WHY WE SERVE: NATIVE AMERICANS IN THE U.S. ARMED FORCES

Allen K. Hoe: E komo mai i ke kīnana hale. Welcome to this sacred place.

Announcer: Veterans please come forward.

Cicero Gasparini: Why did I choose to serve? I wanted to do the right thing.

Willow Gonzalez: I chose to serve to follow in my dad's footsteps.

Brooke Wiley: We grew up poor. We had no money.

Alicia Starova: I had the opportunity to choose to serve. Not everyone had that choice.

Bob Red Elk: We have a long history of Native veterans. More than any other people.

Janette Conger: We are the first nation and we will defend our land no matter what.

Robert Eder: You look at the red stripes on that flag that America so boldly flies. Those high axioms they call equal justice and treaties. Our ancestors fought for that standard of law. They fought for that standard of belief.

James Rush: We're used to serving our tribe, serving our people.

Ed Zapata: We want to be recognized, not just as somebody who serves but who we are.

Shane Ortega: The old people say that when a warrior goes to war, he leaves a part of his soul there on those grounds. My first deployment was back in 2006 in Iraq. I had just turned eighteen years old. I'm sitting in this Humvee in a machine gun turret, and we're patrolling our area of operation. The squad leader, he sees something on the side of the road. He gets out of the truck and he goes to check it out. And he kicks what's a muffler. I watch as he loses his legs, he loses a piece of his skull and significant burns to his face. That was basically my first experience in action.

Miyasha Hillaire: My relationship to the water is strong. Just being here, hearing it, smelling it, watching how it changes. It takes you places. I truly believe that it connects us. When I was fifteen, I got to be a part of the first Canoe Journey. Canoe Journey is a celebration of Native history and that connection with the water. It always starts with one tribe and we paddle from tribe and nation to tribe and nation, going as far south as Oregon to Canada. I paddled, I navigated, we sang songs, shared stories, and ultimately came home to the Salish Sea. I asked myself, “How can I be on the water and support myself? How can I be on the water and help protect it?” And so, of course, the coast guard was just natural.

I come from a hundred generations of people that inhabited this place. I served with the army, my father served in the army, and both my grandfathers served in the army. I grew up in the sixties, surfing big waves, racing motorcycles. And Uncle Sam thought that I was having too much fun on the beach, and so I was drafted in 1966. I volunteered to go into combat and, sure enough, within ten days I got my orders to go to Vietnam. Combat medics don’t last very long in Vietnam. But it was a choice that I had made. It had nothing to do with a patriotic reason or motherhood or apple pie. I just needed to prove to myself that I could be a good soldier.

**Mniluzahe Berg:** That was Grandma Sally. My mom's mom. I want to honor her. Mniluza Berg emáčiyapelo. Denver a wathí Pine Ridge emátaŋhaŋ. Oglála Lakȟóta wičháša na mniwáŋča-akičhita héčhe ma. I grew up mostly in Denver, Colorado, with one sister and two brothers. Times sometimes were tough, you know. We did have to move because we weren’t able to afford rent, and I think I went to eleven different schools. My mom grew up in Pine Ridge. She was a big part of the American Indian Movement. And she valued our culture. We knew Pine Ridge was our home. We'd go back and visit our grandma and grandpa and see our cousins and go to the powwows. No matter what I went through, no matter how many times I moved, it empowered me to know that this is our land. But growing up here in Denver as a Native American, it was tough. We had to band together. This is my brother Black Horse. This is one of the last photos of me and him together. Black Horse was a big part of my life. He was always pushing me and building me up to the person I am. And one day, it was August 19, ‘99. He was struggling at that time. He developed what was bipolar. Me and him got into a fight. And my mom called the cops because she thought that they would calm everything down. He took off running and I remember I followed him outside and I could hear the siren. And I didn’t see him. He didn't come back. I got home. And I remember my dad came out and he said, "There's been an accident. Something happened to Black Horse. When the cops went to arrest him, he fought them and they shot him and they killed him." And...and that was life-changing for me. I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. I called home back to Pine Ridge and I talked to an elder and he just said, "Stay strong. You have to stay strong." And all of a sudden, my whole mindset changed. That happened in August, and January 24, I was on a flight flying to Great Lakes, Illinois, and going into the navy.

