



THE SECRETARY OF THE NAVY
WASHINGTON DC 20350-1000

April 30, 2024

MEMORANDUM FOR DISTRIBUTION

SUBJECT: Department of the Navy 2024 Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month

The Department of the Navy (DON) celebrates Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month in May, paying homage to Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders who have resiliently protected our Nation's lands and seas. This year's theme, "Advancing Leaders Through Innovation," provides an opportunity to highlight the AAPI military and civilian leaders who have made lasting social and technological advancements within the DON.

AAPI innovation dates back to May of 1869, when thousands of Chinese Americans helped build the first transcontinental railroad - a major technological feat of the 19th century. During World War II (WWII), Marietta Chong Eng, a Navy occupational therapist paved new paths for veterans by aiding and helping to rehabilitate Sailors and officers who lost limbs during the war. Innovative and exemplary service was also demonstrated by leaders like Vicente T. Blaz. In 1941, Blaz was one of the many native Chamorros held in a detention camp during the Japanese occupation. He was freed in 1944 when the Marine Corps reclaimed Guam and was inspired to serve. In 1951, he commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the Marine Corps and was later awarded the Bronze Star Medal for his service during the Korean War. In 1972, he was the commanding officer of 9th Marine Regiment, one of the main units that liberated Guam during WWII and became the first person from Guam to reach the rank of Brigadier General in 1977. Historic AAPI leadership continued when in 1988, Robert K. U. Kihune made history as the first Native Hawaiian to reach the rank of Vice Admiral. He led half of the naval forces during the First Gulf War, when in command of Naval Surface Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet in 1998. Near the end of the 20th century, Rear Admiral Eleanor Mariano broke barriers as the first Filipino American to reach flag rank and the first woman in the military to be appointed as the White House Physician.

The barriers broken by past AAPI leaders created a foundation that continues to be felt into the 21st century as we witness the Department's exponential technological growth. Dr. Thomas C. Fu, Department Head of Sea Warfare and Weapons at the Office of Naval Research, exemplifies this ongoing innovation. He dedicates his efforts to investing in basic and applied research, as well as advanced technology development programs, ensuring our platforms and undersea weapons maintain their technological superiority.

Today, approximately 69,000 AAPI members serve in the DON with 46% active duty, 9% reserve, and 46% civilian. Their contributions strengthen the DON's future in technology and innovation. With sincerest gratitude, we recognize all the Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders who dedicate their expertise in service of our country.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Carlos Del Toro".

Carlos Del Toro

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