

UNDERCOVER WORK EARNED A GI TORTURE — BUT NO U.S. MEDALS

SAN JOSE — During World War II, American Sgt. Richard Sakakida was tortured by Japanese soldiers, risked his life to engineer the escape of 500 Filipino guerrillas, and sent valuable intelligence to the U.S. military from behind enemy lines.

Sakakida received no commendation for his undercover work — not even a Purple Heart.

Among the reasons for the apparent oversight are that Sakakida's undercover work during the war was classified until 1972, and his exploits are difficult to corroborate because most of the people familiar with his record and who could recommend him for an award are dead.

A military statute said recommendations for World War II medals had to be made by 1951.

But a half-century after the war, Japanese-American veterans groups are campaigning to convince the Army that Sakakida, a 73-year-old Fremont resident and retired Air Force officer, deserves the nation's highest military award — the Medal of Honor.

They have won the support of community groups, a high-ranking Philippine representative and a U.S. senator.

"It's outrageous to us that he's never been honored for his (wartime) service," said John Tagami, an aide to Sen. Daniel Akaka, D-Hawaii. "And at the same time he's been written up in history books, inducted into the military intelligence hall of fame and been honored by the Philippine government."

Akaka has authored a bill that would waive the statute of limitations in Sakakida's case.

Although Akaka himself believes Sakakida deserves a medal, the bill wouldn't order the Army to award one, Tagami said. It would instruct the service to review his wartime record and decide whether he should receive such an honor.

Instrumental in the drive to recognize Sakakida's service is the Military Intelligence Service Association, an organization of second-generation Japanese-Americans who served as linguists in the war against Japan.

While Sakakida was not in the Military Intelligence Service, its members consider him one of their own.

"He didn't even get a Purple Heart from his venture in Japanese prison," said Saratoga resident Tom Sakamoto, a member of the group who served in the war. "I think it's beyond the call of duty what he did. He should have gotten the Medal of Honor or the Distinguished Service Cross, at a minimum ... I think the country owes him a lot."

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The lack of recognition from the government doesn't bother Sakakida, who says he was just doing his job and would prefer to live a quiet retirement and forget his World War II duties.

"If I do get it, I will feel very honored," said the self-effacing retired lieutenant colonel. Sakakida said the real honor should go to the many people who have expended time and effort on his behalf.

But that kind of reaction is typical of Sakakida, said a friend of more than 40 years.

"He's not the type to toot his own horn," said Aptos resident Jay Nishikawa, who served under Sakakida in postwar Japan.

A native of Hawaii who speaks fluent Japanese, Sakakida was recruited by the Army before the war to gather intelligence on Japanese agents operating in the Philippines.

Using the cover story that he was a draft dodger, the then-21-year-old was able to infiltrate the Japanese community in Manila and, through clandestine meetings, relayed information to his superiors.

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Sakakida donned a uniform and continued working with military intelligence to stymie the Japanese. When Corregidor fell in mid-1942, his superiors listed Sakakida as a civilian on the surrender rolls in hopes he would be free to resume undercover work.

But the Japanese didn't believe his cover story that he had been forced by the American military to translate for captured Japanese soldiers. Sakakida was held captive and tortured.

First the Japanese tied his hands behind his back and hung him from a rafter, Sakakida said. Later, his captors applied lighted cigarettes to his thighs, stomach and genitals. They stuck his head under a dripping faucet for hours, and stuck a hose inside his mouth, turned on the water and pushed his bloated stomach so that he would vomit.

The torture stopped in February 1943, when the Japanese put Sakakida to work for them, doing petty jobs around the 14th Army headquarters and acting as an English translator.

Sakakida said this put him in a position to gather intelligence. He also planned and executed the escape of Filipino guerrilla leader Ernest Tapas and 500 other freedom fighters.

Earlier this year, the Philippine government presented Sakakida with the Philippine Legion of Honor, an award reserved for those who helped the country in what Filipinos refer to as the "war of liberation." He was also treated to a reception at the Philippine Embassy in Washington, D.C.

"By these achievements," says a Philippine government resolution, "Mr. Sakakida contributed immeasurably to the liberation of the Philippines, thereby earning for himself the respect and admiration of the Filipino people."

Sakakida is also a member of the Military Intelligence Corps Hall of Fame at Fort Huachuca, Ariz. He is also the subject of a video produced by the MIS Association and the National Japanese American Historical Society titled "Mission to Manila: The Sakakida Story."