

'We Answered the Call' fitting theme for this year's heritage month

Dayton Daily News (Ohio)

May 15, 2020 Friday

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Section: NEWS

Length: 784 words

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Body

This year's theme for the Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month is "We Answered the Call."

What a fitting theme we have this year as we are confronted by a new reality. During this unprecedented time in our military history, we are faced with COVID-19. This global health pandemic is affecting millions of people around the world. But whether at the front lines of war in a foreign country or staging temporary military hospitals across our nation, our brothers and sisters continue to answer the call.

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have fought and served on behalf of the United States as far back as the Civil War. For generations, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have continued to build a proud legacy that signifies the spirit of our nations. We represent nearly 50 countries and ethnic groups, with distinct cultures, beliefs, and practices. Each country is rich in history and tradition. Our proud heritage encompasses the entire world and has dramatically shaped American history.

Please allow me to share some examples:

Asian-Pacific American women first entered military service during World War II. The Women's Army Corps or W.A.C., recruited 50 Japanese American and Chinese American women, sending them to specialized training schools. Twenty-one of these women were assigned to the Military Intelligence Center at Camp Ritchie, Maryland. They examined and interpreted key confiscated Japanese documents, extracting information pertaining to military plans. Maggie Gee and Hazel Ying Lee were two of the first Chinese Americans in the Women Air Force Service Pilots or W.A.S.P. program, established in the United States Army Air Force in 1943.

As of 2016, 33 Asian-Pacific Americans have received the Medal of Honor. The first Medal of Honor recipient of Asian-Pacific American descent was U.S. Army Private Jose Nisperos, a Filipino from the Philippine Scouts during World War I. Twenty-one of the 24 Medal of Honor recipients during World War II were Japanese Americans serving with the 100th Infantry Battalion. In the Korean War, two Native Hawaiians were awarded the Medal of Honor. During the Vietnam War, 35,000 Asian Americans were deployed to South Vietnam, with a total of 139 Asian American servicemen dying during the conflict. Three of the servicemen were posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

As of April 2017, 62 out of the 2,346 recorded deaths in Operation Enduring Freedom were Asian American or Pacific Islanders. Additionally, 390 Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders were wounded.

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Each of these individuals has their own story of trials and tribulations growing up in an Asian American or Pacific Islander family. Some were children of immigrants that came to the United States seeking a better way of life for themselves and their children. Some chose the path of service to fulfill their dreams and honor their families.

I come from a family who have proudly served their country. My grandfather served four years in the Army after high school in the late 1940s after World War II. I am the son of a sailor, my American father was born in Michigan and served 20 years in the U.S. Navy. He retired in 1991 as a chief petty officer. His first tour of duty in the Navy was in the Philippines where he met my mother and subsequently, where I was born.

I am also proud to be a second-generation "chief" in my family. My oldest daughter is currently a senior airman in the Air Force Reserve, and she is in the same career field as her old man, an Air Force medic. My family represents four generations who have served or are currently serving in the armed forces. We are a proud family that answered our nation's call!

I would like to share and excerpt from President Ronald Reagan's 1981 proclamation:

"Commonly, immigrants have come to American shores with few material possessions, relying on initiative, hard work and opportunity as the keys to success and prosperity in their new nation. Asian and Pacific Americans have been squarely within this tradition. Overcoming great hardships, they have lived the American dream, and continue as exemplars of hope and inspiration not only to their fellow Americans, but also to the new groups of Asian and Pacific peoples who even now are joining the American family. The United States owes a debt of gratitude to Asian and Pacific Americans for their contributions to the culture, heritage and freedom of the nation we together love and serve."

Our predecessors left us with a strong foundation and proud heritage. Let us keep this in mind as we walk a new path that is filled with unknown challenges and uncertainty. Let us once again draw up the courage and strength to answer our nation's call!

Load-Date: May 16, 2020