

‘With Honor and Distinction’

VFW recognizes some of the most influential veterans of Asian-American and Pacific Islander descent during Asian-American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month

May 09, 2024

With May serving as custodian to national holidays such as Memorial Day, the spring month also dons the title of Asian-American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month.

Established as an annual observance in 1992, Asian-American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month encompasses more than 50 ethnic or linguistic groups living in the U.S. and its territories.

For VFW Commander-in-Chief Duane Sarmiento, a Filipino-American himself, the month is a special one as it honors the lasting imprint Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders have left throughout U.S. military history.

“From their service with John Paul Jones in the Revolutionary War and Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans to Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, Asian-Americans have served our country with honor and distinction,” Sarmiento said.

Beginning with Army Pvt. Jose Nisperos receiving the Medal of Honor for his actions on Sept. 24, 1911, Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders have received the military’s highest honor for valor 31 times in America’s ensuing wars and conflicts.

Among them is MOH recipient Cpl. Terry Teruo Kawamura, a Hawaii native who served with the Army’s 173rd Engineer Co., 173rd Airborne Bde., during the Vietnam War.

Kawamura’s selfless heroics came while stationed at Camp Radcliff in central Vietnam on March 20, 1969, when an enemy demolition team infiltrated the unit quarters area and opened fire with automatic weapons.

Disregarding the intense fire, Kawamura ran for his weapon when a violent explosion tore a

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

hole in the roof and stunned the occupants of the room. He shook off the explosion and grabbed his weapon to return the enemy fire, but realized another explosive charge had fallen through the hole in the ceiling and fallen on the floor.

Although in a position to escape, Kawamura threw himself on the charge and gave his life to prevent serious injury or death to several other members of his unit who were still recovering from the first explosion.

Other military awards of high distinction also have been awarded to Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders for their bravery throughout time. This includes Army Cpl. Magdalena Leones, a Filipino who received the Silver Star for her actions in the Philippines during World War II.

As a special agent operative for the U.S. Army, Leones was awarded the Silver Star for repeatedly risking her life to carry important intelligence data, vital radio parts and medical supplies through heavily garrisoned enemy-held territory from February to September 1944.

Despite the likelihood of being detained and tortured or executed by the Japanese, Leones continued her perilous missions between guerrilla forces throughout the Philippine island of Luzon with notable success. Through her intrepidity and skill as a special agent, Leones is credited with having contributed to the early liberation of the Philippine Islands.

Like Leones and Kawamura, the heroic and valiant acts of all veterans of Asian-American and Pacific Islander heritage are part of the fabric of freedom the U.S. shares today.

The VFW salutes and honors all Asian-American and Pacific Islander service members, veterans and their families for their indelible contributions to our country.

This article is featured in the 2024 May issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.