your family or your country.

Rarely has a nation been so well-served by a people it has so ill-treated. For their numbers and length of service, the Japanese Americans of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, including the 100th Infantry Battalion, became the most decorated unit in American military history. By the end of the war, America's military leaders in Europe all wanted these men under their command. Their motto was "Go for Broke." They risked it all to win it all.

They created a custom of reverse AWOL -- wounded soldiers left their hospital beds against doctor's order to return to battle. They were veterans of seven brutal campaigns. They fought in Italy to overwhelm entrenched German positions that blocked the path north. They fought in France and liberated towns that still remember them with memorials. They took 800 casualties in just five days of continuous combat in southern France, to rescue the lost battalion of Texas which had been surrounded by German troops.

As their heroic efforts forced back the Nazis in Europe, news of their patriotism began to beat back prejudice in America. But prejudice is a stubborn foe. Captain Daniel Inouye, back from the war, in full uniform, decorated with the Distinguished Service Cross, the Bronze Star, Purple Heart with Cluster, and 12 other medals and citations, tried to get a haircut and was told, "We don't cut Jap hair."

As Captain Inouye said later, "I was tempted to break up the place," but he had already done all the fighting he needed to do.

People across the country had learned of his heroism and that of his colleagues, and loyal Americans were eager to teach others the difference between patriotism and prejudice. A group of Army veterans who knew firsthand the heroism of Japanese American soldiers, attacked prejudice in a letter to the Des Moines Register. It said, "When you have seen these boys blown to bits, going through shellfire that others refused to go through, that is the time to voice your opinion, not before."

In Los Angeles, a Japanese American soldier boarded a bus in full uniform, as a passenger hurled a racial slur. The driver heard the remark, stopped the bus, and said, "Lady, apologize to this American soldier or get off my bus." This defense of our ideals here at home was inspired by the courage of Japanese Americans in battle.

Senator Inouye, you wrote that your father told you as you left at age 18 to join the Army and fight a war that the Inouyes owe an unrepayable debt to America. If I may say so, sir, more than half a century later, America owes an unrepayable debt to you and your colleagues. (Applause.)

Fifty-four summers ago, just a few steps from this very spot, President Truman greeted the returning members of the 442nd and told them, "You fought not only the enemy, but you fought prejudice, and you have won." Let us not also forget that Americans of Japanese, Korean, Chinese and Filipino descent, along with Alaskan natives, all faced the same blind prejudice.

That is why we are proud to honor here today the service of 2nd Lieutenant Rudolph B. Davila, an American of Filipino and Spanish descent, who risked his life to help break through the German lines near Anzio; and Captain Francis Wai, an American of Chinese descent, who gave his life securing an important beachhead in the Philippine Islands. Americans of Asian descent did much more than prove they were Americans; they made our nation more American. They pushed us toward that more perfect union of our founder's dreams.

The report of the Presidential Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, some 20 years ago now, called internment an injustice, based on "race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership." It prescribed several steps for redress, including an apology from the Congress and the President.

Some years later, many leaders backed legislation sponsored by Senator Daniel Akaka, to review the combat records of Asian Americans in World War II to determine if any deserving service members had been passed over for the Medal of Honor. The review found, indeed, that some extraordinarily brave soldiers never did receive the honors they clearly had earned.

So today, America awards 22 of them the Medal of Honor. They risked their lives, on their own initiative, sometimes even against orders, to take out machine guns, give aid to wounded soldiers, draw fire, pinpoint the enemy, protect their own. People who can agree on nothing else fall silent before that kind of courage.

But it is long past time to break the silence about their

courage, to put faces and names with the courage, and to honor it by name: Davila, Hajiro, Hayashi, Inouye, Kobashigawa, Okutsu, Sakato, Hasemoto, Hayashi, Kuroda, Moto, Muranaga, Nakae, Nakamine, Nakamura, Nishimoto, Ohata, Okubo, Ono, Otani, Tanouye, Wai. These American soldiers, with names we at long last recognize as American names, made an impact that soars beyond the force of any battle. They left a lasting imprint on the meaning of America. They didn't give up on our country, even when too many of their countrymen and women had given up on them. They deserve, at the least, the most we can give -- the Medal of Honor.

I would like now to ask the military aides to read the citations.

(The citations are read and the Medal of Honor is presented to the recipients.)

END 5:15 P.M. EDT