Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month 2017

“Unite Our Voices by Speaking Together”

Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month

The rich heritage of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders spans the world and the depths of America's history.

Generation after generation, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have forged a proud legacy that reflects the spirit of our Nation—a country that values the contributions of everyone—who call America home.

Through times of hardship and in the face of enduring prejudice, these women and men have persisted and forged ahead to help strengthen our Union.

Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month

Since 1992, May has been designated to recognize the personal achievements and valuable contributions to the American story by Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

We celebrate the cultural traditions, ancestry, native languages, and unique experiences represented among more than 56 ethnic groups (speaking over 100 languages) from Asia and the Pacific Islands who live in the United States.

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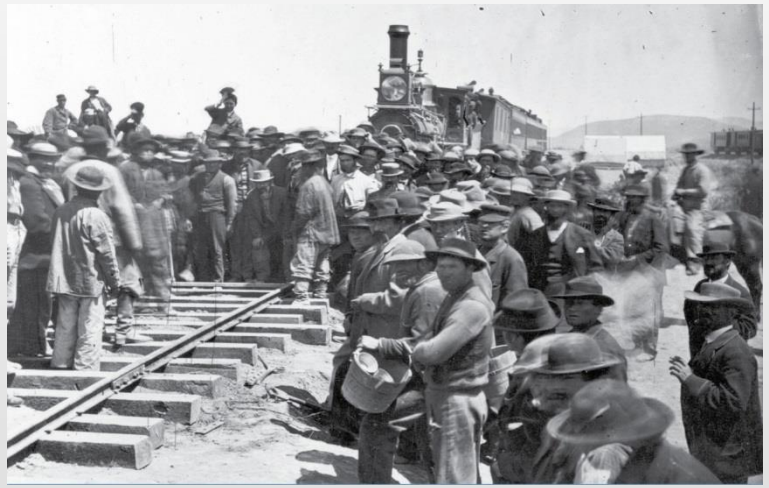

The month of May was chosen to commemorate the immigration of the first Japanese to the United States on May 7,1843, and to mark the anniversary of the transcontinental railroad completion on May 10,1869. The majority of the workers who laid the tracks of that nation-unifying railway were Chinese immigrants.

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The Federal Asian Pacific American Council has selected the 2017 theme: *"Unite Our Voices by Speaking Together"*.

This presentation provides snapshots that briefly cover the integral role played by the many Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders who helped shape and defend this nation.

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Florence Smith Finch, the daughter of an American soldier and a Filipino mother, was working for the U.S. Army during World War II when the Japanese occupied the Philippines.

She joined the underground resistance movement and smuggled food, medicine, and supplies to American captives. Eventually, she was arrested by the Japanese, tortured, and sentenced to three years imprisonment.

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After liberation by American forces, Finch returned to the U.S. aboard a United States Coast Guard (USCG) transport. She enlisted in the USCG to *"avenge the death of her late husband,"* a Navy PT boat crewman killed at Corregidor.

Seaman First Class Finch was the first USCG Women's Reserve member to receive the Asian-Pacific Campaign ribbon for her service in the Philippines.

At the end of the war, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In 1995, the USCG named a building on Sand Island, Hawaii after her.

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Major Kurt Chew-Een Lee, the son of Chinese immigrants, was said to have been one of the first officers of Asian ancestry in the Marine Corps.

In 1950, machine-gun platoon leader Lee struck out ahead of his unit in the mountains of Northeast Korea. They were facing advancing Chinese troops deployed to aid North Korean forces.

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By drawing enemy fire and yelling phrases in Mandarin, Lee confused and exposed the position of Chinese units. His bravery enabled his unit to take a Chinese-occupied base, despite their significantly lower numbers.

He earned the Navy Cross and the Silver Star, two of the military's highest combat decorations for valor.

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"His exploits in Korea were numerous. He was very successful in holding open a pass to allow our people to escape from the Chosin Reservoir, which is probably one of the greatest feats of military maneuvering in Korea," said fellow soldier, Jim Kunkle.

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Lee went on to serve in the Vietnam War and was awarded the Purple Heart with gold star.

His heroics have been recounted in books and a documentary film. Still, when Lee was interviewed in 2010 about his illustrious military career and his bravery, he said, *"I am most proud of being able to train future generations of Marines."*

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Tulsi Gabbard was raised by a Hindu mother and a Catholic father in *"a multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-faith family."*

An advocate for environmental policy, Gabbard successfully ran for the Hawaii State Legislature in 2002, becoming its youngest person ever elected.

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A year later, Gabbard joined the Hawaii National Guard. In 2004, she volunteered to deploy with her fellow soldiers, becoming the first state official to voluntarily step down from public office to serve in a war zone.

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She served two tours of duty in the Middle East, and she continues her service as a Major in the Army National Guard. She said, *"In the military, I learned that leadership means raising your hand and volunteering for the tough, important assignments."*

In 2013, she made history as the first female combat veteran, first Hindu, and first female of Samoan ancestry to become a member of Congress.

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Captain Sunita Lyn “Suni” Williams, of Indian-Slovenian descent, served as an American astronaut and United States Navy officer.

“Happenstance” is Williams’ answer to the question of how she became an astronaut. *“I thought that only really, really smart people become astronauts,”* she said. *“I didn’t know anything about the astronaut program.”*

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At the Naval Academy, she aspired to become a Navy diver, but there was only one opening for a woman diver. Selection was based on class ranking. Williams graduated somewhere in the middle of her class, so someone ahead of her in line took the spot.

