



# Robert Tomiya Sato

SEP 17, 1917 - AUG 26, 2015



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HAWAIIAN  
MEMORIAL PARK MORTUARY  
AT VALLEY OF THE TEMPLES

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# Robert Tomiya Sato

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## R obert Tomiya Sato September 17, 1917 – August 26, 2015

Tomiya Sato was born on September 17, 1917 in the small town of Waipahu, the son of Yazo and Toyo Sato from Fukushima, Japan. After his mother's sudden passing when he was just an infant, Tomiya and his older sister, Yachiyo, were sent to live with his uncle Ryozo's family in Fukushima where they raised him in a farming village until he was a teen. The family was by no means rich in wealth but invested in his education, noting his interest in studying. He returned to Hawai'i at age 17 speaking not a word of English. But his aptitude to study and learn languages helped him immensely. He went to night school to learn English while working during the day. He was talented at shuji (calligraphy) and writing waka (classical Japanese poems), which led the Jodo Mission to ask him to be a Japanese teacher.

Everything changed after Tomiya was drafted into the Hawaii National Guard in 1941. He remembered the day Pearl Harbor was bombed, watching in horror as the planes with the hinomaru (rising sun) emblem flew by. Living at Schofield Barracks, he was quickly assigned to guard Kāneohe Mental Hospital. At night, he was tasked to build barbed wire fences along Kailua beach. Then suddenly, all Japanese American soldiers, due to the government's suspicion of their loyalty, were ordered to leave for "destination unknown." Not able to go home, 1432 soldiers primarily of Japanese ancestry, including Tomiya, left from Aloha Tower on the ship S.S. Maui on June 5, 1942. After weeks of zig zag travel, they landed in Oakland, California. Eventually, they ended up by train in Camp McCoy, Wisconsin in June of 1942 for basic training. They stayed through the frigid winter where they saw snow for the first time. Despite the cold weather, the locals were warm toward the boys from Hawaii. Then Tomiya went to Camp Shelby in Mississippi, suffering through the drenching heat and discrimination for which the South was well known at the time. This 15 month training prepared the boys from Hawaii for war in the harsh conditions in Europe. Small in stature at 5'3" and no more than 120 pounds, Tomiya blended in with the rest of the nisei (second generation) boys. What made him different, however, was his ability to speak fluently and write in Japanese.



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As the books and movies about the 100th Infantry Battalion and 442nd Regimental Combat Team retell, the many battles that the Americans of Japanese Ancestry soldiers faced were fierce, devastating, and decorated with honor. Tomiya fought originally with Company E but as the numbers in Company A dwindled, he was assigned to join them. He survived the battle of Cassino, Italy, in the winter of 1944, described as the 100th's toughest battle. Over the course of just over a year, Tomiya saw many of his friends die on the battlefield and suffered many wounds himself, including frostbite in his feet and shrapnel in his leg from "tree bursts" of enemy shells showering from the dense forest of Bruyeres, France. On October 15, 1944, he would have died from intense bleeding from shrapnel had it not been for very brave medics who risked their lives to rescue him. He recalled struggling to tie a tourniquet on his leg but could not keep his hands from shaking. Miraculously, he dragged himself to the edge of a road and flagged down two medics who picked him up "like a toothpick," and with fear in their eyes, threw him in a jeep and sped to safety.

Tomiya received two Purple Hearts for his injuries, as well as a Bronze Star, Combat Infantry Badge, and Distinguished Unit Badge. This was not unusual among his comrades. In fact, the 100th Infantry Battalion/442nd Regimental Combat Team became the most decorated unit of its size in the Army's history. Tomiya believed that the boys of the 100th must prove to fellow Americans that they have the same love of country, ideals, and loyalty of all Americans.

During his recuperation criss-crossing the United States from one hospital after another over the course of 11 months, Tomiya proudly recalled shaking the hand of legendary Babe Ruth on a goodwill visit to the hospital. He didn't want to wash his hands after that! Tomiya finally recovered in St. Louis hospital in Honolulu and was discharged from the Army in September of 1945, permanently injured with a slight limp in his leg and his feet never feeling warm again. But that did not stop him. With his language skills, he was sent to work in U.S. occupied Japan under the control of General MacArthur to "rebuild" the nation. He served as a government censor for four years and recalled the dark days of post-war Japan, devastated by bombs and the spoils of war.

Returning back to Hawaii, Tomiya took the GED (General Educational Development) Exam having not gone to high school. Then, with support from the G.I. Bill, he attended the University of Hawaii for one year and started a chess club. He then transferred to the college of his choice – Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois – to study Economic Foreign Trade and International Relations, where he graduated in 1953 with a Bachelor of Arts.



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While at Bradley, he was team captain of the school's chess club and became a chess champion. He even organized a championship tournament with competing schools from Indiana (Notre Dame and Purdue), Illinois, and Michigan but sadly, it was canceled due to a blizzard. With one more year left on the G.I. Bill, Tomiya went to Mexico City to attend Mexico City College for post graduate work. Unfortunately, he ran out of money and never completed his studies. However, he stayed and worked in Mexico for one year and learned to speak Spanish.

