Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month

Advancing Leaders Through Purpose-Driven Service

May 2021
Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month

The Department of Defense pays tribute to the generations of Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) who have enriched our nation's history and who continue to be pivotal to our success as a nation as we move into the future.

AAPI encompass a diverse group of cultures, ethnicities, races, and languages. They include all Americans who trace their ancestry back to the Asian continent and the many Pacific islands of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia.
Asian American/Pacific Islander Heritage Month dates back to the 95th Congress (1977-1978) when five joint resolutions were introduced proposing that a week in May be designated to commemorate AAPI accomplishments.

After a congressional bill passed in a 1978 joint resolution, President Jimmy Carter recognized the first 10 days of May as Asian-Pacific Heritage Week.

In 1992, President George H.W. Bush extended the celebration to cover the entire month.
May’s Significance

May was selected as the observance month to commemorate the arrival of the first Japanese immigrants to the United States on May 10, 1843. The date also marks the anniversary of the transcontinental railroad completion on May 10, 1869.

Between 1865-1869, twelve thousand Chinese immigrants constructed the western section of the transcontinental railroad—one of the greatest engineering feats in American history.
The Federal Asian Pacific American Council chose this year’s theme: “Advancing Leaders Through Purpose-Driven Service.”

This presentation highlights Major Kurt Chew-Een Lee, Rear Admiral Huan Nguyen, Captain Kwang-Ping Hsu, and Chief Master Sergeant JoAnne S. Bass.

Each of these individuals emulate this year’s theme.
Major Kurt Chew-Een Lee, the son of Chinese immigrants, was the first Asian American Marine Corps officer.

Throughout his military career, which spanned from World War II to the Vietnam War, he was awarded numerous medals for bravery.

In an interview with the Washington Post, Major Lee said, “Certainly, I was never afraid...Perhaps the Chinese are fatalists. I never expected to survive the war. So I was adamant that my death be honorable, be spectacular.”
Major Kurt Chew-Een Lee

On Nov. 2, 1950, Lee conducted a solo reconnaissance mission, moving ahead of his unit to fire rounds and throw grenades. His goal was to expose the location of Chinese soldiers who had attacked his unit while reinforcing North Korean troops.

At one point, he called out in Mandarin in an attempt to confuse the enemy. He was wounded, but the tactic worked, allowing his unit to reposition and drive back the Chinese.

While Lee recovered from the gunshot wound to his arm, tens of thousands of Chinese forces surged into the region, overwhelming the eight thousand American troops fighting as United Nations forces.
Major Kurt Chew-Een Lee

With his arm in a sling, Lee left the hospital against medical recommendation, commandeered a jeep, and returned to the front. Moving at night and using only a compass, he led his Marines across mountain passes to locate and reinforce a small group of soldiers that had been surrounded. His unit proceeded to repeatedly drive back Chinese soldiers, ensuring that the vastly outnumbered Americans were able to retreat to the sea. A final wound during the fighting ended his combat duty.

Lee later served during the Vietnam War and he retired in 1968.

Interviewed in 2010 about his distinguished military career and bravery, Lee said, "I am most proud of being able to train future generations of Marines."
Rear Admiral Huan Nguyen

In 2019, Nguyen became the first Vietnamese American promoted to the rank of rear admiral.

Nguyen was born in Vietnam, the son of an armor officer in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. During the 1968 Tet Offensive, Nguyen's mother and father, along with his six siblings, were killed by Viet Cong communist guerillas. Nine-year-old Nguyen was shot in the arm and thigh, with another bullet piercing his skull. Nguyen survived and after dark, escaped.
Rear Admiral Huan Nguyen

Nguyen found safety with his uncle, a colonel in the Republic of Vietnam Air Force. In 1975, they fled Vietnam, seeking refuge in the United States. The U.S. 7th Fleet helped to evacuate thousands of Vietnamese refugees and transport them to safety in Guam.

“The images that I remember vividly when I arrived at Camp Asan, Guam, now Asan Beach Park, were of American sailors and Marines toiling in the hot sun, setting up tents and chow hall, distributing water and hot food, helping and caring for the people with dignity and respect. I thought to myself how lucky I am to be in a place like America. Those sailors inspired me to later serve in the United States Navy,” Nguyen said.
Kwang-Ping Hsu was the first foreign-born cadet at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy. In the first 10 years of his career, he achieved the rank of lieutenant commander and earned two Coast Guard Air Medals for exceptional air rescue efforts. He became an accomplished polar aviator, serving tours as a helicopter detachment commander for icebreakers in the Arctic and Antarctic. He participated in some of the most unique and important missions in Coast Guard history.
Captain Kwang-Ping Hsu

People knew Hsu for his excellent skills as a pilot and rescuer as well as his compassion and sense of humor. His record of Service extended over 30 years.

In 2007, Hsu passed away, and his body now lies in Arlington cemetery. His son David, a former Army Special Forces officer with combat tours in the Pacific and Iraq, writes, “Dad always viewed his life as nothing less than extraordinary—a journey beyond any he could have imagined due to the opportunities of America and the Coast Guard.”
Chief Master Sergeant JoAnne S. Bass

In 2020, CMSgt Bass formally took the reins as the Air Force’s 19th Chief Master Sergeant.

Bass’ appointment makes her the first woman, and the first person of Asian American descent, to be elevated to the Service’s highest enlisted rank.
Chief Master Sergeant JoAnne S. Bass

When asked at her Change of Responsibility ceremony about what comes next and how she plans to lead, Bass responded, “We have much to get after.”

She went on to say she would continue the leadership principles she learned from her parents and her husband, Rahn, a retired Army First Sergeant.

“What my parents did instill in me is the value of hard work and treating people well,” she said.

And regarding her husband, “He taught me to always take the ‘hard right’ versus the ‘easy wrong.’ And my word to all Airmen is that we will always take the hard right; meaning, we will always do the right thing even when it’s not comfortable.”
Conclusion

The rich AAPI heritage spans across the world and through the depths of America’s history.

Generation after generation, AAPI members have forged a proud legacy that reflects the spirit of our nation—a country that values the contributions of everyone who calls America “home.”
Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute,
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