She decided on flight school instead. Again, there were only a couple of spots available to female jet pilot candidates, but she wasn't ranked high enough; she ended up in helicopters.

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Williams became the test pilot for her squadron. At test pilot school she got her first glimpse of NASA. She applied and was turned down. She accepted orders to Italy for her next Navy tour when NASA called.

She now holds several NASA records, including the longest spaceflight by a woman (195 days), total spacewalks by a woman (seven) and the most spacewalk time for a woman (50 hours, 40 minutes).

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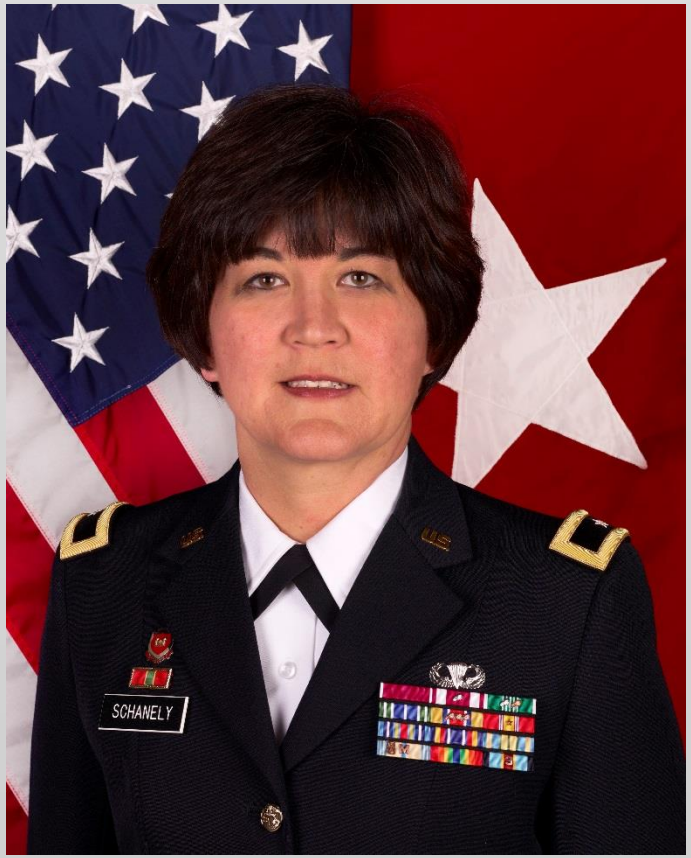

Brigadier General Miyako Schanely made history as the first female Army Reserve engineer, and the second Japanese-American woman promoted to General Officer in 2013.

She hopes her career can serve as an example for younger soldiers—especially women—noting the engineering field is populated mostly by men.

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Schanely credits her military career as a reflection of her family's military heritage, a proud tradition going back to World War II. Her mother and her father both served in the Air Force. Her stepfather, an Army warrant officer, performed counterintelligence work in the Pacific at a time when the rest of his family was forced into an internment camp.

In 2016, she became the Commanding General of the 102nd Training Division; and Deputy Commanding General for Mobilization and Training at the U.S. Army Maneuver Support Center, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.

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In 2014, Brigadier General Viet Luong became the first general in the history of the U.S. military that was born in Vietnam.

Luong came to the United States as a 10-year-old child in 1975 during Operation Frequent Wind after the fall of Saigon.

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Luong said, *"I still remember that moment to this day, because as soon as we landed I looked at my dad and I said, uh, I said 'Dad, where are we at?' And he looked at me and he says, 'hey, we're aboard the American carrier USS Hancock.' And I say, 'well, what does that mean?' And he looked at me and he said, 'that means nothing in the world can harm you now.'"*

Luong made a decision on that carrier deck. *"People might not believe that, but, I knew right back then that I want[ed] to serve our country,"* he stated.

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"As a Vietnamese American, and as an immigrant, I am a symbol of democracy, of freedom, of justice, of our constitution." Luong said. *"I live everyday trying to live up to the honor and prestige of one of the owners of that."*

In addition to serving tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, he was also deployed to Kosovo and Bosnia over the course of his career.

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Harry Harris Jr. is the highest-ranking Asian-American in the history of the United States Navy, and the first to attain the rank of 4-star Admiral. He was promoted to Admiral in 2013 and assumed command of the U.S. Pacific Fleet.

He is the first Asian American to head the U.S. Pacific Fleet, the same office Admiral Chester Nimitz led to direct the Navy against the Japanese during World War II.

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Harris was born in Japan and raised in Tennessee and Florida. His mother did not teach him Japanese, wanting him to be totally immersed in American culture. She did, however, tell her son the story of the Japanese-American soldiers who heroically fought in Europe for the 442nd Regiment.

The story of these Nisei resonated with him. "*As a Japanese-American kid growing up in Tennessee, I needed role models,*" Harris said, looking back.

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In a speech before members of the 442nd Regiment Harris said, *"Today our nation draws her strength from those who served in the past, like these veterans of World War II. Our nation draws her strength from those who serve today….Those who serve are part of an unbroken chain linking Americans, generation to generation."*

Harris also holds the distinction as the Navy's current "Gray Owl"—the Naval Flight Officer who has held this designation for the longest period. He is also the current "Old Goat"—the longest-serving Naval Academy graduate still on active duty.

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As we commemorate Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month, we pay tribute to all the Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders who have strived for a brighter future for the next generation.

Together, let us recommit to embracing the diversity that enriches our Nation and to ensuring all our people have an equal chance to succeed in the country we love.

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