



RHUMB LINES

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November 1, 2011

American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month

"Our Navy recognizes that a multitude of unique backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives can help solve the many challenges our Navy faces. Harvesting this diversity of thought maximizes the value of our most important asset – our people."

– Chief of Naval Personnel Vice Adm. Scott Van Buskirk

The Navy joins the nation in observing [American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month](#). This month celebrates the cultures, histories and traditions of the indigenous peoples of North America, including parts of Alaska and the island state of Hawaii, and recognizes the significant contributions these first Americans made to the establishment and growth of the United States.

Service, Honor, Respect: Strengthening Our Cultures and Communities

Since 1776, American Indians have contributed their courage, determination and fighting spirit to help defend America's national interests. Today, American Indian and Alaska Native Sailors, officers and civilians represent the very best of our nation and reflect a [long legacy of service](#).

- American Indian Sailors served on Continental and state vessels during the War of Independence, and many tribes were involved in the War of 1812. During the [Civil War](#), as many as 20,000 American Indians contributed to Union and Confederate forces as auxiliary troops on both land and sea.
- In 1917, [Joseph James Clark](#) became the first American Indian to graduate from the U.S. Naval Academy. Admiral Clark, an Oklahoma Cherokee, achieved fame as a pioneer in naval aviation and carrier-attack strategy. He was promoted to rear admiral during World War II and full admiral upon his retirement in 1953.
- During [World War II](#), more than 1,900 American Indian and Native Alaskan Sailors and Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES) volunteered, and more than 375 Marine [Navajo Code Talkers](#) transmitted messages by telephone and radio in their native language, saving the lives of countless troops and helping win numerous island battles. This code was never cracked by the Japanese.
- Twenty American Indians and Alaska Natives have received the [Medal of Honor](#) for heroism above and beyond the call of duty, including Engineman Second Class Michael E. Thornton, a Cherokee. Petty Officer Thornton was directly responsible for saving the life of his superior officer at the risk of his own life while participating in a daring operation against enemy forces in the Republic of Vietnam Oct. 31, 1972.

Remaining Connected – Recognizing the Value of Diversity

The Navy's diversity policy includes sustained engagement with many diverse groups. The Navy supports organizations recognizing the accomplishments of American Indians and Alaska Natives, including:

- The [American Indian Science and Engineering Society](#) (AISES), which works to increase the representation of American Indian and Alaska Natives in engineering, science and other related technology disciplines.
- The [Society of American Indian Government Employees](#) (SAIGE), whose goal is to promote recruitment, retention, development and advancement of American Indian and Alaska Native government employees.

Key Messages

- American Indians and Alaska Natives have made remarkable contributions to our nation's identity, and the Navy proudly embraces their rich heritage.
- Diversity of the thoughts, ideas, and competencies of our people keeps our Navy strong and empowers the protection of the freedoms and opportunities we enjoy every day.
- Diversity has made our nation and Navy stronger. To benefit the most from that diversity, every individual, military or civilian, must be encouraged and enabled to reach his or her full potential.

Facts & Figures

- Today, more than 17,000 active duty, Reserve, and civilian members of the Navy Total Force declare themselves American Indian or Alaska Native.
- According to the [U.S. Bureau of the Census](#), 4.5 million American Indian and Alaska Natives comprise 1.5 percent of the total U.S. population.
- Explore more information on the history of American Indians and Alaska Natives and their remarkable contributions to the Navy at <http://www.history.navy.mil>.