

Seasider News!

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Ninole-Born Shiroku “Whitey” Yamamoto Represents Nisei soldiers of WWII on “Go for Broke” Stamp

This year, the U.S. Postal Service will issue the “Go for Broke” stamp which honors all 33,000 Japanese American soldiers who served in the U.S. military during World War II. And, “Go for Broke” is what an army of people did to get this stamp in service during a campaign that lasted over 15 years. Led by a team of three Nisei women, “Stamp Our Story” was launched in 2005 to commemorate the achievements of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team (442 RCT), 100th Infantry Battalion, Military Intelligence Service, Women’s Army Corps, Army Nurse Corps, and other Nisei military service units.

The soldier featured on the “Go for Broke” stamp is Private First Class Shiroku “Whitey” Yamamoto. He was born in 1923 in Ninole, the son of Issei parents. His mother abandoned the family when he was about three months old, leaving him to be raised by his father, Asaemon, an independent cane planter. Whitey attended Laupahoehoe School at Laupahoehoe Point until 10th grade when he dropped out to care for his father who had fallen ill. When his father’s condition worsened, Whitey appealed to the principal of Laupahoehoe School, Elvis Rhoads, for help. Mr. Rhoads arranged for Asaemon’s admittance to the plantation hospital where Asaemon died a week later, leaving Whitey at the age of 16, an orphan. Elvis Rhoads concerned about Whitey’s welfare took on administration of the Yamamoto estate and he and his wife, Mary, became his hanai family. Whitey lived with the Rhoads in Laupahoehoe and after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, moved to Hilo when Elvis Rhoads was transferred to Hilo Intermediate School.

In January 1942 the War Department ordered recruitment of additional soldiers of Japanese descent provided they were citizens, had resided in the U.S. since birth, and answered the two loyalty questions in the affirmative: *Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered?* and, *Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power or organization?* By February 1943, the 442nd Combat Team was activated with over 4,000 soldiers, 2,686 of them from Hawaii.

On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive order 9066 which authorized military authorities to set-up internment camps. In March 1942, General John DeWitt signed 18 proclamations that resulted in the forced internment of more than 110,000 people of Japanese ancestry who resided on the West Coast, two-thirds of whom were American citizens. Hawaii imposed martial law but did not intern Japanese residents over concerns that such an action would have negative impacts on every sector of its economy. When General Delos Emmons, commander of the U.S. Army in Hawaii, was ordered to remove soldiers of Japanese ancestry from active duty, he petitioned and received permission to organize soldiers in the 298th and 299th regiments into a “Hawaiian Provisional Battalion.” The Battalion was ordered to return to the Mainland. At arrival in Oakland, California, the Battalion

Commander opened his orders: the renamed 100th Infantry Battalion was to proceed to Camp McCoy, Wisconsin.

Whitey joined the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in 1943, a New Deal program for unemployed men 18-25 initiated by President Roosevelt at the height of the Great Depression. He was assigned to a crew tasked to build the Saddle Road with two dump trucks, one bulldozer, and lots of manpower. The CCC recruits collected lava rock and loaded it into the dump trucks to lay a rough, gravel road for military vehicles to traverse. One thing Whitey remembers about Pōhakuloa at that time: *"...we had lots of meat because they had wild sheep running all over the place...And the boys, when they go back home, they take us on the truck and if anybody wants a chunk of meat, oh we got lots of meat."*

He returned to Hilo taking up residence at the Sagawa Dormitory on Kino'ole Street while working at the Moses Stationery Store delivering supplies to local schools. There was much talk all around about enlisting and Whitey got lots of advice about whether to sign up or not. *"I don't want to go to war. And nobody wanted to,"* he recalled, but, finally he reckoned *"I better join up because my classmates down at Laupahoehoe School, one, two—about three of 'em joined up. So I felt more at ease because they went in."* Whitey enlisted in the 442nd RCT in March 1943. He thought *"...to show our patriotic feeling, I think we should do the best we can to convince those ones that's doubtful about it. To prove ourselves that, you know, we're like anybody else."* He added *"...I guess we're young and more adventurous type. And no brains but more guts."*

He arrived at Schofield Barracks on Oahu to get fitted for his uniform and await transport to the mainland for basic training. Before sailing stateside, a big community gathering was arranged at 'Iolani Palace to see the recruits off. Whitey recalled it as *"...a solemn, very sad and solemn occasion."* In March, he boarded the *Lurline* to make the four day voyage to San Francisco where upon arrival, he proceeded by train to Camp Shelby, Mississippi. Looking out from the train windows, Whitey noted *"...for the first time, we're discovering how the Mainland U.S.A looked like."*

