

# Brigade Vietnam Memorial Story

*By Retired Command Sgt. Maj. James Reis*

When 29th Infantry Brigade veterans of the Vietnam era talk about the Rock, they're not talking about the wrestling/movie icon "the Rock," they are talking about the original Brigade Memorial. To all, newcomers and veterans, this is the tale of the rock that once fronted the Brigade's 22nd Avenue, Fort Ruger headquarters up to the 1990s.

When the 29th made its move to Kalaeloa in 2000, the memorial was put in storage until a suitable-accessible final resting place was agreed upon. One proposed location was the Hawai'i State Veterans Cemetery in Kāne'ohe, but under the direction of the **Col. Joseph J. Chaves**, the 29th Infantry Brigade Combat Team commander, plans were formulated to have the memorial placed and rededicated at the Brigade's new Kalaeloa headquarters, in 2003.

The story began in the 1970-71 timeframe, when the Hawai'i Army National Guard decided to create a memorial to honor the 29 Hawai'i Army Guard and Reservist who died while on active duty during the 1968 call-up. A large bronze plaque was commissioned. The design was to include the names and activated units of the 29 Soldiers.

During 1971, word went out to all units, that the Guard was searching for a suitable rock, of a fairly large size, to mount the bronze plaque. **Capt. Albert Ayers**, the 227th Engineer Company commander, heard about the request and contacted a friend, **Isao Ito**; who worked for the City and County of Honolulu in the Wahiawā area. Ito said that he had recently surveyed the entire Wahiawa area for a very large stone, because Wahiawā Town had requested one for a similar purpose. He knew of such a stone, deep in Waipi'o Valley, that might fit the Guard's requirements.

Ayers accompanied Ito into the back of Waipi'o Valley to look at the prospective rock. The jeep trail they followed wound deep into the valley, past intermittent small truck farms and thick jungle growth. Eventually, they came to a small patch of banana trees, just off to the side of the trail. The rock they were looking for was deeply imbedded in the ground, with only its top showing above the tall kunai grass. It seemed to be the perfect choice to Ayers, as it met all of the Guard's specifications for a large flat and suitably shaped rock.

Early one morning, Ayers, joined with volunteers **1st Sgt. Joe Nakoa**, **Sgt. Edgar Clark**, **Sgt. 1st Class Manny Silva** and **Sgt. Robert Segawa** began their journey to bring the rock out of Waipi'o with a five-ton wrecker and, a five and a quarter-ton (Jeep) truck. After a long drive from the unit's Diamond Head armory and traveling for quite a while on the muddy dirt trail up the valley, they finally reached the site of the banana patch. The wrecker had a hard time making it all the way up the narrow, muddy trail; if the road conditions weren't bad enough, it started to rain with the intensity of a downpour in the monsoon season of in Southeast Asia.

After much deliberation, Nakoia suggested offering a pray. Ayers asked whatever spirits dwell in the pōhaku (*Hawaiian for stone*) and the surrounding jungle to pardon them for taking the pōhaku and let them know that it was going to be used for a good purpose.

To get the pōhaku onto the truck, it first had to be dug out of the ground. A large hole was started and dug several feet deep all the way around the large pohaku. A sling was then rigged underneath and the pohaku was hoisted out by the boom of the wrecker and placed on the bed of the 5 1/4-ton truck.

The five men struggled in the pouring rain to position the very heavy pōhaku in the bed of the truck. The surfboard-shaped pohaku was about six by three by one foot, with a rounded end and a jagged pointed tip.

Eventually, the pōhaku was blessed prior to the attachment of the bronze plaque with the 29 Soldiers names. From 1973 to the 1990s, 22nd Avenue was the site of the Brigade's annual memorial service in held May, honoring those who made the ultimate sacrifice during the Vietnam call-up.