

Col. Jimmie Kanaya spends his retirement saluting comrades of WWII's most decorated unit

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ADAM ASHTON; STAFF WRITER

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Retired Col. Jimmie Kanaya — reflected in a glass case at his Gig Harbor home that contains awards presented to him over his military career — spent 30 years in the Army after enlisting in 1940. Today, he travels the nation as a representative of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, the most decorated unit of World War II. (PETER HALEY/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

Over the years, retired Col. Jimmie Kanaya felt the public's gratitude time and again for his service with a storied regiment of Japanese American soldiers in World War II. He even accompanied President Barack Obama in the Oval Office two years ago to represent his unit when it received a special honor.

He wishes he could steer that attention to his fallen comrades.

"Those guys that gave it all during the war, they're the heroes, they're the ones who should be recognized," he said.

Kanaya, 92, lives today in Gig Harbor with his wife, Lynn. But he's on the road a lot. He'll travel to New Orleans this weekend to bring his comrades' stories to life at the National World War II Museum.

He is to be a guest at three exhibits and ceremonies.

- He is to participate in the unveiling of the U.S. Freedom Pavilion: The Boeing Center, an expansion of the museum that aims to illustrate how the country mobilized for war.
- He'll be present for a stop in the nationwide tour of the Congressional Medal that his famed unit, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, received in 2010. The medal recognized thousands of Japanese American soldiers who served in the war even as their families were held in internment camps across the West.
- He will share his memories as a prisoner of war through the exhibit "Guests of the Third Reich," which opened on Veterans Day and runs through July 7. His story is featured in an audio piece of the exhibit.

Kanaya served for more than 30 years in the Army, including assignments in South Korea and Vietnam in the decades that followed World War II. He enlisted in 1940, leaving his job at a Portland auto dealership to become an Army medic.

Kanaya's unit, the 442nd, fought with distinction on the European front and since has been recognized as the most decorated of the war.

He fell into captivity in southern France and spent the last six months of the war at German camps, sometimes on forced marches to keep the prisoners out of the hands of their would-be liberators.

He remembers sharing rations with five other prisoners at Oflag 64 camp in Poland. They'd shave wooden slats from their bunk beds to make small fires for warming water.

"Of course eventually the slats fell through," he said.

Germans kept him and his fellow prisoners on the move, seeking to keep the Americans from rejoining their units or falling into the hands of Russian troops.

He almost escaped in March 1945 during an American raid that was intended to liberate his camp. It failed, and Kanaya returned to the camp. He was freed a month later.

Lately, Kanaya has traveled the country to share memories about his experiences in World War II, including several years ago for a different POW exhibit in New Orleans.

He has participated in ceremonies honoring his Nisei regiment on both coasts. He sings the praises of the soldiers who have passed away over the years.

"I'm just fortunate that I'm still around, and all the guys that are with me, most of them are gone now," he said.

Adam Ashton: 253-597-8646

adam.ashton@thenewstribune.com blog.thenewstribune.com/military

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