

Three AJA Upgrades to MOH Pending, February 4, 2022

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Nineteen Hawai'i-born residents, 13 of them Japanese Americans, have been honored with the simple sky-blue Medal of Honor – the country's highest award for valor under fire in combat conflicts.



Medal of Honor, Army version. (Photo courtesy of the National

World War II Museum)

Now, the records of three other Japanese American soldiers — two Vietnam War veterans from Hawai'i and the other a 442nd Regimental Combat Team Nisei who enlisted from behind the barbed wire fences and guard towers at Rohwer internment camp in Arkansas to fight in Europe and Korea — are under review. They could join the roster of Medal of Honor heroes.

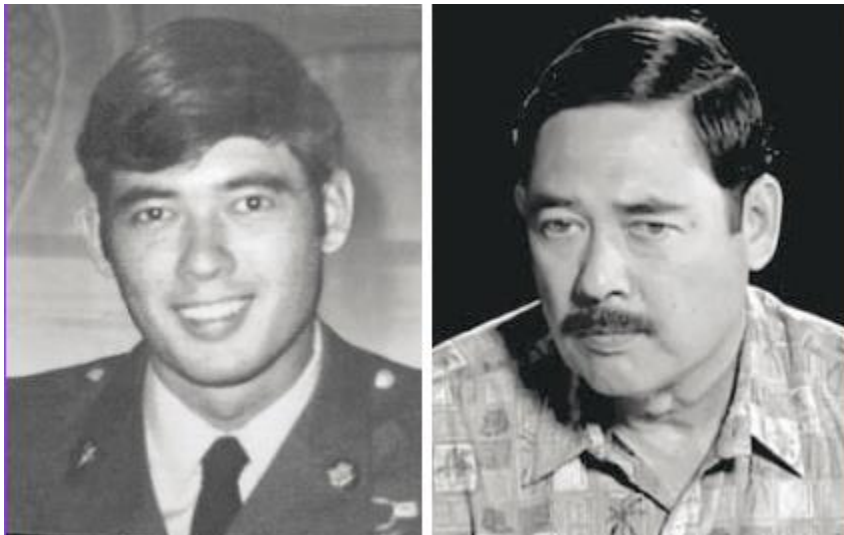
All three are recipients of the Army's Distinguished Service Cross, which ranks just below the Medal of Honor. The standards for awarding the Medal of Honor, which was established in 1861, are for "conspicuous life-risking acts of bravery or self-sacrifice," displaying "gallantry and intrepidity... above and beyond the call of duty. The Distinguished Service Cross is for deeds of "extraordinary heroism not justifying the award of a Medal of Honor."



Staff Sgt. Edward Noboru Kaneshiro.

Vietnam War veteran **Staff Sgt. Edward Noboru Kaneshiro** was 38 when he saved his platoon from a Viet Cong ambush in December 1966. When he was awarded the Silver Star, his Army citation said he single-handedly cleared a trench line and bunkers. Kaneshiro was killed in action three months later and awarded the Distinguished Service Cross posthumously.

Spc. 5 Dennis M. Fujii received the Distinguished Service Cross while fighting North Vietnamese soldiers and coordinating U.S. airstrikes and artillery for two days defending a South Vietnamese base in February 1971. Fujii volunteered to fight in Vietnam. Initially, he was trained as an infantry soldier and re-enlisted to fly as a medical evacuation helicopter crew chief. Fujii was wounded when his helicopter was shot down and stranded in Laos.



Spc. 5 Dennis M. Fujii. (Photos

courtesy of the U.S. Army Museum of Hawaii and U.S. Army)

Private First Class Wataru Nakamura, a member of the 442nd RCT during World War II, was serving in Korea with the 2nd Infantry Division in May 1951 when he was killed during a pre-dawn one-person assault on enemy bunkers with hand grenades. His actions earned him the Distinguished Service Cross.

The U.S. Army Museum of Hawaii at Fort DeRussy

The photos and citations of Kaneshiro and Fujii already hang in the U.S. Army Museum of Hawaii's Gallery of Heroes at Fort DeRussy, recognizing Hawai'i service members who were awarded the Army Distinguished Service Cross, Navy Cross, or Air Force Cross.

In the Medal of Honor section of the gallery, light streams through a stained-glass window behind a large Medal replica. A five-pointed star and a green laurel wreath, symbolizing victory, hang from a gold bar with "Valor" held by an eagle. The center of the star features a profile of Minerva—the Roman helmeted goddess of wisdom and war. The gallery's Medal of Honor Hawaii section contains the photos and citations of three soldiers from the Korean War, six from the Vietnam War, and 13 from World War II.

