



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

Pacific Island Americans & the Coast Guard

Historical Chronology

1849

- Seventeen Hawaiian seaman sign-on to serve on board Revenue Cutter *C.W. Lawrence*, first cutter in the Pacific, for the final leg of a voyage from the East Coast to its new homeport of San Francisco. After African Americans, Native Americans and Hispanic Americans, Pacific Island-Americans are the longest-serving minority group in the Coast Guard.

1898

- In 1898, Congress passed legislation annexing the Hawaiian Islands as a U.S. territory.
- That same year, the U.S. annexes the former Spanish territory of Guam after the Spanish are defeated in the Spanish-American War.

1904

- In 1904, Revenue Cutter *Thetis* is stationed at Honolulu. For over 10 years, the cutter serves the Hawaiian Islands and Midway Island and signs-on Hawaiian crewmembers to serve in non-ranking enlisted jobs.
- By 1904, the eastern islands of Samoa had become the U.S. territory of American Samoa. As more Pacific islands became territories or protectorates of the U.S., their inhabitants became eligible to serve in the Coast Guard.

1906

- In 1906, Samuel Amalu joined the U.S. Lighthouse Service and became Hawaii's renowned dean of lighthouse keepers. He was the keeper of the Kilauea Light Station. Amalu, who took charge of the light on 9 April 1915, had the longest tenure of any light keeper at Kilauea serving there for ten years. By the time he reached the Kilauea light he had served as a keeper at the Kawaihae Light on the island of Hawaii and at Barber's Point Light on Oahu. A trailblazer among Hawaii's light keepers, Amalu laid a path of discipline and devotion to duty for subsequent lighthouse keepers.

1908

- In 1908, Manuel Ferreira joined the Lighthouse Service and served as the keeper of seven lighthouses during his career. He was born in 1885 and became known as "*one of the grand old men of Hawaiian lighthouse lore.*" He ultimately became the keeper of the Kauiki Head Light Station on Maui. In 1919 he rescued the crew of a Japanese fishing trawler that ran aground off Barber's Point, Hawaii, where Ferreira served as the light keeper. He was also instrumental in saving the schooner *Bianca* and its crew in 1923 when the ship lost its sails and was in danger of



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smashing on a reef. Ferreira was unable to launch the lighthouse skiff due to the high surf. Instead, he ran three miles to the nearest telephone and called for help. The USS *Sunadin* was dispatched and reached the wallowing schooner just in time to tow it from the jaws of destruction. From 1927 through 1929, he served as a keeper of the Molokai Light Station, located only two miles from the Kalaupapa Leper Settlement on the island of Molokai. He retired in 1946 after 38 years of service.

1917-1919

- Like numerous Pacific Islanders, Hawaiian James Kimokeo served during World War I. He served as a Water Tender on board Cutter *McCulloch* in 1917, during a collision that sank the cutter off the coast of California. Later, he served as a surfman at Alaska's only boat station located in Nome, Alaska, when the Spanish Flu Pandemic decimated the Native Alaskan population in that area.

1941-1945

- On 7 December 1941, Hawaiian-American Coast Guardsman Melvin Kealoha Bell manned the Diamond Head radio station during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, warning commercial vessels that a surprise attack was underway.
- In 1944, RM1 Bell advanced to a wartime rate of Chief Radioman, becoming the first Pacific Islander to make Chief Petty Officer. During this time, he served within the U.S. Navy's intelligence office helping crack the Imperial Japanese Navy's secret codes.
- Pacific Island men joined the Coast Guard as wartime Temporary Reservists. Coast Guard Temporary Reservist Duke Paoa Kahinu Mokoe Hulikohola Kahanamoku, also known as "The Big Kahuna," was considered Hawaii's greatest athlete, and became a film star and the father of international surfing.

1947

- Beginning in 1947, Palau, the Marshall Islands, Northern Mariana Islands and the islands of Micronesia, became part of the U.S. administered Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. In the post-war years, these territories became part of the Coast Guard's area of responsibility administered from bases in Hawaii, Guam and American Samoa. In addition, many young men and women from these trust territories joined the ranks of the Coast Guard.

