

Norio Uyematsu Speech
JAVA and NJAMF Veterans Day November 11, 2024 Washington DC

Good afternoon, members of the Japanese American Veterans Association and the National Japanese American Memorial Foundation, Veterans, Honored Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is such a great pleasure and honor for me to be here with you today for your Veterans Day observance.

As a 93-year-old, who served in the Korean War, 74 years ago, there are not that many of us Japanese American Korean War veterans left to share our story, and I thank JAVA President Howard High for giving me the opportunity.

The Korean War began on June 25, 1950, and ended on July 27, 1953 without an official end to the war.

In all, some 5 million soldiers and civilians lost their lives in what many in the United States refer to as “the Forgotten War” for the lack of attention it received. It was one of the shortest wars but also the deadliest.

There were 5,000 Japanese Americans who fought and served in the Korean War with 247 persons of Japanese ancestry, being “Killed” or “Missing in Action.” This is only an approximate number since these soldiers were identified only by their Japanese surnames.

With the outbreak of the Korean War, my orders to be shipped to Okinawa abruptly changed. We were all herded like cattle and boarded a small troop ship on July 17, 1950, from San Francisco to Fort Lewis in Seattle, Washington.

From Seattle, we boarded an Army Aircraft and landed at Tachikawa Airport. From Tachikawa, I was bused to Camp Drake in Tokyo, which was the home of the First Cavalry Division who were already shipped to Korea.

From Tokyo, I rode a train to Camp Haugen, Hachinohe, Aomori Prefecture in Northern Japan where I was assigned to the 865 Anti-Aircraft Artillery Self Propelled unit.

From Camp Haugen, we were sent to Misawa Air Force Base to guard the base with our Quad 50 caliber machine gun on a half-bed track and a twin 40 millimeter canon on a tank.

From Hachinohe, our unit boarded a Landing Ship Transport and landed at Inchon, South Korea.

Our unit was sent to Kempo Air Force Base where we finally united with C and D Battery companies that were guarding the air base.

The airfield was the headquarters for the F-80 Shooting Star Jet Aircraft, which later was replaced by the F-86 Saber Jet. The runway was too short for the F-80's to take off and many times they had to jettison their bombs on takeoff.

While at Kempo Air Base, I was sent to Taegu, South Korea for an interview as an interrogator of North Korean and Communist Chinese Prisoners of War. (POW).

I was interviewed in Japanese, and I answered them in English since I was not interested in being an interrogator.

Since I had been promoted to Corporal in 1951, they had other plans for me. The saddest thing for me was, at that time I could speak fluent Japanese but now I can't remember anything.

They transferred me to the 521st Military Intelligence Unit (521st MIS) located in the 10th Corp sector. In December of 1951, I was assigned to the 9th Republic of Korea Army located by the Hwacheon Reservoir.

Our living quarters were tents, and we lived through severe cold in the winter where we slept in our sleeping bags, with our clothes and boots on.

This assignment has affected me, in the way I live to this day, since I need to wear my socks when I sleep and keep the temperature cold like I'm still in Korea.

One of my most vivid memories of the Korean War was seeing Korean Refugees fleeing from the war zone.

It was very sad to see mothers with their children and elderly men and women with Asian faces, who reminded me of people I knew back home.

My time as an interrogator of POW's, was sometimes difficult to make prisoners want to talk, so I tried to talk to them on a more personal level by talking to them about their families to make them feel more at ease and then our conversation was more productive.

I don't think many of you know that the 521st Military Intelligence Service Platoon was cited for exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding services in support of combat operations in Korea.

As was stated in the commendation, "The determination, technical skill, and willingness to assume additional responsibilities exhibited by the members of this platoon reflect great credit on themselves and the military service of the United States," which was quite an honor for us in this forgotten war.

In July of 1952, my time in the Army was coming to an end.

I volunteered for 3 years and received a one-year extension by President Harry S. Truman who called the Korean War a Police Action. All promotions were frozen so I could not be promoted to the next rank.

When I enlisted, I was a 17-year-old Nisei, who was born in Cupertino, California and had graduated from Brigham City's Box Elder High School in 1948.

I remembered what the 442nd did during WWII and I wanted to enlist in the U.S. Army to honor those brave men that came before me.

My family's story was one of a divided family with three, two sisters and a brother, being left in Japan and four of us being born in America.

My parents immigrated from the village of Kirikushi on Etajima Island in Hiroshima Prefecture in Japan and came to the United States in December of 1927 traveling from Mexico. They left behind two daughters ages 9 and 7 years old and an infant son 9 months old.

