

= Francis B. Wai =

Francis Brown Wai (April 14 , 1917 ? October 20 , 1944) was a captain in the United States Army and received the Medal of Honor for actions during the recapture of the Philippines from Japan in 1944 . As a youngster , Wai liked to surf and he played several sports in high school and college . He graduated from college with a degree in finance . Although he initially planned to work with his father , he joined the Hawaii National Guard , commissioned a lieutenant . Wai was sent with his unit to fight in World War II and he was killed during the U.S. amphibious assault on Leyte , Philippines .

He was initially awarded the Distinguished Service Cross , the United States ' second highest decoration for valor . After an extensive review of awards in 2000 , his medal was upgraded to the Medal of Honor . To date , Wai is the only Chinese American and one of only two Asian American officers to receive the medal .

= = Early life = =

Wai was the child of a Native Hawaiian mother and a Chinese father . Growing up , he often surfed with Duke Kahanamoku , regarded as the father of surfing , and Buster Crabbe , who later became an actor . He attended the Punahou School in Honolulu where he earned athletic letters in track , football and baseball . He went to college at the Sacramento Junior College before transferring to UCLA . At UCLA , he was a four sport athlete and graduated in 1939 with a bachelor 's degree in Banking and Finance . He intended to work alongside his father in real estate and banking but instead joined the military upon the outbreak of World War II .

= = Military service and death = =

After his graduation , Wai enlisted in the Hawaii National Guard and was called into active duty before the United States ' entrance into World War II . He received a commission as an officer and completed Officer Candidate School in 1941 . His commission was rare at a time when few Asian Americans were allowed to serve in combat leadership roles . He was eventually assigned to the 34th Infantry Regiment of the 24th Infantry Division with the rank of Captain . The 24th Division , based at Schofield Barracks , Oahu , was among the first American units to be involved in the Pacific Theater , exchanging fire with Japanese aircraft during the December 7 , 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor .

= = = Operation Reckless = = =

In May 1943 , Captain Wai deployed to Australia with the 24th Infantry Division and by September 19 , 1943 , the unit was at Camp Caves , near Rockhampton , on the eastern coast of Australia . Wai and the rest of the unit began intensive combat training . With training completed , the division moved to Goodenough Island on January 31 , 1944 , to prepare for Operation Reckless , the amphibious invasion of Hollandia , Netherlands New Guinea (now Jayapura , in the Papua province of Indonesia) .

The 24th landed at Tanahmerah Bay on April 22 , 1944 and seized the Hollandia Airdrome despite torrential rain and marshy terrain . Shortly after the Hollandia landing , the division 's 34th Infantry Regiment moved to Biak to reinforce the 41st Infantry Division . Wai 's regiment captured the Sorido and Borokoe airdromes before returning to the division on Hollandia in July . In two months , Wai and his unit had crossed New Guinea and recaptured three airdromes from the Japanese .

= = = Leyte = = =

After occupying the Hollandia area , Wai was assigned to X Corps of the Sixth United States Army in preparation for the invasion of the Philippines . On October 20 , 1944 , his division was paired with the 1st Cavalry Division within X Corps , and the two divisions made an assault landing at Leyte

. When Captain Wai landed at Red Beach , the Japanese forces stationed on the island concentrated their fire on the waves of incoming troops from gun positions located in a palm grove bounded by submerged rice paddies . When Wai arrived on the beach in the fifth wave , he found the soldiers there to be leaderless , disorganized , and pinned down on the open beach . Assuming command , he moved through the rice paddies , without cover . His demeanor and example inspired the other men to follow him . With deliberate disregard of his own personal safety , he advanced without cover to draw Japanese machine gun and rifle fire , thus exposing the locations of the entrenched Japanese forces . Systematically , the Japanese positions were assaulted and overcome . Wai was killed leading an assault against the last Japanese pillbox in the area . For his actions during the landing on Leyte , Wai was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross . After the war , his remains were interred at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Hawaii . His grave can be found in section Q , grave 1194 .

= = Military awards and honors = =

In 1996 , amid allegations of prejudicial treatment of Asian Americans in uniform in World War II , Congress directed Louis Caldera , then Secretary of the Army , to conduct a full review of military records . The review concluded that 22 Asian Americans , including Wai , did not receive full consideration for the Medal of Honor and in 2000 , Wai 's Distinguished Service Cross was upgraded to the Medal of Honor .

Of those whose medals were upgraded , Wai was one of only two who did not belong to the predominantly Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat Team / 100th Infantry Battalion ; the other being Rudolph B. Davila of the 7th Infantry . At a White House ceremony June 20 , 2000 , President Bill Clinton presented the Medal of Honor to 22 Asian Americans whose Distinguished Service Crosses were upgraded to the Medal of Honor .

During the course of his short military career , Wai earned eight awards and decorations .

= = = Medal of Honor citation = = =

Rank and organization : Captain , U.S. Army , Headquarters , 34th Infantry Place and date : Leyte , Philippine Islands , October 20 , 1944 Entered service at : Honolulu , Hawaii Born : Honolulu , Hawaii

Citation :

" Captain Francis B. Wai distinguished himself by extraordinary heroism in action , on 20 October 1944 , in Leyte , Philippine Islands . Captain Wai landed at Red Beach , Leyte , in the face of accurate , concentrated enemy fire from gun positions advantageously located in a palm grove bounded by submerged rice paddies . Finding the first four waves of American soldiers leaderless , disorganized , and pinned down on the open beach , he immediately assumed command . Issuing clear and concise orders , and disregarding heavy enemy machine gun and rifle fire , he began to move inland through the rice paddies without cover . The men , inspired by his cool demeanor and heroic example , rose from their positions and followed him . During the advance , Captain Wai repeatedly determined the locations of enemy strong points by deliberately exposing himself to draw their fire . In leading an assault upon the last remaining Japanese pillbox in the area , he was killed by its occupants . Captain Wai 's courageous , aggressive leadership inspired the men , even after his death , to advance and destroy the enemy . His intrepid and determined efforts were largely responsible for the rapidity with which the initial beachhead was secured . Captain Wai 's extraordinary heroism and devotion to duty are in keeping with the highest traditions of military service and reflect great credit on him , his unit , and the United States Army . "

Wai was inducted into the UCLA Athletics Hall of Fame on October 11 , 2014 .