

Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month

“Advancing Leaders Through Opportunity”

Asian American Pacific Islander Month



The Department of Defense (DoD) pays tribute to the generations of Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) who have enriched our Nation's history through their countless contributions, vibrant cultures, and rich heritage.

Asian American Pacific Islanders



AAPI encompass a diverse group of cultures, ethnicities, and languages. They include those Americans who trace their ancestry to the Asian continent and the many Pacific island regions.

Theme/Presentation

The Federal Asian Pacific American Council designated the 2023 theme as, “*Advancing Leaders Through Opportunity.*”

Opportunity is defined as, “*a set of circumstances that make it possible to do something.*” Opportunity can be “*built, accessed, achieved, or given.*”

This presentation highlights retired U.S. Navy Lt. Commander Kimberly M. Mitchell, whose life circumstances exemplify opportunity.



The Baby in the Hat

In May 1972, near Quang Tri, South Vietnam, a wounded man found a baby on the side of a road. Lying in the arms of her dead mother, she was still trying to nurse. Unable to go on himself, the man put the baby in a hat and handed her over to South Vietnamese Marine, 2nd Lt. Bao Tran.

Tran was preparing to blow up a bridge before the Viet Cong could cross. He asked his commanding officer what to do. The reply was direct, “*You take care of her.*”

Tran took the baby to the nearest nunnery, 37 miles away. During their journey, he poured water from his canteen onto his fingers and let her lick the droplets.

Tran Thi Ngoc Bich



At the Sacred Heart orphanage in Da Nang, Sister Angela Nguyen received the baby and said to Tran, “*You must fulfill your responsibilities. You must give her something of yourself.*”

“*What would you like to call her?*”
Nguyen asked Tran.

He gave her his last name and added Ngoc Bich (Precious Pearl).

U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. James Mitchell

From the orphanage Ngoc Bich was adopted by U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. James Mitchell. He and his wife renamed her Kimberly.

“My mother and father didn’t have any children prior to my dad being deployed to Vietnam. I think they just mentioned that if the opportunity came up to adopt a child, they would, and it didn’t matter if it was a boy or girl,” said Mitchell. “I was fortunate enough for him to say that day, ‘I’m gonna adopt this one. I’ll take this one.’”



U.S. Naval Academy

Mitchell's father encouraged her to consider joining one of the military service academies. Initially she thought of joining the U.S. Air Force to honor her father.

Mitchell shared in an interview, *"I started getting pamphlets about the Naval Academy and the programs that they had. Everything was in color, and everyone was smiling. And I was like, 'this looks like a lot of fun ... In the pictures of the Air Force Academy, there wasn't a whole lot of smiling.'"*



Navy Service

Mitchell served in the U.S. Navy for 17 years as a Surface Warfare Officer onboard surface ships and at shore commands.

During her service, she earned a master's degree in organizational management from George Washington University.

In her last two years on active duty, she worked as the Deputy Director of the Office of Warrior and Family Support for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.



Career

After departing the Navy in 2012, Mitchell became President and Co-Founder of the Dixon Center for Military and Veterans Services.

In July 2017, she moved to San Diego, where she became the first non-Vietnam Veteran and first woman selected as President & CEO of Veterans Village of San Diego.

In March 2020, Mitchell became the Senior Vice President for Military and Government Affairs for the National University System (NUS). She leads the NUS' innovative outreach efforts for the military, veteran, and military family educational degree and outreach programs.

Spirit of Service

Mitchell has worked with hundreds of communities and assisted thousands of organizations address the transition and reintegration challenges faced by service members, veterans, and military families.

“That call to serve is something greater than yourself. Some of them have some very interesting background stories and challenges that they overcame. I think it's just a great thing about America that our Armed Forces are able to bring in anybody who wants to serve,” said Mitchell.

She implores younger generations to serve the country and encourages them to be open to opportunity — to learn the stories of those who came before and who sacrificed all for our freedoms.

Conclusion

We celebrate Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month to honor and pay tribute to the Asian American and Pacific Islanders.

Their perseverance through adverse circumstances created opportunities and made a brighter future for the next generation of leaders.



In 2011, Mitchell reunited with Bao Tran, the Vietnamese officer who rescued her during the Vietnam War.

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