Referring to the difference between mainland Japanese and Island Japanese, Whitey observed *"...the only difference was that, well, they spoke perfect English, we were local boys, we talked more in Pidgin. But we got used to one another....we had the advantage. From what I understand throughout the war, is that we communicated with Pidgin English when the critical time comes around, so the enemy happen to tap in our line, then they would be confused and they would be at loss as to what we were talking about. But we knew all about it. So, I suppose that's how we accomplished our mission, more so."*

Upon arrival at Camp Shelby, Whitey was assigned to the 442nd Regimental Combat Team (RCT) Antitank Company. He felt fortunate: *"So you know, we were very fortunate to think that we don't need to do any walking. More only riding around the places, yeah. So I was assigned to be a jeep driver."* Throughout the war he drove for Lieutenant Milner, officer of the reconnaissance squad, and Sergeant Toru Hirose, conducting reconnaissance for placement of 37 mm anti-tank guns some 600 yards from the frontlines.

While at Camp Shelby, he visited one of his Ninole neighbors, Sadami Yada, and her brother Sam Yada, and his family at the Rohwer Internment Camp. He recalled the visit as *"...quite a sobering thing because they were in the camps...I felt very sorry for them, you know, because our own government picked those people up on the West Coast and elsewhere with not much of a day's—within 24 hours or 48 hours, that they have to leave their farm, their stores, their own business, and take whatever they can. And they had no time to make arrangements to have somebody to look after their property... And it*

was pitiful that they lost everything. It was a sad thing. And, of course, that is something that will hopefully ...never happen again to anybody in our country. So in a way, I think we sacrificed that way by our families remaining back on the Mainland, while we sacrifice ourselves, our portion of it, overseas."

The 100th Battalion shipped out to Salerno, Italy in the summer of 1943. On May 1, 1944, the 442nd sailed from Hampton Roads, Virginia on a 28-day, zig-zag voyage across the Atlantic aboard the Liberty Ship in a convoy of about 100 ships. The Liberty Ship landed in Naples where Whitey was assigned to his jeep. He explained welders installed one vertical pole and 2 support beams on the front bumper that extended above the windshield to *"...cut the German piano wire, so that would save us from getting decapitated."*

About one month later, he took an LST (landing ship) to Civitavecchia north of Rome to join the 100th Battalion. He didn't realize how close to the front they were until his first sergeant captured a German soldier: *"...we were getting organized and getting settled down—our first sergeant took a shovel and then went into the bushes area to relieve himself. And before you know it, he was coming back with a German prisoner."*

The troops moved northward and on June 26, 1944, the 100th and the 442nd engaged the Germans at the village of Belvedere. Even though the infantry troops were outnumbered, they succeeded in driving the enemy as far north as Sassetta. For its actions under heavy fire, the 100th earned a Presidential Unit Citation. For the next three weeks, the 100th/442nd continuously fought the German army, taking Cecina, Hill 140 and Castellina. During these engagements 239 soldiers of the 100th/442nd were killed and 972 wounded.

In July 1944, the Antitank Company detached from the 442nd to go to Rome for glider training in preparation for the D-Day invasion of southern France. Each glider, 48-feet long and 15-feet high, carried only one wagon with ammunition and a jeep, or a 57 mm British anti-tank gun. 44 gliders were put into service, pulled by a DC-3 or C-47 across the ocean and released at Le Muy. For two months, the Antitank Company guarded the exposed right flank of the Seventh Army and protected the 517th Parachute Infantry, cleared mines, captured Germans, and guarded roads and tunnels. Meanwhile, the 442nd liberated Bruyeres in five days of fierce combat to take Hills A, B, C, and D. The 100th moved on to capture Biffontaine in house-to-house fighting, incurring 21 casualties, 122 wounded and 18 captured.

After less than two days in reserve, the 442nd was ordered to rescue soldiers from the Texas 36th Division two miles east of Biffontaine—the "Lost Battalion." The 442nd engaged in the heaviest fighting it had seen in the war, but nothing could stop their advance, not gunfire or artillery shells. It took five days to rescue the 211 Texas soldiers, and the 100th/442nd paid a heavy price: 216 Nisei soldiers died and 856 were wounded. Whitey recalled that some of the Generals commented that *"...the 100th and the 442nd never stepped back, always go forward and accomplish the mission, regardless of how hard it was."*

Finally, the 100th/442nd drew a well-deserved rest, spending 4 months in the Maritime Alps and the French Riviera. While on Riviera, Whitey observed the capture of a German soldier in a midget submarine---*"We were about the only army that ever captured a navy submarine"* he said.