1948

- On 26 July 1948, President Harry Truman ordered the integration of the armed forces of the United States with Executive Order 9981, which ensured greater access to officer and enlisted ranks by all minorities.

1949

- After World War II, CRM Melvin Bell's wartime rate was reduced to Radioman 1/class. However, in 1949, he was advanced to the permanent rate of Chief Electronics Technician, becoming first Pacific Islander advanced to the permanent rate of chief in the Coast Guard.



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1958

- In 1958, Melvin Bell advanced to ETCM, becoming the first minority Master Chief in the Coast Guard. He is also the first Pacific Island-American namesake of a Coast Guard cutter.

1968

- In 1968, Juan T. Salas became first Pacific Islander to graduate from the Coast Guard Academy and first Chamorro to graduate from any U.S. military academy. In addition to becoming the first Pacific Island American to graduate the Academy, he was also the first one to receive a Coast Guard officer's commission.

1977

- In 1977, Chamorro Ken J. Balajadia received his Coast Guard wings becoming the first Pacific Islander Coast Guard pilot. He had graduated Officer Candidate School in 1976, becoming the first known Pacific Islander to graduate from OCS, receiving his officer's commission before earning his wings. He flew Coast Guard C-130s for a few years before accepting a position as a civilian airline pilot.

1986

- In 1986, Juan Salas became the first Pacific Islander to command a cutter, CGC *Lipan* (1986-1988). In 1989, he became the first Pacific Islander to command the Coast Guard's Recruiting Division.

1990

- In 1990, Juan Salas was promoted to the rank of Captain becoming the first Pacific Islander to reach that rank. He had already been the first Pacific Islander to serve at every officer rank from ensign to commander.

1992

- In 1992, CAPT Salas became the first Pacific Islander to command the Marianas Section/Marine Safety Office/Captain-of-the Port office for Guam, a base later known as Sector Guam.
- In 1992, Juan Salas's son Matthew J. Salas became a cadet at the Coast Guard Academy making him and his father the first father-son Pacific Islander attendees of the Academy.

1996

- In 1996, Matthew Salas graduated from the Coast Guard Academy making him and his father the first father-son Pacific Islander Academy graduates and Coast Guard officers.

1997



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- On 1 June 1997, Francisco "Frank" Palacios, a Chamorro from the island of Saipan, advanced to F&S4 becoming the Service's first Pacific Island Chief Warrant Officer.

2008

- On 11 March 2008, Ensign Mark A. Unpingco became the first Chamorro Dive Officer of the Coast Guard after graduating from the Marine Engineering Dive Officer (MEDO) Course at the U.S. Navy Dive & Salvage Training Center in Panama City, Florida.
- In 2008, LCDR Matthew Salas became the first Chamorro to command a cutter (CGC *Sequoia*) homeported in Guam.
- In 2008, Christine Igisomar, from the island of Saipan, became the first Chamorro female graduate of the Coast Guard Academy.

2010

- In 2010, F&S2 Ifong Lee became the first Samoan Chief Warrant Officer in the Coast Guard. At that time, she was the only Pacific Island Chief Warrant Officer.

2012

- On 1 June 2012, Chief Warrant Officer Kilohana Akim became the first Hawaiian woman to make INV3 in the Coast Guard.

2017

- On 1 July 2017, Therese Morta Benavente became the first female Chamorro Master Chief Petty Officer in the U.S. Coast Guard. She was born and raised in Guam, where she joined the Coast Guard Reserves in April 1997 as a yeoman through the Direct Petty Officer Reserve Program.

2018

- In 2018, Hawaiian Kory Kahanamoku, great grandson of Duke Kahanamoku graduated from Officer Candidate School. In 2020, he received his Coast Guard aviation wings.

2019

- On 1 June 2019, YNCS Tafaoga Foalima Collins advanced to Master Chief becoming the first Pacific Islander of Samoan ancestry to do so in the Coast Guard.
- On 1 October 2019, LT Christine Igisomar was promoted to LCDR. A native of Saipan, she was the first Chamorro woman to achieve this rank in the Coast Guard. In 2020, she became the first Pacific Islander to serve as Aide to the Commandant.

Updated: 05/16/2020