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COVER STORY

USPS "GO FOR BROKE" POSTAL STAMP 2021 RELEASE

The Story and Image of Shiroku "Whitey" Yamamoto Represent the Courage and Humility of World War II Nisei Veterans

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Special to The Hawai'i Herald

A quiet, humble and unassuming Honolulu Nisei veteran is featured on the "Go For Broke" stamp dedicated to the soldiers of World War II who are Americans of Japanese ancestry. U.S. Postal Service Art Director Antonio Alcalá's engraved depiction of the 1944 wartime photo of Shiroku "Whitey" Yamamoto is one of 19 commemorative stamps to be issued next year by the USPS.

The stamp is based on a 1944 photo taken of U.S. Army Private First Class Yamamoto in combat gear standing at a railroad station in Touet de L'Escarene, a village in southeastern France.

The "Go For Broke" stamp comes after 15 years of lobbying by the mainland Nisei "Stamp Our Story" campaign (niseistamp.org/). "Go For Broke" was the motto of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, a gambling term in Hawaiian pidgin that in the game of craps means to go all in.

Roy Betts, USPS spokesman, told The Hawai'i Herald that no arrangements have been made for a dedication ceremony on the day the stamp will be issued and that because of the pandemic, the ceremony might have to happen over Facebook or Twitter.

Only two other minority service members — Hispanic Americans in 1984 and black Buffalo Soldiers in 1994 — have been recognized by the postal service with a stamp. USPS receives upwards of 50,000 proposals annually for stamps on United States-related subjects.

Stamp of Honor

The USPS said the stamp "recognizes the contributions of Japanese American soldiers — 33,000 who served in the U.S. Army during World War II in the 100th Battalion, 442nd Regimental Combat Team, Military Intelligence Service and other units." The mail service points out that many of these soldiers enlisted from barbed-wire internment camps to prove their loyalty as U.S. citizens.

Three California nisei women, all former internees of whom two were widows of 442nd and MIS veterans, began the stamp campaign in 2005. The campaign with the backing of the Japanese American Citizens League drew nationwide support and even petitions from French citizens and officials from towns the Nisei warriors had liberated. The late U.S. Congressional Rep. Mark Takai of Hawai'i was one of the major sponsors of this legislation, introduced in 2016 to request the postal service issue a stamp honoring AJA World War II soldiers, both men and women.

The stamp will join other tributes to the Nisei warriors, which include National Go For Broke Day celebrated on April 15 and the Congressional Gold Medal.

Wayne Osako, co-chairman of "Stamp Our Story" campaign, said, "the stamp would not be a reality without Hawai'i's help, and [we are] so glad to see a Hawai'i local as the face on the



U.S. Postal Service art director Antonio Alcalá used the *intaglio* printmaking process that involved scratching or engraving the photo into a metal plate, then applying colored ink to that plate. The process is used in designing dollar bills. His other stamp works include Wilt Chamberlain in 2014, Janis Joplin (2014), Elvis Presley (2015) and the solar eclipse (2017). (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Postal Service)

stamp," citing the support of the late Rep. Mark Takai and Gov. David Ige. "We want to point out that one of the three Nisei women who started the campaign, the late Chiz Ohira, was married to legendary 442 veteran Ted Ohira of Makaweli, Kaua'i."

Shari Tamashiro, Kapi'olani Community College cybrarian, applauded the decision by postal officials "to pick one of the regular guys" to represent the Nisei warriors of World War II.

"They could have settled and picked one of the Medal [of Honor] recipients (21 of them were in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team) to be the face on the stamp."

Tamashiro said postal officials called her after seeing Shiroku Yamamoto's 1944 photo on "The Hawai'i Nisei Story" website (nisei.hawaii.edu/) in 2017. The website documents the oral histories Tamashiro and University of Hawai'i staff had collected from 21 World War II AJA veterans and their families including interviews with one Women's Army Corps soldier and four civilian women.

In the Hawai'i Nisei Story's first oral history interview in 2005, Yamamoto said he got the nickname "Whitey" because his first name, Shiroku, was hard to say. And since "shiro" means "white" in Japanese, friends started to call him "Whitey."

Grace Tsubata Fujii, president of Sons & Daughters of the 442nd RCT told The Hawai'i

Herald "Whitey was another one of our favorite heroes."

"Yamamoto was greatly loved and well-respected," Fujii said. She described him as "extremely friendly, gracious, cheerful, positive, prompt, generous, humble, neat, well-dressed and a dedicated 442nd Veterans Club member and officer."