My mother was forced to leave her young son behind and had to hand him over to relatives through a train car window since the relatives knew the trip would be too difficult for a couple with a newborn baby. She never saw her son again until he was 39 years old.

My parents had to travel through the mountains of Mexico to come into the United States.

My mother was an incredible woman of small stature, who just after giving birth, was able to travel and sustain such difficult circumstances to be able to make it to Salinas, California where my father had made arrangements to work as a farm laborer.

It was a time when Japanese aliens were not allowed to enter the United States due to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1884, which included Japanese Immigrants. When they were able, they became U.S. Naturalized Citizens.

They quietly made a living and when I was 4 years old a kind Italian farmer, in Sunnyvale, California, asked them if they wanted to share crop with him on his farm and they agreed.

We lived in a one room storage shed which was converted to a bedroom and another room was added for a kitchen with cold running water that had a dirt floor.

My parents had enrolled me in Santa Clara Grammar school at the age of 5 years old since my friends were starting school. When I was promoted to second grade, the Teacher noticed I was only 5 years old, so she held me back. I told my parents that I was not promoted to second grade, and they had an interpreter go to the school and talk with the principal about my demotion.

With the promotion document, I was allowed to continue in second grade.

That incident may have been the wrong decision, in the end, since I was smaller than my other classmates which made it difficult for me to participate in sports and get adjusted since there were not that many Japanese students in my class.

In 1939, my parents saved enough money to buy a run-down walnut orchard in Campbell, California under my uncle's name, who was an American born citizen, and my mother's younger brother.

My parents dug up all the walnut trees and leveled the ground with the help of a horse and planted strawberries, raspberries and blackberries.

We, as children, helped in the fields and since I was the oldest, I had more responsibilities on the farm.

Just when they saw the light at the end of the tunnel, the Empire of Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on December 7, 1941.

This resulted in President Franklin Delano Roosevelt initiating and signing Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, which forcibly incarcerated 120,000 persons of Japanese descent, of which two-thirds were American citizens, from the west coast states of Washington, Oregon, California and part of Arizona. They designated these areas as a war zone.

My family and many others had to sell their property and homes at pennies on the dollar and we left with only what we could carry.

It was ironic since our farm was ready for harvest and was sold for \$500 to an Oklahoma fruit picker which included 2 homes, two 2-car garages, a packing shed, and a Japanese bath.

All the Assembly Centers and Concentration Camps were surrounded by barbed wire fences with guard towers with searchlights manned by United States Army Soldiers armed with machine guns, rifles and pistols. We were sent to one of the 15 Assembly Centers at Pomona then to the Heart Mountain Internment / Incarceration Camp / Relocation Camp / Concentration Camp.

As an 11-year-old, it was the first time I was among people that looked like me. For me, it was great being among other Japanese American kids but for the older generation it had to be tough losing their freedom and everything they had worked so hard to achieve.

The Heart Mountain, Wyoming concentration camp would be my home for three years from 1942 to 1945.

As a youngster, I remember when a Nisei officer from the 442nd Regimental Combat Team would visit his family at Heart Mountain and return to duty, we would run down to the front gate and witness the Caucasian Army Soldier having to salute the Nisei Officer.

Although we were too young to enlist, that incident stuck in my mind once I got older.

Once it was announced that the Heart Mountain camp was going to close, my family had nowhere to go since we lost our farm in Campbell, California. We were one of the last people to leave Heart Mountain in November of 1945.

My family had heard about an offer from a farmer in Brigham City, Utah. His name was Mr. Earl Anderson, a member of Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, who was allowing Japanese families to live and work on his farm. He converted a shed into six living quarters with a kitchen and bedroom for the families. So, my father went ahead to Brigham City and my mother stayed behind with us until we were ready to leave.

I recently found a WRA Application for Relocation Assistance which showed my mother was paid \$213.20 to transport all of us to Utah. My mother, sister, and I each received \$45.80 which included a \$15.80 common carrier fee, \$5 for meals enroute, and a one-time payment of \$25. My two younger brothers received \$7.90 less.

Mr. Anderson and his two sons Bob and Steve treated the Uyematsu's like their own family and my father became their Brigham City farm foreman and he worked for them in that capacity for 40 years. It was amazing since my father was never given any instructions and he was allowed to run their farms like his own.

I always admired Earl Anderson for what he did for Japanese Families to give us a second chance at a normal life when there was heavy animosity and resentment towards the Japanese, removed from the camp, for moving into Brigham City, Utah.

After I was honorably discharged in 1952, I decided to move to Los Angeles and get my college degree.

The day I was packing at my parent's home, in Brigham City, to leave for Los Angeles, I saw my parents watch me with such sad faces and did not say a word.

