

Navy Captain Gordon R. Nakagawa
By Larry Oda, Monterey, California

During WW II Nisei were banned from serving in the US Navy. Also, the Army Air Force institutionally tried to keep the Nisei out, however, some nine managed to find their way in the Army Air Corps and serve as gunners. Thanks to the outstanding combat performance of the 442nd and the Tuskegee airmen which contributed to the climate for post WWII reforms and thereby leveled the playing field for minorities to compete for any job and rank, Gordon R. Nakagawa was accepted in the US Navy and he was a pilot of a fighter plane (A6A intruder). He is among the many Japanese Americans who competed with the best of the best in the military and other disciplines and contributed to the greatness of America.

Who is the late Captain Gordon R. Nakagawa, USN (Retired)? Gordon was born in Auburn, CA, on June 13, 1935. At age 6, he and his family were forcibly imprisoned at the Tule Lake internment center, one of the ten camps that interned 110,000 persons of Japanese ancestry during WWII, for no reason other than their ethnicity.

After the war, Gordon's family relocated in Lincoln, CA. He received his commission through the Navy ROTC program when he graduated from the University of California at Berkeley in 1958. He then completed flight training and received his designation as a Naval Aviator in August 1959. Gordon flew 185 combat missions, with four combat deployments to Vietnam. In December 1972, his aircraft was struck by enemy fire, resulting in Gordon being taken as a Prisoner of War (POW) in Hanoi, North Vietnam. On March 29, 1973, he was one of the last POWs released from the "Hanoi Hilton." Gordon said this was the second time he became a POW--the first being at Tule Lake. Following his release, Gordon was assigned to command and teaching assignments at domestic posts, including Washington, DC. He served as an instructor at the US Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland.

Captain Nakagawa's awards include two Legions of Merit, two Bronze Stars, two Purple Hearts, and the POW Medal. He was an advocate and champion of education. For 8-1/2 years, he was an elected trustee on the Monterey Peninsula Unified School District (MPUSD) Board and a Board Member Emeritus of Leadership Monterey Peninsula. He received a Leadership Recognition Award from the California Association of Leadership Programs; honored as a 2000 Distinguished Fellow, California State University Monterey Bay; chosen as the 2004 Monterey County Veteran of the Year; and along with wife Jeanne, were jointly recognized in 2006 as Marina Citizen of the Year. [*Larry Oda, former President of JACL, and Nakagawa served aboard the USS Ranger, aircraft carrier, during the 1967-68 deployment to Vietnam and the seizure of the USS Pueblo in January 1968. Nakagawa was Executive Officer of Attack Squadron 165 and Oda was a clerk in the Air Intelligence Office.*]



CAPT Nakagawa and his A6A Intruder