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Heart of Service Awards

Bob Cook — Joined Marines in 1943. Was part of force set to invade Japan before Japan's surrender in 1945. Moved to Texas and Spring Branch, where for 20 years he served as commander of Spring Branch VFW.

Posted: Tuesday, November 5, 2013 1:25 pm

By **Rusty Graham**

Growing up in South Texas, Donna Fujimoto Cole spent a lot of time wishing she looked different than she did.

An American of Japanese ancestry, Cole said she was picked on and bullied, especially when Dec. 7 — Pearl Harbor Day — rolled around.

But she said she never felt so proud as when she'd take her father's "blue 442 album" to school for show and tell. Her father — born in the United States — was one of 19,000 or so Japanese-Americans who served in the 100th Infantry Battalion and the 442nd Central Postal Directory.

Cole told her story and that of the 100th, 442nd and the 6,000 or so Japanese-Americans who served in the Military Intelligence Service in WWII Friday at the Houston West Chamber of Commerce's annual Salute to Veterans luncheon.

This year's event honored veterans and active duty members of all services and covering all conflicts but placed a particular emphasis on veterans of World War II.

Cole urged those in attendance to collect stories from the WWII veterans they know, and submit those stories to the National World War II Museum in New Orleans.

"The war changed the world," Cole said. "Sixty million people were killed, 2.5 percent of the world's population at the time."

She said that while some 1.2 million WWII veterans are alive today, they're dying at a rate of 600 per day.

Philip Godshalk — Joined Army in 1943, serving with 670th Field Artillery Battalion in Europe, under Gen. Patton's command. Still active in the community, he serves as program manager of HCC's Academy for Lifelong Learning.

Tsutomu Okabayashi — Better known as Tommie, Okabayashi joined the Army in 1943 without his parents' knowledge. The native Texan was part of the 442nd Regimental Combat team, fighting in Italy and France.

Ervin Rees — Retired after 27 years as an Air Force pilot and service in three wars, Rees is a household name in the Alief community, serving as president of the Alief chapter of AARP and organizer of the Alief Old Timers Reunion.

"It's urgent that we obtain these stories (and) donate them to the museum," said Cole.

The Japanese-American units served with distinction in both Europe and the Pacific, its members fighting for freedom even while many had families interred back home.

Cole told of the 442nd's involvement in the rescue of the Lost Texas Battalion, in the Vosges Mountains of France in October 1944, suffering tremendous casualties but getting the job done. Some of the men kept going into Germany and helped liberate work camps, "while many had families at home behind barbed wire," she said.

Likewise she said, it was the Military Intelligence Service that got wind that Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, the architect of the attacks on Pearl Harbor, would be airborne in April 1943 and coordinated the attack that killed Yamamoto.

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The three units were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal in 2010.

A flyover prior to the luncheon program by the Commemorative Air Force in vintage aircraft included a final pass in a missing man formation.

The pledge of allegiance was led by Gen. George S. Patton, portrayed by Denny Hair of the Third Army Living Historians, who also had vintage vehicles and a historical presentation on display.

KPRC Channel 2 anchor and former Marine Bill Balleza recognized each branch of service and its veterans, and introduced state Sen. Dan Patrick, who presented four veterans with Heart of Service awards — Bob Cook, Philip Godshalk, Tommie Okabayashi and Ervin Rees.

Stephen King of West Houston said that his father served in World War II but never talked about it, like many of his generation. He said that he never knew anything of his father's service until after he died and his mother opened up a box with medals, letters and other war memorabilia his father had collected.



Salute to Veterans committee chairman David Gilkeson told a veteran story of his own Friday, about his dad, a WWII veteran who made it home, and an uncle, a WWII veteran who didn't, and about how the family didn't find out for years what happened to his uncle's submarine.

"(The event) is the vision our committee put together over a year of planning coming to fruition," Gilkeson said later. "From a family perspective, the story has been told about my uncle."