After returning to Hawaii from Mexico, Tomiya chose the English name of Robert as his first, and liked to go by Bob. Hawaii was not yet a state and the economy was tough. Having difficulty finding a steady job, he became a refrigerator salesman. In 1955, he took a long trip to Japan to visit distant relatives using his savings and met Kazue Kondo in a rural village outside of Hiroshima. Kazue made his heart skip, and he convinced her to move to Hawaii and become his wife. They married in Yokohama on August 25, 1955, and Tomiya returned to Hawaii to see his ailing father. Kazue came by ship to Hawaii in January of 1956. They struggled financially as he worked for H. Kawano and Company selling mutual funds on commission and Kazue used her adept sewing skills to earn extra money.

Bob finally earned a salary working as the first Executive Secretary of Club 100, the social club of the veterans of the 100th Infantry Battalion from 1958 to 1960. Following the club's motto of "for continuing service," even after leaving his job at Club 100, he remained very active, emceeding many events, providing entertainment with his genuine style of humor, and raising funds for social causes. He volunteered whenever he could because he loved the club so much and never forgot the boys who could not come home.

Bob began working at Manoa Finance Company in public relations and met with primarily Japanese speaking customers. He greatly enjoyed his work as he was gregarious and found talking to strangers, Japanese or not, very easy. At age 65 and at the bank's closure, he retired as senior vice president after 22 years of dedicated service. However, he continued to work as a teacher at McKinley Community School for adults. He taught the Citizenship class to Japanese nationals who wished to become naturalized into the United States. It was his way to strengthen the country for which he held much pride. For nearly 30 years, he taught three semesters, two evenings and a Saturday every week, serving what he estimated to be more than 1,600 students. Most of the students were women who came to Hawai'i from Japan with their husbands. Never missing a day of class, Sato sensei (teacher) taught in Japanese so that his students would understand the



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content. But as the test was in English, he had to make sure they could read and write in that language as well. Incredibly, nearly 100% of his students passed the test and became U.S. citizens!

Bob and Kazue raised two girls, Barbara and Pauline in Honolulu. He and Kazue saved money every year so that the family could go on vacations, often to Japan to see relatives. He loved traveling, and boasted that he went to almost every state in the union. He loved going to Japan the most, soaking on the onsen (hot springs). Bob instilled in his daughters the value of education and urged them to pursue it vigorously. He proudly sent them to the University of Southern California (Barbara) and University of Michigan (Pauline).

Bob was keenly aware of his duties as an American citizen, which included the right and responsibility to vote. He voted in every election and instilled in his wife and children the duty to do the same. He was a proud Democrat and was asked and agreed to serve as an appointed member of the Hawai'i State Commission on Aging under Governor George Ariyoshi.

In his retirement, Bob enjoyed attending bon dances, not to dance, but to watch Kazue dance so gracefully, to listen to the rhythmic music of the flute and drums, and to eat sweet barbecue meat and crispy andagi (Okinawan donuts). He loved to eat mochi and manju (Japanese sweets) as well. He also continued to play recreational softball, becoming one of the oldest players in the makule (elderly) league. He was content playing chess and the Japanese game of go whether or not he could find a partner. After his grandchildren, Brandon and Diane, were born, he became a doting ojiisan (grandfather), carrying them on his back and singing songs to them. They looked up to him for his perseverance during the war, which motivated them to fight whatever obstacles came their way. He especially enjoyed teaching them how to pick mangoes from the tree in the front yard and raking the leaves.

The mango tree nearly killed him after he attempted to trim it and fell off a ladder at age 85. He broke his hip, which required surgery and months of rehabilitation. But, as in his youth, he recovered fully and was able to walk without a cane for many years. He began showing signs of dementia, which became advanced Alzheimer's disease. Despite his illness, he was able to travel out of state a few more times. With his family, he went to Alaska, one of the few remaining states he had not visited. He also returned to his hometown in Fukushima in 2009. Then in 2011, he made his final trip to Washington, D.C. with his daughters to attend the Congressional Gold Medal ceremonies bestowed on the nisei veterans of World War II. That was an extremely touching experience that he was proud to attend.



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In May of 2014, Bob became a resident of the Maunalani Nursing and Rehabilitation Center, which provided excellent care with compassion. “Sato-san” was well-liked by staff and residents alike because of his pleasant and gracious demeanor. He always thanked everyone who helped him. After a valiant effort to regain his health, on the evening of August 26, 2015, a day after his 60th wedding anniversary with Kazue, he passed away while sleeping, enveloped by the love and thankfulness of family and friends.

Robert is survived by wife Kazue, daughters Barbara (Jim Low) and Pauline Sato (Cal Hirai), and grandchildren Brandon and Diane Low. A private service will be held at the Izumo Taisha Shinto Shrine in Honolulu on September 20. A celebration of life will follow at the 100th Infantry Battalion Veterans Clubhouse on Saturday, October 17 from 11:30 am – 2 pm. Casual attire. Parking available at Ala Wai Elementary School. This will be followed by a committal service at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific with military honors on Monday, October 19 at 10:30 am. In lieu of flowers, the family suggests that donations be made to the 100th Infantry Battalion Veterans.

For more information, contact [Pauline.sato@gmail.com](mailto:Pauline.sato@gmail.com).



## Events

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### Committal Services

 **Monday**, October 19, 2015

 10:30 AM - 11:00 AM HT

 National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific



# Memories only last if you share them

Join us in honoring Robert by contributing to a collection of shared memories.



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