

Kazuyoshi “Kaz” Kawata was born in Portland, Oregon on January 2, 1924. His parents, Takaji and Masano Kawata, were Issei (first generation immigrants from Japan). At that time the Issei were denied by law the opportunity to become U.S. citizens. The Nisei (the second generation in America) were American citizens by birth.

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, amid a wave of xenophobia and wartime hysteria, an exclusion zone along the west coast was established from which anyone of Japanese ancestry was to be excluded. Some 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry would be removed from the exclusion zone and incarcerated in hastily built camps, most were American citizens.

In May 1942, with only two weeks notice, all of Portland’s residents of Japanese ancestry were ordered to report to the Portland Assembly Center with only what they could carry. There they were confined in the Pacific Northwest Livestock Exposition grounds awaiting the construction of War Relocation Camps elsewhere in the U.S. Ironically, Kaz was registered for the draft while in the Assembly Center. At that time all Nisei were designated as 4-C (enemy alien). Eventually the Kawata family was evacuated to the Minidoka Relocation Camp in southern Idaho.

An excellent student throughout his school years, Kaz was a senior at Portland’s Lincoln High School with six weeks remaining until graduation when his family was incarcerated at the Assembly Center. Despite the objections of the school board, at the graduation ceremony (which Kaz could not attend) the Lincoln High School faculty recognized his achievements and honored him with the T.T. Davis Award as the top student of the class of 1942. With it came a small cash scholarship.

Initially there were two opportunities for Nisei to leave the camps, work and education. Kaz joined a work gang and cleared land and helped harvest sugar beets and potatoes in and around Idaho in the fall of ’42. In early 1943, using the T.T. Davis scholarship, he began studies at the University of Idaho, Southern Branch in Pocatello (now Idaho State University).

Also in January 1943, the War Department decided to re-think its ban on Nisei joining the army and announced the formation of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, a segregated, all-Nisei, all volunteer unit. Drafting Nisei would come later. Kaz volunteered.

After one term at Pocatello, Kaz received his orders to report for induction, after which he was sent to Camp Shelby, Mississippi for training with the 442nd. It was noted, however, that he had passed the Army Specialized Training Program exam and he was sent instead to train with other soldiers who qualified for the program. After basic training, the ASTP soldiers were sent to colleges and universities around the country for their specialized training (somewhat like ROTC). The ASTP was discontinued shortly thereafter, however, and the soldiers in the program were re-assigned, en masse, to line units. Kaz was assigned to the 667th Field Artillery Battalion and deployed to Europe, participating in three campaigns which included the Battle of the Bulge, the Remagen Bridgehead and the drive on Munich. After VE Day and a stint in the Army of Occupation in Germany, he returned to the U.S. and was honorably discharged with the rank of technical sergeant in May 1946.

Eager to get on with his life, Kaz quickly enrolled as an engineering student at the Oregon State College under the Rehabilitation Bill. Similar to the GI Bill, the Rehabilitation Bill was enacted to benefit veterans with disabilities. (Kaz had suffered cold induced nerve damage to his feet during the bitterly cold fighting in the Battle of the Bulge).

In Corvallis, Kaz met Marion Sammis, also a student at OSC. Both wanted to do something positive with their lives and both were interested in service with the church. Together they decided to do so as husband and wife and they applied to the Methodist Board of Missions to serve as missionaries. After graduation (Kaz earned his Bachelor of Science degree in Civil Engineering) they married in August 1949. (They had to cross the Columbia River into Washington state for the wedding as it was illegal for them to marry in Oregon. The state of Oregon still had anti-miscegenation laws on the books).

Further education was recommended by the Board of Missions so Kaz spent the next year earning his Master's in Civil Engineering at the University of Minnesota. Following a year of socio-cultural study at the Hartford Seminary in Connecticut in preparation for their assignment to India, they sailed for India arriving in Bombay in August of 1951.

Kaz and Marion served 16 years as missionaries in India. Kaz added two more degrees while on furloughs, his Master's in Public Health from the University of California, Berkeley ('58) and his Doctorate in Public Health from the Johns Hopkins University ('65). The engineering and public health backgrounds were of great value to his work, which encompassed numerous construction, water supply and waste water projects. Kaz was particularly proud of his role as Chief Engineer finishing the construction of the 400 bed Brown Memorial Hospital at the Christian Medical College in Ludhiana, Punjab. Concurrently he held a teaching position with the Department of Social and Preventive Medicine there.

In 1966 the Kawata family (now a family of 5) returned to the U.S. after the Johns Hopkins University asked Kaz to consider an appointment to the faculty of the School of Hygiene and Public Health. He accepted and so began a tenure there that spanned 23 years. Kaz rose through the academic ranks to become a full professor and served for a time as the Acting Director of the Division of Environmental Health and Engineering. He especially enjoyed mentoring his students. In addition to his teaching responsibilities, he was engaged in many research studies and consultations around the world. A high point in his career was his work in Egypt in the late 80's. On a long-term USAID contract, he served as an advisor to the Government of Egypt primarily on rural waste water projects covering all the governorates in the country. For three years he and Marion lived and worked in Egypt based in Cairo. When Kaz retired from Hopkins, he continued to advise and consult for USAID, World Bank, WHO and many other organizations that needed and sought his expertise.

In his retirement Kaz began to read and study as many as 60+ books a year. The subject matter was varied, touching on current events, history, theology or anything that piqued his interest. He would then write reviews of the books using his own unique perspective and background to underscore his points. His writings expanded to include commentaries and essays incorporating his personal experiences in life. Like many Nisei, he was initially reluctant to write about the Relocation, but he felt it was necessary to document the injustices experienced then to ensure it never happens again.

Kazuyoshi Kawata lived in Gaithersburg, Maryland at the Asbury Methodist Village retirement community from 1991 until he passed away on January 13, 2023. He was 99. His name appears on the Honor Roll sign at the Minidoka National Historic Site and on the Go For Broke Monument in Los Angeles, but since he did not serve with the 100/442nd Regimental Combat Team or the Military Intelligence Service, he did not receive the Nisei Soldiers of World War II Congressional Gold Medal awarded in 2011 to veterans of those units.

