**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

**Gregg Kakesako**
Special to The Hawai‘i Herald

Quiet, humble and unassuming Honolulual Nisei veteran is featured on the USPS “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 Touret 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 national and widespread 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 Hawaii 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 Hawaii’s help, and [we are] so glad to see a Hawai‘i local as the face on the 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, Kauai.”

Shari Tamashiro, Kapiʻolani 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 worthy).”

Shari 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, Shirooku, was hard to say. And since “shiro” means “white” in Japanese, friends started to call him “Whitey.”

Grace Tsutaba Fuji, 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,” Fuji 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 Fuji. 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.”

Fuji 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 stopped 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 Isei Aasaemon and Kimiko. His father, an independent sugarcane 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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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 clear lava rocks at Pāhokū 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 fence. Yamamoto's family's name and became part of that line.

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 Dragon” — the allied airborne invasion of 44 gliders into southern France.

The French towns of Bruyères 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 Lauapehoeo schoolmate, Amy Yamamoto (no relation), in 1951. The two had been corresponding with each other during the war and while Whitney was on the mainland.

Amy Motoyo Yamamoto was the fifth of six children of Giseke Nakahara and Hisa Yamamoto who were issei from Hiroshima. Under the practice known as “mukoyoshi,” Amy’s father adopted his wife Hisa’s family’s name and became part of that Yamamoto line.

After getting married, “Whitey” Yamamoto to 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 Veterans’ 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 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.

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

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