**Phoenix Johnson:** My name is Phoenix. I'm of the Tlingit and Haida Nation. I'm a Two Spirit Indigenous veteran, served active duty air force. When I was six years old, I remember my favorite movie was *Top Gun*. I was just totally enthralled with the fighter jets, and I think I wanted to be Tom Cruise. I told myself one day, I'm going to work with fighter jets. Three days after my eighteenth birthday I left for boot camp for the air force. For me, it was my first experience into adulthood. I remember everything happening so quickly. I left for boot camp. I was in training. I got to my first base and I was shown to my barracks, and they closed the door and I just stood there. And I looked around the room and I thought, "This is it. This is my life now." I don't really feel like I was prepared for what life was like as a Native woman serving in the military. And I had to figure it out on my own, the hard way.
**Shane Ortega:** Both of my parents are military. I've lived everywhere from Pennsylvania to Florida to Kentucky. And now I'm out here at Fort Hall, Idaho. My childhood was pretty... Being poor, being brown and, you know, Afro-Indigenous, and growing up in this really complex religious environment of the south... It was a lot to overcome. We can account for people in my family serving since the Civil War all the way to the present. However, for me, joining the service was an economic opportunity. I was seventeen years old and I was basically doing anything I could to get by, to pay my bills, and to support my life. I have deep appreciation for the level of sacrifice and personal commitment that I gave up to do that and how it did revolutionize my life. Boot camp I didn't find challenging at all, except this sort of regimen of the Western binary system. These extremes of just the masculine and feminine, and realizing that I couldn't authentically be myself in completion. When I went in the service as a female soldier, my physical capacity was much more than that of other female soldiers. I transitioned to male while I was still in the service. The military at its core applauds masculinity. Misogyny is still rampant. I chose to stay past my contract because I knew that there was capacity to make change. And, oftentimes, we do say that people within the system don't change the system. That's not always true. I started working at the ACLU and doing all that legislation work. And, together, we ended the trans military ban.

**Miyasha Hillaire:** I first came to this building thirty years ago. I was able to walk inside. An enlisted member had a bunch of rifles on the counter and I was, like, "What are you doing? This may be something that I want to be a part of." I knew in my heart and my spirit that I was going to serve. When I first stepped on base, it was very exciting. I get chills now just going back. My first base was at Kodiak, Alaska. I got to spend a couple of years there. And then I served in the search and rescue station in Seattle, Washington. To be able to serve right in the same waters that I paddled a canoe to, it was really awesome. And I loved it. That passion of taking care of life, you know, grew into taking care of people.

**Mniluzahe Berg:** When I graduated boot camp, our first mission was Australia, Singapore, Hawaii. And then we went to Hong Kong. Growing up in Denver, I'd never seen myself traveling out of the state and country. And all of a sudden I'm overseas and hanging out in the middle of Hong Kong with my navy buddies. It did fill a void. I always carried tobacco with me and I would make tobacco ties. My rack had a star quilt on it, and I had to keep up with my Lakota traditions and spirituality because that's what was really my base and foundation for me staying alive and moving forward. After my five-and-a-half years, I wanted to go back home and help my people. I had a dream. My brother Black Horse came and he said, "I need you. Now it's time for you to become a cop." So then I went and became a cop. I was a cop on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. I let the hate die with me by me stepping to that challenge that he asked me to do.
Allen K. Hoe: Let me have your attention real quick. I have here something that is very special personally to me. This piece of cloth, to most people it just looks like an old piece of colored fabric. My team and I carried this flag in combat in Vietnam. Over my tour, I watched nearly fifty of the guys that stood alongside of me not come home. And on Mother's Day, 1968, I lost eighteen men. One of the things that I learned as a combat veteran is that, at the end of the day, surviving combat has nothing to do with how good a soldier you are or how much training you've had. At the end of the day, it's just simply luck. I am the proud father of two sons, Nainoa and Nakoa. Nainoa, which actually is appropriately pronounced in Hawaiian language “Na'ilono’a,” means “one without limits.” Nainoa always was fascinated with army stuff. Sure enough, he came home one day and said that he was going to join the army. He earned every award. He broke every record. His accomplishments in his unit are still to this day unmatched. My older son, when he and his team went to Iraq, they said, “Send the flag. We want to carry it in honor of those men that your dad served with in Vietnam.” And...part of the legacy of this flag is that he was killed the day that he was carrying this flag in combat. As a combat veteran, I always thought, however foolish that thought may have been, that I could transfer some of my luck to my sons. Luck is luck. It's not something that you get to share, you get to, you know, pass on. That was hard to accept.

