



Published in the Alliance Times-Herald April 24, 2013

WWII Veteran's Passing Stirs Memories Of Rescue

BROOMFIELD, Colo. — Tad Nagaki, a resident of Alliance for over 50 years, died April 22 at the home of his grandson in Broomfield. He was 93.

Nagaki was the last living member of the World War II, seven-man American rescue team that liberated 1,500 Allied prisoners in the Japanese-held Weih sien concentration Camp in China, Aug. 17, 1945.

“America has lost a true hero,” said retired New Jersey Assemblywoman Mary Previte, who was a 12-year-old, liberated that day at Weih sien. “I’ll never forget that day. Angels dropping from the sky — parachuting from the belly of a B-24 bomber outside those barrier walls. Weih sien went mad. Emaciated prisoners weeping, dancing, pounding the sky with their fists. Hysterical with joy, we rushed the gate to welcome these American gods. Yes, sun-bronzed American gods with meat on their bones.”

Previte said the Tad Nagaki story is an important chapter of American history. As an American-born, Japanese-American enlisted man, after Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, Nagaki was sidelined with other Nisei doing menial labor in Ft. Campbell, Ky. Because he was Nisei, he was denied his request to become an air cadet. Then in 1943, Nagaki volunteered to be part of an elite team of Nisei spies. It was an experiment: Could Japanese-Americans be trusted to fight the Japanese?

Nagaki served as a member of this Office of Strategic Services’ (OSS) 15-member Nisei unit that infiltrated behind Japanese lines in the China-Burma-India Theater of Operations during World War II. Members of this team were highly trained in communications and survival skills.

Serving first with OSS 101 in Burma, he transferred to China. When Allied intelligence warned that the Japanese planned to execute their Allied prisoners in China and Manchuria, Nagaki volunteered for the rescue team called the “Duck Mission” that liberated Weih sien located in Shandong province, in northeast China.

He served as the team’s Japanese-language interpreter. For his heroism, he was awarded the Soldier’s Medal and promoted to sergeant.

In 1997, Mary Previte tracked down these liberators in a successful national search and visited each one face-to-face to say thank you. Nagaki farmed corn, and beans, and sugar beets near Alliance with brothers Ma, Akira “Skeets” and Frank.

Nagaki insisted during their meeting, “I am not a hero,” Previte said. “He said he only did what any American would have done.

“Like children following the Pied Piper, we children — crowds of us in Weihsien — followed these heroes everywhere,” Previte said. “My 12-year-old heart turned summersaults over every one of them. We wanted to sit on their laps, to touch their cheeks. We begged for their insignia, begged for their buttons, begged for their autographs. Tad told me that one girl cut off a piece of his hair for a souvenir. When we begged these heroes to sing the songs of America, they taught us ‘You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.’ I can sing it still.”

When grandsons Jason and Ryan Nagaki celebrated his 90th birthday in 2010 with a town-wide open house at the Alliance Country Club, letters from around the world poured in from former Weihsien internees — from the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Belgium, and the United States.

“Tad was a quiet man. He never wanted me to make a fuss about him,” Previte said. “At that birthday celebration, I discovered that while Tad had lived in Alliance for half a century, very few of Tad’s family and friends even knew that he had risked his life liberating 1,500 Allied prisoners from the Weihsien concentration camp.”

In August 2005, in recognition of the ending of World War II, a United States State Department publication in China published the Tad Nagaki story in Chinese and in living color for distribution to thousands of top-level Chinese decision makers.

“The Tad Nagaki story is a story for all of America,” Previte said. “When we Americans turned mistrust of our Japanese-Americans into respect, trust, and opportunity, we reaped the immeasurable blessings of Nisei heroism and patriotism. That’s the Tad Nagaki story. What a legacy!”