Although 22 photos and Medal of Honor citations are displayed in the museum's gallery of heroes, only 19 were born in Hawai'i. Three were born elsewhere — Marine Gunnery Sgt. Allan Kellogg (Connecticut), Army Staff Sgt. Delbert Jennings (New Mexico) and Navy Comdr. George Davis (Philippines) — but lived here after the war.

The Long Road to Medal of Honor Correction of Records

Besides the AJA soldiers, two Korean War soldiers — Private First Class Charles R. Johnson and Pvt. Bruno Olds — were included in the list of names tucked away in the massive 2022 National Defense Authorization bill that President Joseph Biden signed into law at the end of December last year.

That congressional authorization, which waived time limits in presenting the Medal of Honor to the five soldiers, was just the first step in what could be a long and laborious review process before an actual White House ceremony is held. All the reviews must be completed by 2024 under provisions of the 2022 defense bill.

Under federal law, recommendations for the Medal of Honor must be submitted within three years of the valorous act, and the Medal must be presented within five years. Any submissions outside this timeline require congressional approval to waive the time limits.

The next step is a careful review by Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth. Then another review by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin III. Army officials indicate that if Wormuth rejects the application, the Medal of Honor package could be appealed to an Army review board.

At the Pentagon, Sgt. First Class Anthony Hewitt, Army Medal of Honors public affairs spokesman, said his office wasn't aware of any organizations "advocating for reviews or upgrades to these individuals."

"However," Hewitt added: "a living (active or former) service member may request a correction of records from a Distinguished Service Cross to the Medal of Honor to the Army Board for Corrections of Military Records. Members of Congress and/or service member advocates may also be included in this process for living or deceased service members.

"The individuals identified under National Defense Authorizations Act for the fiscal year 2022, authorizations for certain awards (sec. 582), will require a Service Secretary to review certain records or cases for those who may qualify for an upgrade to the Medal of Honor. The review is conducted by a Senior Army Decorations Board panel and provides a non-binding recommendation to the Secretary of the Army. If the Secretary supports the Medal of Honor award, they forward the nomination to the Secretary of Defense, who executes a similar review process. Ultimately, the President is the sole approval authority for the Medal of Honor."

The case of Army Sgt. Alwyn Cashe reveals just how long the process can take. It took 16 years for Cashe to become the first Black soldier since 9/11 to be awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously in December. Cashe died of burns he suffered while serving with the 3rd Infantry Division in Iraq in 2005. After rescuing fellow soldiers from a burning vehicle in Salah Ad Din Province, he was initially awarded the Silver Star, the country's third-highest medal for valor in combat. He was 35 and a platoon sergeant with the 3rd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division. In 2019 three members of Congress asked the Pentagon to review his records and a year later both houses of Congress approved legislation recommending President Joseph Biden posthumously award him the Medal of Honor which the family accepted in 2021 at a White House ceremony.

The path in recognizing the exploits of the 442nd Regimental Combat soldiers is a case study in the procedure and numerous steps that must be taken.

Advocacy for Equality at the White House

Until Sen. Daniel Akaka inserted language in the 1996 National Defense Authorization bill setting aside \$500,000 to search military records of Asian Americans and Native American Pacific Islanders who might have been slighted in the awarding of the Medal of Honor, only one member of the 100th Battalion/442nd RCT to receive the Medal was Private First Class Sadao Munemori. Munemori, of Los Angeles, saved two of his comrades in Italy when he smothered a hand grenade with his body. However, it took congressional pressure from a Utah senator before Munemori's actions were recognized.

In numerous interviews, Akaka said that despite the impressive record of the 100th Battalion and the 442nd RCT, Nisei soldiers never got fair recognition because of anti-Japanese sentiment. Akaka based his bill on a similar congressional mandate calling on the Army to review the records of African Americans. That began in 1993 at the urging of the Congressional Black Caucus and resulted in seven Black soldiers receiving the Medal of Honor from President Bill Clinton four years later. Until then, not one African American had received the nation's highest award, although 1.2 million had been in uniform in World War II.