When I went to enlist in the Army, I found out that I needed my parents signature since I was 17 years old. My Father signed immediately but my mother would not sign until one month before my 18th birthday.

I now know why she did not sign immediately since she did not want to lose her second son like she did her first borne son in Japan. She and my father relied on me so much and the last word my father said when he passed away was my name.

Due to WWII, my understanding of Japanese traditions was not understood, and I had no idea of my responsibilities which may have changed my life today if I had stayed in knowing that my father cared for me that much.

Luckily, my younger brother took care of my parents, and the Uyematsu family has lived in Brigham City, Utah now for 79 years.

Even though I was no longer in the United States Army, I wanted to continue to be active in some capacity and I joined the Kazuo Masuda Memorial VFW Post 3670 and served as a three-time post commander. I am now the oldest member of the post at 93 years old and a lifetime member.

I am also a life member of the Korean War Veterans Association, the American Legion, and the Disabled American Veterans organizations and support the Wounded Warriors Project.

In 1996, a group of 28 Japanese American Korean War veterans assembled to organize the first Japanese American Korean War Veterans (JAKWV) organization where Robert M. Wada was charter president, and I was co-vice president with Min Tonai.

One of our first projects was to create a Japanese American Korean War Memorial monument at the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center in Los Angeles' Little Tokyo. It was dedicated on May 24, 1997 in honor of the 247 Japanese Americans who gave their lives in the defense of the Republic of Korea.

No one has ever written a book about these brave soldiers and our charter president Robert M. Wada, with the help of our Japanese American Korean War Veterans editorial team, put together a book entitled "Americans of Japanese Ancestry in the Korean War – Stories of Those Who Served."

This was the first book to put together the stories of Americans of Japanese Ancestry from the United States who provided their accounts of the Korean War. I was editor of this book that was published in 2010.

We could not retain our membership in the Japanese American Korean War Veterans organization since so many Korean War veterans were passing away, so we dissolved the organization.

It is interesting, in recent years, that the term "The Nisei Experience" only reflects the service of those that served in WWII and the U.S. Army Museum has no mention of our service and only a small display on the Korean War.

Those of us that served in the Korean War were also second generation or Nisei, incarcerated in concentration camps on American soil behind barbed wire fences, fought for our country of the United States of America, but too young to enlist when we were in camp. Our service has been forgotten to be recognized but our experience was real.

For those of us who fought in the Korean War, our race was labeled as "Mongolian" rather than Japanese and it has never been corrected on our personnel records to this day.

Many of you may not know about a disastrous fire at the National Personnel Records Center on July 12, 1973 where approximately 16-18 million Official Military Personnel Files were destroyed.

That day, our sacrifices went up in a cloud of smoke.

The records affected personnel that served in the U.S. Army that was discharged from November 1, 1912 to January 1, 1960 and were 80 percent destroyed.

No duplicate copies of these records were ever maintained, nor were microfilm copies made. This disaster was a tragedy to many Japanese American veterans in both WWII and the Korean War to get benefits.

I was fortunate that although my personnel record envelope and some papers were burnt, I was one of the lucky ones to have my original documents saved.

But once my wife Rose passed away in 2020, I had no purpose in life since I was so depressed and became a shadow of myself to continue living.

Patti Hirahara, who is like a daughter to me and who also lost her husband in 2020, saw my condition and was in shock at what I had become. I was always so active and involved in so many things but with the Covid Pandemic, I was not going anywhere and just staying at home.

Patti brought me homemade Japanese food and I gained the weight I needed to become healthy and happy again.

Once life got back to normal, she asked me a very important question about what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.

I said two things. One was to preserve the legacy of the Japanese American Korean War veterans and the second was to honor the late Earl Anderson of Brigham City, Utah who was never acknowledged for his generosity in helping the Japanese, who were released from the concentration camps in the late 40's, until his death in 1952.

The first thing Patti did for me was to get me an invitation to attend the "Wall of Remembrance" dedication at the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. on July 27, 2022. With an estimated 2,500 in attendance, I was surprised that I was the only Japanese American Korean War veteran in the crowd.

In being the only one, I began to wonder, how our Japanese American Korean War veteran legacy can be preserved if I don't speak up now and tell our story across the United States.

I was given the opportunity to speak at the Brigham City Kiwanis Club for Veterans Day in 2022 by the grandson of Earl Anderson and I traveled back to Utah for the opportunity.

This led to having my family's story published on the front page of the Box Elder News Journal newspaper in Brigham City and also having the Brigham City Museum decide to hold their first Japanese American Pioneer exhibit to be held in Box Elder County in 2025.

