

Veterans Day 2008: Ceremonies in Washington honor service members' sacrifices

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — Far from the Veterans Day crowds along the national mall, a small group of World War II veterans gathered in a secluded park north of the U.S. Capitol Tuesday afternoon.

Like other veterans, they wore their military hats, uniforms and American flag pins with pride. But these particular war heroes have a unique story and place in our nation's history. They are the Japanese-American veterans of World War II.

“They fought two separate wars — one abroad and one against racism at home,” said Lynn Betancourt, whose father, Grant Hirabayashi, served as a tech sergeant in the 5307 Composite Unit, also known as Merrill's Marauders, in China, Burma and India. Fluent in Japanese, Hirabayashi worked in military intelligence while his family was forced to leave their home in Seattle and move to an internment camp in Tule Lake, Wyoming.

About 33,000 Japanese Americans served in the U.S. military during World War II. Of those, 812 lost their lives. Their names are inscribed on the wall of the Japanese American Memorial to Patriotism during World War II, which was commissioned by an act of Congress and dedicated in 2000. The memorial honors those who served, but also the Japanese-Americans that suffered hardships during internment.

The names of the internment camps, along with the number of people who lived there, are etched into the curved, rear wall of the memorial. The shape is designed to reflect the sound of the gong at the entrance. A separate stone panel features excerpts from the official apology given when President Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act in 1988. In the center are rocks that jut up from a pool of water that reflects the autumn leaves above.

“This monument tells many, many stories,” said Hirabayashi, smiling in the afternoon sun. With the help of his daughter, he found the name of his cousin, William Mizukami — who died serving in the Army's 442nd Regimental Combat Team in Europe — and gently ran his fingers over the name.

“This means so much to me,” said Hirabayashi, who has come to the ceremony all eight years. “It takes a great country to acknowledge its mistakes.”



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Lynn Bettancourt helps her father, Grant Hirabayashi, find his cousin's name at the Japanese American Memorial to Patriotism during World War II.



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Born in Seattle, WA, Grant Hirabayashi and his family were removed from their home and placed in the Tule Lake internment camp in Wyoming. Fluent in Japanese, Hirabayashi left the camp to serve as a Tech. Sgt. in the U.S. Army 5307 Composite Unit, Merrill's Marauders, in Asia.