

Student helps nisei veterans' families by geotagging graves

By Linsey Dower
ldower@staradvertiser.com

When Sage Tottori volunteered as a Boy Scout at September's Nisei Veterans Memorial Service at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, he noticed many families struggling to find their loved one's gravesite — even when given a plot number.

A senior at Island Pacific Academy in his final year of scouting, Tottori was on the hunt for a project to earn Eagle Scout status and was inspired to help those families he'd seen wandering through the rows of the Punchbowl cemetery. While some tried using Ancestry.com's Find a Grave smartphone app, the nisei grave locations hadn't yet been geotagged into the app. So he came up with the idea to geotag each nisei veteran gravesite and "get a direct route to that grave," he said.

Geotagging involves attaching geographic coordinates to websites, photos, text messages, QR codes and other media based on the location of a mobile device.

After committing to the project, Tottori reached out via email to Lynn Hirakuji, then-president of Nisei Veterans Legacy, and she quickly agreed to help him. According to its website, the Honolulu nonprofit works "to preserve, perpetuate and share the legacy of Americans of Japanese Ancestry who served in the U.S. Armed Forces in World War II."

"As soon as I saw that I



COURTESY SAGE TOTTORI

Sage Tottori's brother, Taj, helped him with his Eagle Scout project to geotag the locations of nisei veteran gravesites at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific at Punchbowl.

said, 'Absolutely,'" Hirakuji said. "It will certainly help any member of the public, not just a descendant who is trying to locate a gravesite."

Hirakuji, who continues to serve as a board member of Nisei Veterans Legacy, began contacting various nisei veterans groups in the state and compiled a list of names of

those buried at Punchbowl. Using the list, Sage and his mother, Kimberly Tottori, started visiting Punchbowl every Sunday to pinpoint gravesites. He said they spent about eight hours each Sunday searching the cemetery in sections, walking row by row, looking for nisei grave markers identifying their

service in the 100th Infantry Battalion, 442nd Regimental Combat Team, 1399th Engineer Construction Battalion or Military Intelligence Service.

Each time they came upon a nisei gravesite, they matched the name on the grave to those on their list and attached the location of the site to the deceased's

name on the Find a Grave app.

After a while, the two Tottoris were joined in the effort by friends and family, greatly speeding up the process. After about two months, they had finished searching the entire cemetery, having found and marked almost 1,800 graves, Tottori said. Shaking the hands of

some of the surviving nisei at last year's memorial service cemented his commitment to the project, he said. Another motivation was the fact that his great-grandfather, Bishop Mitsunyo Tottori, was one of the only Buddhist priests who was not sent to an internment camp during World War II for being Japanese American.

"He felt because his children were born in Hawaii he owed his loyalty to the United States and the U.S. government and that his children should continue that loyalty," Tottori said in a written statement. "This Eagle project helps connect me spiritually to my great-grandpa's wishes."

For Hirakuji, the most exciting thing about the project was that it was carried out by Tottori and other community youths.

"It's the youth who will perpetuate the legacy of the nisei soldiers — local youth who are finding the nisei soldier story so interesting that they want to do something like this," she said.

Tottori said he plans to attend college on the mainland after graduation, but when he does return home on school breaks, he wants to continue working with Nisei Veterans Legacy to geotag new nisei veteran gravesites.

Linsey Dower covers ethnic and cultural affairs and is a corps member of Report for America, a national service organization that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues and communities.