Phoenix Johnson: Being an Indigenous woman, having an identity of erasure, it just adds that much more to that sense of irrelevancy. We're taught to present ourselves a certain way. We're taught to speak in a certain way. As a young person, nobody looked at me as a leader. I've had my brush with suicide. I've had my brush with a mental health crisis. That is what drove me to participate in something like military service. Because of the military, I was separated from my culture and my identity. But because of my experience and my service in the military is what pushed me to root myself down in my culture and my identity. And to be able to make that journey back home has been incredibly healing. “Ona, are you ready to go?”

Ona: “Uh-huh.”

Phoenix: My daughter's name is Ona.

Ona: “I love you.”

Phoenix: “I love you.” She was really young when I really started engaging with the community. I think that one of the reasons we see a higher rate of service of Indigenous people is because we're so dedicated to our homeland and we're so dedicated to serving our societies.

Speaker: “We lift again our hands to you, and we say, ‘Aatlein gunalchéesh. Aan yatkiu sani. Aatlein gunalchéesh.”

Phoenix: It's really important to me that she sees her mother being strong and engaging with the community in a positive way. So I want to make sure that I took my lessons from the service and make sure that she has opportunities I never had.

Shane Ortega: I was medically retired from the United States Army in 2016. What is it like transitioning past tense back to civilian life? I haven't transitioned past tense back to civilian life. It's a constant process that I will be in for the rest of my life. I still see a psychologist for my complex PTSD. I have to stay on top of my own personal health care needs. I will be in recovery state for the rest of my life. However, I look at other veterans who had life-altering, forever-changing injuries. I am so blessed with resiliency. You have to be grateful for where you're at.
Mniluzahe Berg: I've been blessed with four kids. "Stay with him, stay with him! Good job." And I try to raise them like how my mom raised me, with our Lakota way of life and knowledge that I have. I try to make sure I pass that down. And I want them to be proud of that and to acknowledge that. And it is in our lineage. We come from warrior societies. And that's something that's in us. We go and we learn these skills that we're able to bring back so that we can protect our community. That when our community needs us and calls upon us, we're able to be there for them. "Okay what do we say?"

Child: "Who has it better than us?"
All: "Nobody!"
Child: "Who has it better than us?"
All: "Nobody! 1, 2, 3 Bergs!"

Allen K. Hoe: Nainoa's, younger brother, his name is Nakoa. Strong, brave, courageous. He is also serving in the U.S. Army. Of my two boys, he's really had to be the stronger, the braver, the more courageous. What does it mean to be a warrior? I'm not sure I've really thought of it in those terms. To me, it's just who I am.

Miyasha Hillaire: I think that Native people serve because of our spirit. A lot of us are true warriors at heart. We carry generations in our spirit.

Mniluzahe Berg: Our ancestors, they never gave up and they always pushed forward. And they did that for me. They did that for who I am. They showed us how to be strong. They showed us how to be resilient. We've got to show our future generations that that's what we have to be. And that's what we have to do.

Shane Ortega: These warriors who laid down their lives, who sacrificed their time to protect this nation-state, without ever being acknowledged fully, even to this day.

Phoenix Johnson: I think it's really important to challenge the stereotype of what a Native veteran is. We're part of such a small percentage of the population, and it comes with a mentality and an entire experience.

Allen K. Hoe: There have always been things in our country not done right. How they've treated Native Hawaiians, how they've treated Native Americans. We all have huge challenges, but at the end of the day, it's an incredible legacy.
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CREDITS

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(In Order of Appearance)

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Alicia Starova (Tsimshian), U.S. Marine Corps
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Janette Conger (Crow Creek Sioux), U.S. Army
Robert Eder (Oglala Yanktonai), U.S. Navy
James Rush (Nuu-Chah-Nulth), U.S. Marine Corps
Ed Zapata (Tlingit), U.S. Marine Corps
Larson Frank (Yakama), U.S. Army
Darla Smith (Makah/Chehalis/Yakama), U.S. Navy
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Mniluzaha Berg (Oglala Lakota), U.S. Navy
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Schofield Barracks, Hawai’i

“Bless Our Soldiers”

“Peace for Me and You”
Performed by Lee Juan Tyler (Shoshone-Bannock Tribes)
Fort Hall Indian Reservation, Idaho

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Lummi Nation
Four Winds American Indian Council
Tall Bull Memorial Grounds
Denver Indian Center
United Indians of All Tribes
Daybreak Star Indian Cultural Center
Standing Rock Sioux Tribe
P.T.S.D. Veteran Athletes
Snoqualmie Indian Tribe
Seattle Indian Health Board
Hawai’i State Veterans Cemetery
National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific

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