Before the review requested by Akaka, the 100th Battalion and the 442nd RCT had earned the distinction of being the Army unit with the highest number of awards for its size and length of service. The 442nd RCT was authorized nearly 80 years ago, on Jan. 24, 1943, met the 100th Battalion in Italy, and was made up almost exclusively of Japanese Americans. Its soldiers had been awarded 52 Distinguished Service Crosses, 560 Silver Stars, 4,000 Bronze Stars, more than 4,000 Purple Hearts and seven Presidential Unit citations, the highest possible military award for a unit in the U.S. military. Their casualty toll was the highest percentage of any Army unit. But only one 100th/442nd Nisei soldier, Munemori, was ever granted the Medal of Honor.

Under the provisions of the Akaka bill, Army historians reviewed the military records of 104 Asian and Pacific Island American soldiers; half of them were soldiers of the 100th Battalion and the 442nd RCT, according to Army historian James McNaughton. "Of the 52 Nisei soldiers who were awarded the DSC, including Sen. Daniel Inouye, 47 of them were recommended for further review," McNaughton said in a 1998 Star-Bulletin interview. Inouye declined to participate in the deliberations because he stood to gain personally.



President William Clinton presents the Medal of Honor to Sen. Daniel Inouye at the 2000 White House ceremony. (Photo courtesy of the National World War II Museum)

A Senior Army Decorations Board whittled the list of 47 Asian Americans to 20. It was transmitted to Defense Secretary William Cohen in the summer of 1999, who approved it and sent it to President Clinton for his final approval. The approval procedures took five years and occurred more than half a century after the acts of valor occurred.

On June 21, 2000, under a massive white tent on the South Lawn of the White House, Inouye and 20 other Asian Americans, five of them from Hawai'i, stood proudly in front of Clinton while the President draped the blue ribbon with the distinctive medallion around their necks. A group of more than 400 Asian Americans, many of them from Hawai'i, left their aloha shirts and shorts at home to don suits and dressier outfits and weathered a muggy Washington summer afternoon to witness the tribute.

Clinton recalled that in the summer of 1945, in almost the exact same spot, President Harry Truman welcomed the return of the Nisei warriors. "You fought not only the enemy; you fought prejudice, and you have won," he told soldiers of the 100th Battalion and the 442nd RCT and the audience on the White House South Lawn.

Like six other earlier Hawai'i Medal of Honor honorees, they are no longer living. Yukio Okutsu died in 2003; Yeiki Kobashigawa, 2005; Shizuya Hayashi, 2008; Barney Hajiro, 2011; and Inouye, 2012.

Background on the Three Considered for the Medal of Honor

Spc. 5 Dennis Fujii was born in Hanapēpē and played football and basketball before dropping out of Waimea High School in his senior year after a disagreement with a teacher. One of six children, their mother's parents were rice farmers. His stepfather, Charles, was a mechanic in the National Guard. Fujii enlisted in the Army in 1968 and was able to get his high school diploma while in the service.

In February 1971, the 21-year-old soldier was on his second Vietnam combat tour as a "dust off" (Vietnam War call sign requesting medical evacuation helicopter. The call sign refers to the clouds of dust that would be kicked up when the helicopters took off or landed.) medivac UH-1 helicopter crew chief with the 237th Medical Detachment, 61st Medical Battalion, 67th Medical Group. He was assigned to the 101st Airborne Division's helicopters to evacuate the wounded out of Laos. He spent his first nine months assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry, 25th Infantry Division as an assistant machine gunner.

In a 2018 Army video interview, Fujii said even as a boy, "I dreamed myself as being a soldier ... I have no regrets as far as joining the military. I do it all over again. I thought it was part of [a] young man's obligation to our country. After all, freedom doesn't come cheap. I thought I should do my fair share."

On Feb. 18, 1971, Fujii's Huey "dust off" helicopter was called to a South Vietnamese Ranger battalion firebase in Laos to evacuate the wounded. The South Vietnamese battalion was pinned down in a valley, and North Vietnamese soldiers, sitting on the ridgeline above had zeroed their mortars and artillery on the soldiers.

As soon as Fujii and two Cobra gunships crossed the border into Laos, Fujii recalled in a 2018 Army history video interview, "We started taking fire, and the pickup zone was miles away I had never seen, never seen anything like that. We could hear and feel the bottom of the chopper taking hits, becoming more intense than anything I had experienced. You could hear and feel the rounds hitting the bottom of the aircraft."