"Every week Whitey faithfully walked from his condominium on Atkinson Drive to the U.S. Army Museum of Hawaii, Fort DeRussy, to volunteer as a greeter and docent," recalled Fujii. He was named Volunteer of the Year in 1995, and last year, that Volunteer of the Year award was named after Yamamoto in honor of his 30 years of service.

Retired Gen. David Bramlett, former head of the museum, told The Hawai'i Herald that Yamamoto "was a superb volunteer who did far more than was ever asked or expected of him. He was a regular at the entrance/sign-in desk of the museum, making every visitor feel welcome; he was literally the face of the museum to the thousands of visitors he greeted."

Bramlett was the four-star general who commanded United States Forces Command from July 1, 1996, to Aug. 31, 1998. He also served as deputy commander of U.S. Pacific Command and as interim commander when Adm. Richard Macke stepped down as head of Pacific Command.

"I used to embarrass [Yamamoto] by telling visitors who he really was, well beyond a greeter at the door of the museum. I told them that Whitey was a veteran of the 100/442 RCT, the most decorated unit for its size and duration of service in our history. He was living history, and they should remember him when they are visiting the gallery of the Nisei units."

Fujii said Yamamoto was "the right veteran soldier to honor all of the Nisei soldiers of World War II."

His "Go For Broke" spirit, friends say, is best reflected in his Hawai'i Nisei Project interview where Yamamoto said his family came to Hawai'i to find a better life. "We were brought up properly. Not to bring shame or disgrace to our family, or to our neighbors, or even to the community."

He concluded, "The 100th and the 442nd never stepped back; always go forward and accomplish the mission, regardless of how hard it was."

Hamakua Roots

Yamamoto was born on the Big Island's Hamakua Coast in Ninole in 1923 to issei Asaemon and Kimiko. His father, an independent sugar-cane planter, raised him alone since his mother left the family when he was three months old.

In a February 2005 oral history interview conducted by UH researcher Warren Nishimoto, Yamamoto recalls his father taking him to the cane fields on the forest line about two miles from their home. "Dad would be working out in the field; I would cut the grass to feed the horse."

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Amy and Shiroku Yamamoto. (Photo courtesy of Hawai'i Nisei Story)

When Yamamoto was in the 10th grade, he dropped out of Laupāhoehoe High School to care for his ailing father who died in 1941. Then from age 17, Yamamoto was cared for by foster parents, Elvis and Mary Rhoads, whom he eventually called "Mom and Dad."

Military Service

Following the Japanese attack on the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor in 1941, Yamamoto joined the Civilian Conservation Corps and worked to move lava rocks at Pōhakuloa to help build Saddle Road from Hilo to Kona. Following his Laupāhoehoe classmates who began enlisting in 1943, Yamamoto volunteered in what he believed was the "first wave" of young men from Hawai'i island who were sent to Schofield Barracks for basic training. Like many of his colleagues, Yamamoto admitted this action took "more guts than brains."

At Camp Shelby in Mississippi, Yamamoto was assigned to the 442nd RCT's Anti-Tank Company as a jeep driver. One of Yamamoto's first assignments was to transport and guard German prisoners of war who were captured in North Africa and used to harvest peanuts in Georgia and Alabama.

Yamamoto recalls that while training at Camp Shelby he learned that a neighbor from Hawai'i, Sadami Yada, had been sent to Rohwer internment camp in Arkansas. He described the visit to Rohwer as "a sobering experience"—the camp was in wooded swampland surrounded by guards, a stockade and a high barbed-wire fence.

Yamamoto and members of the 442nd RCT were deployed to Europe in May 1, 1944, merging with the 100th Battalion in Italy. One of his assignments was reconnaissance, where he had to determine the placement of 57 mm anti-tank guns.

In August 1944, Yamamoto's Anti-Tank Company was temporarily assigned to the 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment and participated in "Operation Dragoon"—part of the allied airborne invasion of 44 gliders into southern France.

The French towns of Bruyeres and Biffontaine had already been liberated when the Anti-Tank Company rejoined the 442nd RCT. Yamamoto was assigned to Headquarters Platoon when Maj. Gen. John Dahlquist ordered the 442nd RCT to rescue a battalion of soldiers from the Texas 36th Division. The miraculous rescue of the Lost Battalion of 211 Texas soldiers was overshadowed by the death of 216 Nisei soldiers and 856 wounded.