The time was right due to the overwhelming response from the greater Box Elder County community about the news article that was published.

The museum even created their first Japanese American History collection which will now hold information about the Japanese community.

This was wonderful news since many of the local pioneers were passing away with knowledge that no one else would ever know.

When I returned home for Veteran's Day from Utah, I met Congressman Lou Correa at the new Korean War Memorial in Fullerton, California. He had my service in the Korean War honored on the Congressional Record in November of 2022.

Patti Hirahara, who is a Japanese American history preservationist and a Japanese American press contributor, has been instrumental in helping me tell my story over these past two years.

Since I was going to Japan in September of 2023, I asked her if it would be possible to visit Misawa Air Base in Aomori Prefecture in Japan where I was stationed.

She asked Congressman Correa's office for an introduction to Misawa Air Base and Misawa agreed to give me a VIP Tour. It was wonderful to be able to visit the base again which had the longest runway in the Far East at that time.

Things had changed at Misawa Air Base and became more modernized than when I was stationed there in 1950 when the City of Misawa was very small with unpaved dirt streets.

The people in Misawa were very cordial and they were surprised to see a Japanese American Soldier in a United States Army uniform walking around town.

Misawa Air Base Public Affairs took photos of my visit and made me the subject of their Veterans Day observance in 2023.

In seeing all the news that had been published about me and my family, I was amazed that an unknown, like me, from Anaheim, California, became an instant sensation.

I used to love working behind the scenes and let others be in the limelight but once my Korean War friends passed away, it made me realize what I had to do.

In February of this year, I traveled to Washington DC to donate my post Korean War memorabilia to the Smithsonian National Museum of American History's Armed Forces History Division.

Once my hometown newspaper, "The Orange County Register" heard about my donation to the Smithsonian and my Korean War service, I was interviewed before my departure, and they featured my story on the front page of the Register on Sunday February 18, 2024.

The reaction to this news article was incredible and people from across the country were reaching out to me by letter and online and I saw the story being run on many American military and news sources. The Japanese American Korean War story was finally being recognized.

In donating my past Korean War items to the Smithsonian, it was sad to see my artifacts going away but if it allowed our history to be told at the Smithsonian as part of American history, this was a very important step for me to do this during my lifetime.

I was also the only veteran to help sponsor their annual Day of Remembrance program this year, which featured a presentation from the FDR Presidential Library on February 19th.

In May, I traveled to the FDR Presidential Library in Hyde Park, New York for my first trip, where I was interviewed by Director William A. Harris, for their 2025 Day of Remembrance program.

This interview will be shown on the FDR Library's You Tube on February 19, 2025. This day is also significant to me since my father passed away on that date on February 19th, 32 years ago.

I had promised the Brigham City Museum that Patti and I would go to Brigham City for one week on September 29th to help with any issues that pertained to the new Japanese exhibit.

We attended many meetings to offer support for the project, met with the local JACL, found people that the museum was looking for, and took photos of old sites that were part of the local Japanese community there.

The Wasatch Front North JACL Chapter in collaboration with the Mt. Olympus and Salt Lake JACL chapters will be hosting their first Day of Remembrance program in Brigham City, Utah, on February 15th.

In the morning, the keynote speaker will be William Harris of the FDR Presidential Library, who will be making his first visit to Utah.

In the afternoon, we will have the Grand Opening of the first Japanese American exhibit at the Brigham City Museum entitled "Uncovering the Journey: Japanese American Pioneers in Box Elder County" which will also share stories of their Japanese American veterans.

I never thought I would ever see this happen in my lifetime, but miracles can happen if we believe, and not be afraid to pursue any opportunity.

Today, marks the 70th Anniversary of the official change from Armistice Day to Veterans Day to expand the observance of all who have served in the U.S. military with President Dwight D. Eisenhower signing a proclamation on Oct. 8, 1954 to make it official.

Many of my fellow Japanese American comrades, who served in the Korean War have passed away, and the 247 Japanese Americans who were killed or missing in action need to be remembered for their heroism, sacrifice and service.

This is my mission, until I die, to ensure their stories will be told since they lost the opportunity to live and have a family of their own.

While the Korean War ended in July of 1953 through an Armistice agreement, the Korean peninsula remains divided today.

We need to appreciate all our men and women in uniform and those that have served to continually thank them for their service. I am always surprised when people come up to me and thank me for my service which began in 1949, 75 years ago.

I am honored to be a life member of the Japanese American Veterans Association, but I am also honored to be a U.S. Army Japanese American Korean War veteran.

As my late friend Bob Wada always said, **"To Forget Would Be A Dishonor, To Remember Will Be Everlasting."**

Thank you.

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