



NAKAMURA HONORS JAPANESE-AMERICAN HERITAGE WITH *service to country*



BY DOUG HOAGLAND

A violent explosion slammed Navy corpsman Michael Nakamura into the dirt floor of a brick factory in Afghanistan. The blast from an enemy IED (Improvised Explosive Device) sent sharp pieces of brick flying and filled the room with choking dust.

AN EERIE SILENCE FELL OVER THE SCENE.

Nakamura – “Doc Nak” to the Marines in his platoon – responded instinctively after his body absorbed the concussion of the blast. Jumping to his feet, he shouted: “Is everyone OK? Give me a head count!” Thankfully, no member of the scout sniper team was killed in the November 2009 incident in Helmand Province, called by many “the wild, wild west of Afghanistan.”

After the IED went off, Nakamura and the Marines – many of them suffering blast-induced headaches – engaged the enemy in a fire-fight and then continued on patrol for several days. “We all just sucked it up,” says Nakamura, who as a trained marksman also fought in combat alongside the Marines.

After serving in Afghanistan, he deployed to Libya and the South Pacific with one constant to his health: he suffered repeated migraines. But his commitment to sacrifice and service remained strong. In 2014, Nakamura received the diagnosis of traumatic brain injury resulting from the IED blast. “People have misperceptions about that diagnosis,” he says. “I was highly functional. I didn’t have any learning problems from the injury. I had visual problems, but I overcame those.”

His medical condition reached a crisis in 2018 when he started a new assignment on a destroyer. On board, Nakamura repeatedly fell down and ran into things because his balance was off. In 2019, the Navy medically retired him.

Nakamura 34, had persevered for a decade – overcoming obstacles with the same spirit that his paternal grandparents exemplified during and after World II. One family. Two different times in American history. Bound together by a dedication to living honorably.



Ichiro and Seka Nakamura – Michael’s grandparents – were teenagers in California when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, plunging the United States into World War II. In the weeks that followed, rumors swirled that Japanese-Americans would commit sabotage to aid Japan. The U.S. government concluded that wasn’t true but rounded up Japanese-Americans anyway, says Brynn Saito, assistant professor of English at Fresno State. Saito is co-director of the Yonsei Memory Project, which connects the wartime experiences of Japanese-Americans to contemporary civil liberties struggles. In 1942, Executive Order 9066 set in motion the internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans and Japanese immigrants. They were first sent to temporary camps – including the Fresno Fairgrounds and a site in Pinedale – and then forcibly moved to 10 permanent camps with barbed wire and armed guards in six states.

Nakamura’s grandparents met at one of the camps but were soon separated. His grandmother and her family went to Montana on a work-release program and picked berries while living in harsh conditions. His grandfather enlisted in the U.S. Army

to show his loyalty, serving as a typist and translator in Washington, D.C. Other young men in the camps enlisted, too.

After the war, Nakamura’s grandparents settled in the Bay Area with dreams of owning a business. But prejudice against Japanese-Americans remained strong, and they could not get a bank loan to open a grocery store. So they borrowed from a businessman who charged “outrageous” interest, Nakamura says. To quickly pay off the loan, the grandparents saved money on housing by sleeping among 50-pound bags of rice in their small market’s storeroom. Within three years, they had satisfied that debt and started to expand their holdings. The small market became one of the largest Bay Area stores specializing in Japanese food. The grandparents – who chose American names: Ichiro became Michael and Seka became Sue – bought several apartment buildings and houses. They stressed the importance of education, and all four of their children graduated from college, some with advanced degrees. Nakamura’s father, Paul, became an accountant.

As the decades passed, the nation grappled with the internment of the Japanese-Americans. In 1988 – shortly after Michael Nakamura was born – the U.S. government formally apologized for the internment and paid \$20,000 in compensation to each surviving victim. Growing up, Nakamura couldn’t make sense of what had happened to his grandparents. “You can’t understand why the government would do that,” he says. “The craziest thing to me: my grandparents were Americans. Right? We’re Americans, first, always. Regardless of what happened to his family, my grandfather chose to serve.” Others in the Nakamura family did, too, and Michael Nakamura followed that tradition by enlisting at age 21. He served honorably for 11 years.

Upon his discharge in 2019, he returned to the Bay Area to live with his widowed grandmother – his grandfather had died in 2002. “My grandmother welcomed me into her home while I was getting my life back together,” he says.



Nakamura quickly refocused.

“When one thing ends, I have to start something new. I can’t stay stagnant. So I threw myself into school.”

“It’s people like my grandparents who inspire dreamers like me...”

~Nakamura



Nakamura enrolled in a community college in the Bay Area, later moving to Hanford, CA, where he lives today with his girlfriend – a Navy corpsman – and their baby daughter. As the pandemic sent all classes online, he earned an associate’s degree with plans to transfer to a four-year university to study public health. His ultimate goal: earn a master’s degree and become an epidemiologist to fight diseases like COVID-19. “I want to prove that I’m the guy who can be injured in combat but become a scientist,” he says.

When Nakamura started investigating public universities in California, he found the Veterans Education Program at Fresno State and decided it offered him the best chance of success. He started the program in the fall 2020 semester.

Nakamura says professors in the program are “outstanding” and that strong support comes from Dr. Daniel Bernard, associate dean in the Division of Continuing and Global Education and founder of the program. Nakamura also praises Nick Carbajal, program coordinator. “Man, the passion that Dr. Bernard and Nick have for veterans and the amount of work they do are amazing.” Carbajal describes Nakamura as a “humble leader” who has brought “cohesion and camaraderie” to the nine other students in his cohort. They will complete the program in the spring 2021 semester, and Nakamura plans to begin undergraduate studies at Fresno State next fall.



“California needs more programs like this to help people who have sacrificed for the country meet their goals,” Nakamura says.

Fresno State is the only campus in the California State University system to offer a Veterans Education Program, which is entirely donor-supported.



Japanese Americans from Tacoma, Washington being transported to the Pinedale Assembly Center, California, 1942.

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“The Veterans Education Program is sustained solely through generous community and private support, and no state funds are allocated to this program,” says Dr. Scott Moore, dean of the Division of Continuing and Global Education. “We have established The Veterans Education Program Endowment to plan for the long term sustainability of the program, and we will be fundraising for the endowment.” Cash donations, planned estate giving, and gifts of stock or real estate can help the endowment grow, says associate director of development Katie Bewarder. In addition, the Richard Tucker Endowment supports the program.

Such support offers Nakamura a hopeful future, as does the legacy of his late grandparents. His grandmother died at the end of 2020. “I’ve prevailed over significant odds, and I attribute this to the lessons and values that my grandparents and others solidified in me,” Nakamura says. “What happened to them – the whole story – makes me think you’re stronger than what you’re put through. It’s people like my grandparents who inspire dreamers like me to pursue their goals.” ☺



FIGURE 16-e—PINEDALE ASSEMBLY CENTER

Aerial view of Pinedale Assembly Center, California, c. 1942.

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