On March 23, 1945, the 442nd RCT sailed back to Italy to join the 5th Army which had been stalled at the Gothic Line for five months. The Gothic Line was heavily fortified. The Germans used 15,000 Italian slave laborers to build 2,376 machine gun nests with interlocking fire. But, they were undone by the element

of surprise. The 442nd snuck behind the enemy line on the west coast of the Gothic Line and within two days, broke through to advance toward the Po River Valley that led to the Austrian Alps, the last barrier to Germany. The Nisei had driven so hard that by April 17, the Germans destroyed their own fortifications and pulled back to Aulla which fell to the Nisei on April 25th. The Germans surrendered on May 2nd and the war ended in Italy, followed six days later by victory in Europe.

The 100th/442nd RCT is the most decorated unit for its size and length-of-service in the history of American warfare. The first 4,000 men who joined in April 1943 had to be replaced nearly 2.5 times. In total, about 14,000 men served. The 442nd lost 650 men, more than 3,700 were wounded in action and 67 were declared missing in action. In their two years of service, the 100th/442nd earned:

- 7 Presidential Unit Citations
- 2 Meritorious Service Plaques
- 36 Army Commendation Medals
- 87 Division Commendations

Individual Nisei soldiers were awarded 18,000 decorations, including:

- 21 Medals of Honor
- 29 Distinguished Service Crosses
- 560 Silver Stars
- 4,000 Bronze Stars
- 22 Legion of Merit Medals
- 15 Soldier's Medals
- Over 4,000 Purple Hearts

After the war ended in Europe, Whitey was assigned to the Ghedi Airport, in northern Italy to process German prisoners. He summed it up this way: *"So we collected all their weapons and equipments, the horses and mules, and their trucks, tanks, medical supplies, communication equipments, and all that..."*

After the war ended in Japan, Whitey was briefly assigned to Fort Kamehameha on Oahu before receiving his official discharge from the Army on January 3, 1946. He stayed with his hanai parents, where his "dad" Elvis Rhoads, was working at Leilehua High School as the school's principal. There he enrolled to get his high school diploma, graduating in June 1946.

Whitey used his GI benefits to attend Stout Institute (industrial arts school) in Menominee, Wisconsin. It was there he dubbed himself "Whitey," a nickname that would last the rest of his life. In his own words, here's how it came about: *"... 'Whitey' came about when I was going to Stout Institute in Wisconsin...the poor professor, she's from Tennessee, she cannot pronounce my name [Shiroku]...so I got together with her, 'Let's settle this thing once and for all.' And I explained to her, 'Shiroku' is 'white' in Japanese so why don't we call me 'Whitey,' because Whitey is so common. So that's the way it started."*

After one semester, Whitey left Stout to learn watch repair in Albany, Missouri and jewelry manufacturing, stone setting, and engraving in Newcastle, Pennsylvania. In 1951, he returned to Hawaii where he married his sweetheart from Laupahoehoe High School, Amy Yamamoto. His first job, was as an Instrument Technician at Hickam Airfield. After seven years at Hickam, he accepted a position at

Lockheed Aircraft Company. Subsequently, he joined Aloha Airlines in the instruments shop where he retired after 22 years of service.

Looking back on his military service, Whitey had this to say *"...I think our generation are very fortunate to see what has taken place in American history...It wasn't too long ago, about 200 years ago or so, our ancestors from the European country came across the country on covered wagons. In the early days, before the Revolutionary War, how our forefathers worked hard for their freedom to better ourselves as a whole to run our country. And also sacrificing to retain that freedom is so precious to me, and I guess to all of us, that I think we should, if we have to go to war to protect our country, I think it's our duty to uphold, no matter how...like in our case, the Japanese Americans were interned at the relocation camps. That's one unfortunate thing, but still there's a lot of good things that came about, and I think it's more precious. We feel that we have to preserve what we have and protect as much as we can so that future generations, like our forefathers, or our parents told us, 'Go to school, learn as much as you can, so that you can better yourself, or for your community, for the country'."*

Take a moment on April 5th -- "Go for Broke" Day -- to remember the 33,000 Japanese-American soldiers who fought and the over 800 who died in World War II, 650 of them in the 442nd. Reflect on the incarceration of their families and friends in detention centers while the "Go for Broke" soldiers fought overseas to protect our freedom. Then, go out and buy the stamp!

GO FOR BROKE

Four Forty-Second Infantry
We are the boys of Hawaii Nei
We will fight for you
And the red white and blue
And will go the front
And back to Honolulu-lu-lu
Fighting for dear old Uncle Sam
Go for broke we don't give a damn
We will round up the Huns
At the point of a gun
And victory will be ours
Go for broke! Four Two!
Go for broke! Four Four Two!
And victory will be ours.

All hail our company.

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