



National American Indian Heritage Month

Tribal Nations Soaring to New Heights

National American Indian Heritage Month

Every November, the Department of Defense (DoD) joins the Nation in celebrating National American Indian Heritage Month. The event is also known in some circles as American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month.

It's an opportunity to recognize the rich and diverse cultures, traditions, stories, and important contributions of Native American and Alaskan Native peoples.



Population/Tribes

There are over 9 million American Indian and Alaska Natives living in the United States today.

With over 574 federally recognized tribes, there are hundreds of different cultures that are as unique as the people they represent.



Theme/Presentation

For 2023, The Society of American Indian Government Employees (SAIGE) has chosen the theme: *“Tribal Nations Soaring to New Heights.”*

This presentation highlights Technical Sergeant Blassi Shoogukwruk, Edna Lee Paisano, and generations of Mohawk ironworkers.

TSgt. Blassi Shoogukwruk (1 of 2)

Native Alaskan TSgt. Blassi G. Shoogukwruk grew up in White Mountain, a village on the Seward Peninsula. There, a childhood experience inspired his Air National Guard career.

He said, "When I was 4 years old, we were living in our cabin nine miles up the river from White Mountain and we had a massive flood, in 1985. A HU-1 (Huey) helicopter came out and extracted us from our campsite because we were flooded. We had to spend a few hours on a piece of ice up there on the bank, to stay afloat until the Army Guard came and rescued us, then brought us back to White Mountain."

TSgt. Blassi Shoogukwruk (2 of 2)



“With a lot of us Native people that serve, we’re not just serving our country. This is our home, I’m not just serving my country, I’m serving my home, and I’m defending my home.”

TSgt. Shoogukwruk says he joined a rescue unit to return what he and his family had been given. Additionally, he wanted to continue his family’s legacy of military service.

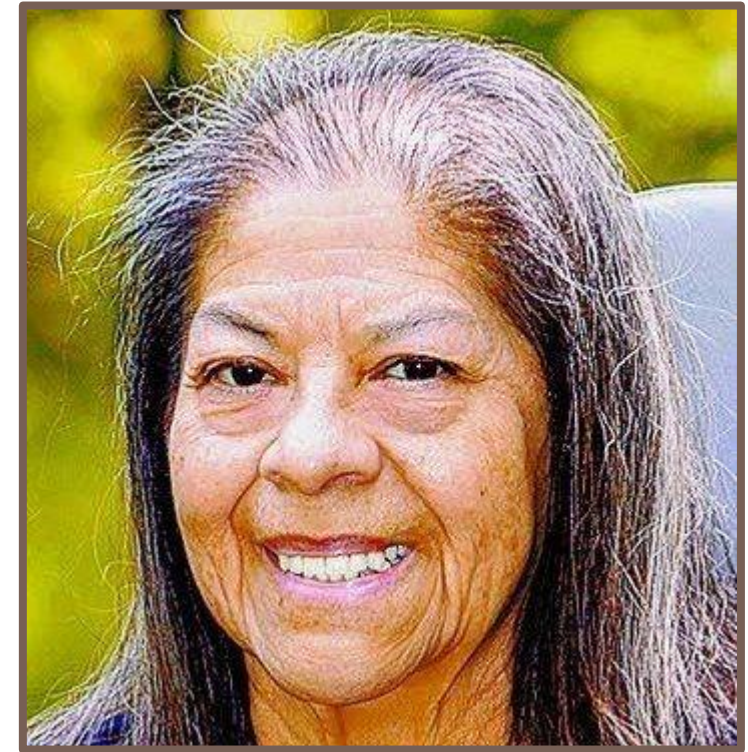
Both of his grandfathers served with the Alaska Territorial Guard, and his mother served as one of the first female Army Guardsmen in Alaska villages. He also has uncles that served in the Alaska Army National Guard, Navy, and Marine Corps.

Edna Lee Paisano (1 of 2)

Edna Lee Paisano was a Nez Perce and Laguna Pueblo demographer and statistician from Sweetwater, Idaho.

In 1980, she was hired by the U.S. Census Bureau, becoming the first American Indian to work there full-time.

She identified a systematic undercount of regions where there were large proportions of Native Americans, causing them to receive disproportionately fewer Government resources and services.



Edna Lee Paisano (2 of 2)

Paisano rectified the imbalance by using her expertise in statistics and computer programming. She developed a questionnaire to estimate the number of Native Americans who might not have been counted in the 1980 census.

This, combined with a large public information campaign, helped increase the number of Native Americans completing the follow-on census.

Her efforts resulted in a 38% increase of American Indian and Alaska Natives reporting within the 1980 census to the 1990 census.

In 1987, she received the Bronze Medal Award for Superior Federal Service. She retired from the Government in 2011.

Mohawk Ironworkers (1 of 4)



Mohawk Ironworkers (2 of 4)

For more than 100 years, generations of Mohawk ironworkers shaped the skylines of North American cities. These men built prominent landmarks, including the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, the George Washington Bridge, and the World Trade Center.

Kyle Karonhiaktatie Beauvais, a sixth-generation Mohawk ironworker, told the Smithsonian in 2002, *“A lot of people think Mohawks aren’t afraid of heights; that’s not true. We have as much fear as the next guy. The difference is that we deal with it better. We also have the experience of the old timers to follow and the responsibility to lead the younger guys. There’s pride in walking iron.”*

Mohawk Ironworkers (3 of 4)

The Mohawk tradition of ironworking began in the mid-1880s. They were hired as unskilled laborers to build a bridge over the St. Lawrence River onto Mohawk land. Quickly, they earned a reputation for being hard workers on high steel, earning the nickname “skywalkers.”

The gigantic skyscrapers of the 1920s and 1930s were framed with steel columns, beams, and girders fitted together by four-man riveting teams. They each took turns firing rivets in forges, tossing, bracing, and hammering them into place hundreds of feet above the ground, sometimes without helmets or safety lines.

Mohawk Ironworkers (4 of 4)

In the 1960s, when New York City announced plans for the World Trade Center, which would be the tallest in the world, hundreds of Mohawk men played a vital role in the construction.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the towers, descendants of the original ironworkers returned to the structure to aid in rescue and cleanup at ground zero.

Lynn Beauvais, a Kahnawake resident, explained, *“My brother Kyle went in eight hours after the towers came down. My grandfather had worked on the construction of the towers and retired from that job. My brothers worked on their final demolition and sent them to the scrapyard.”*

Fittingly, Mohawk ironworkers then helped build the new Freedom Tower, now known as One World Trade Center.

Conclusion

As the first people to live on the land we all cherish, American Indians and Alaska Natives have profoundly shaped our country's character and cultural heritage.

American Indians and Alaska Natives have built a legacy of professionalism and selfless service that inspires future generations.



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