The firebase was littered with the wrecks of helicopters. Fujii's pilot decided to land, and the crew began to load the wounded when a mortar exploded in front of the helicopter and blew out the canopy. Fujii was hit in the shoulder as another medic ran from the helicopter. A second 101st helicopter was able to rescue two pilots and two medics except for Fujii, who had been injured in one eye by another blast and waved off the helicopter. For the next 17 hours, Fujii coordinated aerial and airstrikes while administering to wounded South Vietnamese soldiers. At one point, his Distinguished Service Cross citation says Fujii was forced to interrupt his radio transmissions to fight the North Vietnamese soldiers. Even while he could board a rescue air ambulance helicopter on Feb. 20, it crashed at another South Vietnamese Ranger base, where he stayed for two more days.

After the rescue, Fujii said that he thought he would be court-martialed because President Richard Nixon had promised that no American troops would be on the ground fighting in Laos.

Instead, Fujii returned to Hawai'i on Feb. 28, 1971, and was given a hero's welcome led by Gov. John A. Burns and the key to the county by Kaua'i Mayor Antone Vindinha. He later transferred to the Hawaii Army National Guard and the Pacific Army Reserve but turned down a commission in the Army Reserves.

Fujii was inducted into the Army Aviation Museum's Hall of Fame at Fort Rucker, Alabama. He was inducted into Fort DeRussy's Army Museum's Gallery of Heroes. He also received two Purple Heart and Silver Star medals.

Staff Sgt. Noboru Kaneshiro graduated from Leilehua High School and had served nearly eight years in the Army when he was sent to Vietnam in July 1966. He was a squad leader with Company C, 1st Battalion, 9th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division during a search and destroy mission of a heavily fortified village at Phuu II, Kimsom Valley in the Central Highlands.

He was awarded the Silver Star for his actions on Dec. 1, 1966, when he single-handedly attacked North Vietnamese troops in a fortified trench system that ran the length of a village, rescuing two pinned down squads after their platoon leader had been killed. His unit recommended that his Silver Star medal be upgraded to the Medal of Honor. Instead, he was given the Distinguished Service Cross. Kaneshiro was 38 when he was killed in Vietnam three months later after visiting his family in Pearl City and seeing his infant son for the first time.

Private First Class Wataru Nakamura was drafted from Camp Rohwer internment camp in Arkansas and served in the 442nd RCT's 2nd Battalion as a member of E Company during World War II. On May 18, 1951, Nakamura was a member of Company I, 3rd Battalion, 38th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division, in Korea when his unit was engaged with enemy forces at P'unch'on.

His Distinguished Service Cross citation notes that Nakamura volunteered to check and repair communication lines damaged during an overnight attack. Unaware that the enemy had infiltrated and captured heavily fortified friendly positions, he moved forward until he came under hostile fire. Before sunrise, he made a one-man assault, silencing a machine-gun and its crew with his carbine and bayonet and destroying two other enemy positions with grenades. When his ammunition was gone, he was forced to withdraw, replenish his ammunition, and returned to engage the enemy force.

During the firefight, Nakamura wiped out an enemy position and attacked the remaining bunker, killing one and wounding another enemy soldier before he was mortally wounded by grenade fire.

Nakamura is buried at the Evergreen Cemetery in Los Angeles.

The Medal of Honor is not America's oldest medal. That distinction is held by the Purple Heart, initiated by George Washington in 1782 while commander in chief of the Continental Army. The Medal of Honor was established in 1861 during the Civil War. It has been referred to as the Congressional Medal of Honor because the president awards the medal on behalf of Congress. A total of 3,530 Medals of Honor have been awarded. Sixty-six of the recipients are still alive.

The last local boy, awarded the Medal of Honor, was Korean War Army Private First Class Anthony Kaho'ohanohano from Moloka'i. President Barack Obama presented the Medal posthumously to his family on May 2, 2011 – 60 years after Kaho'ohanohano was killed on Feb. 5, 1951, in the Battle of Chup-a-ri while covering the retreat of his squad. When the North Koreans overran his position, he continued to fight using a shovel when he ran out of ammunition and grenades, killing at least 11 aggressors. U.S. Sens. Akaka and Inouye sponsored legislation to upgrade his Distinguished Service Cross to the Medal of Honor.

One historical note: The Medal of Honor Society reports that a Kingdom of Hawai'i native James Smith was given the Medal in 1872 while serving as a seaman on the *USS Kansas*. Smith was born in 1838, and his Navy enlistment papers showed that he was a "Sandwich Islander." He received the medal for helping to save crew members near Greytown, Nicaragua. It was one of 193 non-combat awards.

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