After the Vosges campaign the Nisei soldiers spent the next four months in the Maritime Alps and the French Riviera and then joined the 5th Army in Italy. While stationed on the coast of

southern France, Yamamoto documented the capture of a one-man German submarine.

Yamamoto was discharged as a Private First Class in January 1946 and returned to Honolulu to attend and graduate from Leilehua High School where his foster father, Elvis Rhoads, was principal. Using the GI bill he learned watch repairing and jewelry manufacturing on the mainland.

After four years, Yamamoto returned to Hawai'i and married his Laupāhoehoe school-mate, Amy Yamamoto (no relation), in 1951. The two had been corresponding with each other during the war and while Whitey was on the mainland.

Amy Motoyo Yamamoto was the fifth of six children of Gisuuke Nakahara and Hisa Yamamoto who were issei from Hiroshima. Under the practice known as "mukoyōshi," Amy's father adopted his wife Hisa's family's name and became part of that Yamamoto line.

After getting married, "Whitey" Yamamoto worked as an aircraft technician at Hickam Airfield, Lockheed Aircraft and Aloha Airlines, where he spent 22 years before his retirement.

In 2006, the Yamamotos, who had no children, with the help of the University of Hawai'i Foundation, used the income from their properties to establish a scholarship and AJA Veteran's Collection Endowed fund to honor Yamamoto's fellow Nisei soldiers and to further the legacy of his foster parent of promoting public education.

Like some of the 442nd veterans who spent much of the war not on the front lines, Yamamoto tried to downplay his role. "So I don't want to



From left: Takayuki "Chilly" Sasaki, Shiroku "Whitey" Yamamoto and Yoshinobu Oshiro. Sasaki and Yamamoto served in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team's Anti-Tank Company. Oshiro was a member of the Military Intelligence Service. (Photo by Shari Tamashiro)

brag myself that I was in the 442nd or any outfit, and they (442nd front-line soldiers) are the ones I take my hat off [to]," said Yamamoto in his 2005 interview. "The ones that were directly facing the enemies, they are the ones that really fought. They suffered the most."

Amy Yamamoto died in 2011 and "Whitey" Yamamoto followed seven years later.

Honor and Humility

Shari Tamashiro believes Shiroku "Whitey" Yamamoto fittingly represents the 442nd. "It would be wonderful if people know the face on the stamp that's representing all the guys. Because he ... has a great story that I'm hoping people looking at the stamp will want to learn about the story of the 100th Battalion and the 442nd," commented Tamashiro.

"I loved that he was selected," Tamashiro admitted. "He was so humble ... always willing to help."

"Whitey was always willing to talk about his experiences," Tamashiro said. "He knew it was really important to share his story ... to help future generations understand what they went through."

To read about the new 2021 stamps go to about.usps.com/newsroom/national-releases/2020/1117-usps-announces-upcoming-stamps.htm.

For more information about the Nisei warriors go to: nisei.hawaii.edu/object/about. **HH**

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Kevin Kawamoto's rendition of what a community furo might have looked like based on documentary research and interviews.

roya business is unclear. She was born on a sugar plantation on Kaua'i and grew up deep in Hanapepe Valley, the eldest of seven children, after her father left plantation life and took up rice farming so he could be his own boss. My grandmother had only an elementary-school education; she helped her mother raise the younger children. Yet she also managed to move to O'ahu as a young woman and run her own business while her husband worked as a dental technician making false teeth.

In 1960 she was forced to close the furoya because the building was to be demolished to pave the way for a more modern housing development, which meant homes with reliable indoor plumbing, private showers and even bathtubs. Old Honolulu was disappearing, and along with it, the cultural artifacts of a bygone era. Western attitudes toward bathing prevailed, and the convenience of a quick shower at home took precedence over the public communal bath. By several accounts, my grandmother was sad to leave the business behind. As Hawai'i changed, the furoya became a thing of the past.

For a time in Hawai'i's history, the community bath and the furoya were unique features of the Japanese immigrant/AJA experience. Fortunately, visitors to Japan can find similar bathing-soaking rituals at sentō and onsen. One wonders, though, how the current pandemic will affect the future viability of these establishments. Perhaps at some point when it is safe to do so, people will want to immerse themselves in the reportedly healing waters of sentō and onsen, metaphorically washing their worries away, and rejuvenating mind and body to celebrate our return back to normal. **HH**

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