

VFW Celebrates Asian American Pacific Islander Veterans

Dating back to the Revolutionary War, veterans of Asian or Pacific Island descent have defended the US in battle

May 16, 2023

Since the early 1990s, May has been designated as Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. It is a time to celebrate the achievements of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders on behalf of the U.S.

Veterans of Asian or Pacific Island descent have been serving in the U.S. military since the Revolutionary War. The first to receive the Medal of Honor was Army Pvt. Jose Nisperos for his actions on Sept. 24, 1911. Some 31 Asian American and Pacific Islanders have received the MOH.

The VFW takes this opportunity to highlight veterans of prominence throughout history hailing from Asia and/or the Pacific Islands.

“From their service with John Paul Jones in the Revolutionary War, Andrew Jackson in the battle of New Orleans to Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, Asian Americans have served our country with honor and distinction,” said Sr. Vice Commander-in-Chief Duane Sarmiento, a Filipino-American.

FRANCIS B. WAI

Born in Hawaii to a Chinese immigrant and a native Hawaiian in 1917, Francis Wai was an athlete in many sports. He attended college at the University of California, Los Angeles in 1937. After earning his bachelor’s degree in economics, he joined the Hawaii Army National Guard, which became the 34th Infantry Regiment when activated.

Landing at Red Beach on Leyte in the Philippines on Oct. 20, 1944, Wai discovered U.S. troops were pinned down on the open beach. He took charge and began the move inland without cover. During the advance, Wai determined the locations of enemy strong points by

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deliberately exposing himself to draw their fire. He was killed while advancing on the last Japanese pillbox. Because of his heroism that day, Wai was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor, making him the only Chinese American to be awarded the nation's highest military decoration.

HAZEL LEE

The daughter of Chinese immigrants who moved to Portland, Oregon, Hazel Lee knew she wanted to become a pilot after she experienced her first flight in 1932. Lee became the first Chinese American female pilot to fly for the U.S. military. She was one of two Asian-American members of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), the other being fellow Chinese American Margaret Gee.

Lee qualified to fly for the Air Transport Command because she had prior flight training and was issued a permit by the Army. In 1944, Lee died two days after a crash with another airplane on a runway in Great Falls, Montana.

TOMAS MATEO CLAUDIO

Army Pvt. Tomas Mateo Claudio was born in 1892 in Morong, Rizal Province of the Philippines. During WWI, Claudio first served with the 41st Infantry Division in the trenches and later with reserve units near Paris. On June 29, 1918, Claudio was serving in K Co., 28th Inf. Regt., 1st Inf. Div., when he was killed during the battle of Chateau-Thierry. He was the first and only Filipino American to die during the Great War.

ERIC SHINSEKI

A Vietnam War veteran, Eric Shinseki claims the title of the first Asian-American four-star general. Of Japanese heritage, Shinseki did two tours in Vietnam: one with the 25th Infantry Division and the other with the 9th Infantry Division. He was awarded three Bronze Stars for Valor and two Purple Hearts.

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While serving as a forward artillery observer during one Vietnam deployment, Shinseki stepped on a land mine, which blew off the front of one of his feet. After nearly a year recovering, he returned to active duty in 1971. Shinseki became the Army's 28th Vice Chief of Staff on Nov. 24, 1998, then became its 34th Chief of Staff on June 22, 1999. Shinseki retired on June 11, 2003, at the end of his four-year term. He became the first Asian American Secretary of Veterans Affairs in 2009.

TULSI GABBARD

A U.S. Army Reserve officer, Tulsi Gabbard became the first Samoan-American voting member of Congress. She served Hawaii's 2nd congressional district from 2013 to 2021.

Gabbard, a Life member of VFW Post 2875 in Honolulu, served in a field medical unit of the Hawaii Army National Guard while deployed to Iraq from 2004 to 2005. She later deployed to Kuwait from 2008 to 2009 with an Army MP platoon.

TAMMY DUCKWORTH

A retired Army National Guard lieutenant colonel, Sen. Tammy Duckworth was elected as the junior senator from Illinois in 2017. Not only is Duckworth the first Thai-American woman elected to Congress, she is the only person born in Thailand to be elected to Congress. Duckworth joined the Army Reserve Officers' Training Corps in 1990 as a graduate student at George Washington University. She later became a commissioned officer in the U.S. Army Reserve in 1992 and trained to fly helicopters. As a member of the Army Reserve, Duckworth went to flight school and transferred to the Army National Guard. In 1996, Duckworth entered the Illinois Army National Guard.

In 2004, Duckworth was serving in Iraq when her Black Hawk helicopter was hit by an Iraqi rocket-propelled grenade. She lost both legs and some mobility in her right arm. She became the first female double amputee from the war. Duckworth, a Life member of VFW Post 2149 in Wood Dale, Illinois, was granted a medical waiver to continue serving in the Illinois Army National Guard for another 10 years until she retired as a lieutenant colonel in 2014.