

I strongly support passage of Oregon Senate Bill 1509 to honor the Nisei Veterans of WWII.

Naming a section of Highway 35 in their honor will prompt visitors and future generations of children to ask, "Who were the Nisei veterans?"

The answer: In the history of the US Army, no unit of like size and duration has ever received as many medals of heroism and service as the 100th Infantry Battalion and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, which together were awarded 18,000 medals. Their rescue of a Texas unit -- the so-called "Rescue of the Lost Battalion" -- has been hailed by the US Army as one of the fiercest and most heroic ground battles in American military history.

Half way around the world, the Nisei serving in the US Army's Military Intelligence Service used their Japanese language skills to play pivotal roles: they undertook dangerous reconnaissance missions to overhear the plans of Japanese Army units on the front lines, and intercepted and translated critical Japanese Army messages at centralized intelligence centers. These actions have been acknowledged as playing crucial roles in bringing the War in the Pacific to an end.

But what truly sets them apart, and makes them worthy of the recognition outlined in Senate Bill 1509, is that they put their lives on the line for a country that had ordered their families to abandon their homes and livelihood in a forced move to desolate War Relocation Authority incarceration camps for the duration of the war. Surrounded by barbed wire fencing with guns trained on them from watch towers, the families endured bitter cold and scorching heat in flimsy, uninsulated hastily built shelters and communal stall-less bathrooms.

When the Nisei veterans returned home after serving their country so gallantly, they were refused service and employment amidst "No Japs" signs posted throughout the Hood River Valley. But they were determined to build a better, more just world. They dedicated their lives to building communities and giving the next generation opportunities they never had for themselves.

In the words of former President Barack Obama to the Nisei veterans in February 2014, "(your actions) reminded us that this country is built not on a particular race or religion or ethnicity, but it is based on creed and ideals that you have all followed. And so you know that what you did was important not only to the world, but it was important to reshaping how America thinks about itself. For that we are very, very thankful."