

# Private First Class Herbert K. Pililaau



October 10, 1928 - September 17, 1951

**Hometown:** Waianae, Hawaii

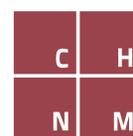
**Entered Service:** March 13, 1951

**Unit:** 23<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiment, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Company C

**Rank:** Private First Class, U.S. Army

**Awards:** Congressional Medal of Honor, Purple Heart

**Cemetery:** Section P, Site 127  
National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific  
Honolulu, Hawaii



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Adapted from: Dan McSwain, "Hero held off enemy at 'Heartbreak Ridge,'" May 26, 2016. *The San Diego Union-Tribune* <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/military/sdut-herbert-pililaau-hero-2016may26-story.html>

## Before the War

Private First Class Herbert Kailieha Pililaau was born in 1928 to William Pililaau and Abigail Kailieha. The ninth of 14 children, he had eight brothers and five sisters. The native Hawaiian was raised in Waianae, a suburb of Honolulu, in what was then the Territory of Hawaii.

Relatives described Pililaau as a quiet man who studied music and wanted to be a police officer. He was a talented singer and ukulele player, as well as an avid reader. He graduated from Waipahu High School in 1948 and studied administration and accounting.

## Military Experience

After Pililaau was drafted into the U.S. Army during the Korean War, he briefly considered refusing to serve as a conscientious objector, citing his Christian faith. Pililaau attended basic training at Fort Shafter in Honolulu and was sent to Korea in March 1951.

### Korean War Stalemate

The first year of the war, from June 1950 to June 1951, was marked by rapid changes as the opposing armies moved up and down the Korean peninsula. But in July 1951, the war entered a long, bloody stalemate. To end the stalemate, the acting commander of the Army's 2<sup>nd</sup> Division ordered the 23<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiment and an attached French battalion to attack the fortified slopes of a ridge that they named Heartbreak Ridge. The commander underestimated the enemy's strength.

In mid-August, the U.S. and United Nations forces pushed North Korean units to retreat. Unfortunately, the North Koreans ended up in a more defensible position at the crest of the hill. Starting September 13 and continuing for two weeks, allied soldiers attacked up the hill, taking heavy casualties and usually reaching the crest low on ammunition. Waves of North Koreans would then counterattack with fresh troops, usually at night, and compel the U.S. and French troops to withdraw.

## Battle of Heartbreak Ridge

Pililaau earned the Medal of Honor for his heroic defense of his unit during a counterattack to hold a seven-mile stretch of that hilly terrain known as Heartbreak Ridge, in what is now North Korea. With his unit low on ammunition and ordered to reposition, Pililaau volunteered to stay behind and cover the withdrawal. Trained to operate the Browning automatic rifle in his unit, Pililaau fired the weapon into advancing waves of enemy soldiers until he ran out of ammunition. Then he threw grenades until those ran out. At that point, the quiet, six-foot private fought attacking North Korean soldiers with his trench knife until they killed him. When the position was subsequently retaken, more than 40 enemy dead were counted in the area he had so valiantly defended.

## Commemoration

On June 19, 1952, President Harry Truman presented Pililaau's Medal of Honor to his parents. He was the first Hawaiian to receive the honor.

In 2000, the Navy christened the Pililaau, a cargo ship for the Military Sealift Command, in the fallen soldier's honor. In addition to the ship, a community park on Oahu and an Army firing range and recreation center are named for Herbert Pililaau.