NATIONAL AMERICAN INDIAN HERITAGE MONTH

Grounded in Tradition, Resilient in Spirit

November
November is National American Indian Heritage Month. It is a time to celebrate the rich and diverse cultures, traditions, and histories of American Indians and Alaskan Natives, the first peoples of the United States.
Cherokee Indian and NASA physicist, J. C. Elliott-High Eagle, authored the legislation for American Indian Awareness Week. It was signed in 1976, making October 10-16 the first official week of national recognition for the American Indian since the founding of the Nation. This set a precedent which was later followed by public laws that expanded the observance to what we now know as National American Indian Heritage Month.
This year, the Society of American Indian Government Employees has selected the theme “Grounded in Tradition, Resilient in Spirit.”

This presentation describes American Indian and Alaskan Native population, tribes, and national sovereignty.

Finally, it honors: Joseph Robert Toahty, the Alaska Territorial Guard, Laura Beltz Wright, and Sergeant First Class John R. Rice.
According to the 2020 U.S. Census, the nation’s population of American Indians and Alaskan Natives, including those of more than one race, was 9.7 million.

Currently, there are 574 federally recognized American Indian and Alaskan Native tribes and more than 100 state-recognized tribes across the United States.

Each have their own unique history, beliefs, governance structure, and culture.
SOVEREIGNTY

Sovereignty is the right of a nation or group of people to be self-governing, and it is the most fundamental concept that defines the relationship between the government of the United States and governments of American Indian/Alaskan Native tribes.

American Indians and Alaskan Natives are technically U.S. citizens first and have the additional option of becoming citizens of their tribe or village as enrolled tribal members.
Joseph R. Toahty came from a large and patriotic family. He had six brothers who fought in World War II. In an 1984 interview, he said, “At one time, my mother had a son in every branch of the Service.”

After graduating from the Haskell Institute for Native Americans in Lawrence, Kansas, he worked as a carpenter at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. He also served in the Kansas National Guard.

In June 1941, he enlisted in the U.S. Coast Guard. After the outbreak of World War II, he was deployed to the southwest Pacific becoming the first person of Pawnee descent to go to sea.
Toahty took part in the Battle of Guadalcanal, the first major land offensive by Allied forces in their fight against the Empire of Japan. As a machinist mate, he helped operate vessels transporting troops and supplies onto the beaches. His role in this historic battle made him the first Native American to both serve in a major U.S. naval offensive operation and set foot onto enemy territory during WWII. He nearly lost his life during the battle. A Japanese shell exploded in a foxhole where he had sought shelter. The explosion blasted him out of the foxhole and killed six of the seven men who were in there with him. After being treated at a field hospital, he quickly returned to active duty.
As with many other servicemen taking part in the Battle of Guadalcanal, Toahty contracted malaria. His case of malaria was especially severe. He was transferred back to the U.S. after 16 months in the Pacific Theater.

He continued to serve in the USCG stateside. As a widely acknowledged war hero (he was awarded the Asiatic-Pacific campaign ribbon with four stars for valor), he traveled extensively across the U.S. in war bond promotion tours.

Nearly four decades later, he was awarded the Purple Heart for wounds he received during WWII.
The Alaska Territorial Guard (ATG) was a military reserve force component of the U.S. Army. It was organized by U.S. Army Major Marvin “Muktuk” Marston. The units were created in 1942 during WWII out of the United States’ concern over enemy invasion of the territory of Alaska.

Serving without pay, Marston’s recruits were mostly rural Alaskan Natives. Women were also among the first volunteers for the newly formed Arctic Armed Force and were experts at surviving in harsh weather conditions.
The ATG brought together for the first time into a joint effort many ethnic groups: Aleut, Athabaskan, White, Inupiaq, Haida, Tlingit, Tsimshian, Yupik, and others.

The minimum enrollment age was officially 16, but members ranged from 80 years to (unofficially) as young as 12.

The ATG operated until 1947. Over 6,368 volunteers who served without pay were enrolled from 107 communities throughout Alaska in addition to a paid staff of 21, according to an official roster.

They patrolled 5,000 miles of Aleutian coastline and 200,000 miles of tundra to defend Alaska and provide intelligence on enemy operations. The ATG also rescued downed U.S. airmen.
Laura Beltz Wright was a member of the ATG. She delivered mail, sometimes using skis or a dog sled. She was known as the “best shot in the company,” according to Major Marston. She once hit a target 49 out of 50 times.

She and her fellow ATG members were not granted veteran status until 2000. Wright had passed away four years earlier. Her family accepted her discharge papers at a ceremony honoring ATG members. Sheila Ezell, Wright's granddaughter, told American Indian magazine, “I was very, very proud.”
Sergeant First Class John Raymond Rice “Walking in Blue Sky” was a Ho Chunk (Winnebago) Indian and a U.S. Army soldier killed in action while leading his squad in the Korean War in 1950.

He was killed during one of the most critical and heroic stands, the Battle of Tabu-dong. He was awarded the Bronze Star for heroism and the Purple Heart.

Rice had also previously served in the U.S. Marine Corps during WWII.
On August 28, 1951, during his funeral, a cemetery employee noticed there were American Indians at the service. After the military burial service, cemetery officials discovered that Rice himself was Native American. They stopped the burial, and made Rice’s wife Evelyn take his body away.

The event touched off a national episode. President Harry S. Truman responded and ordered his body be interred in Arlington National Cemetery.

Sergeant Rice was buried on September 5, 1951, nearly a year to the day after he died.
The Department of Defense along with the rest of our nation, celebrates the first people to live on the land we all value. American Indians and Alaskan Natives have bravely defended and shaped our country’s character and our cultural heritage.

A new generation has assumed this charge from their elders, and they continue to serve not only their individual Indian nations but the United States with dignity and honor as well.
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