

McAlester celebrates Armed Forces Day
with annual parade – Choctaw Nation well represented

Armed Forces Day in McAlester, Okla, historically brings out a large crowd of people celebrating patriotism and showing appreciation for military veterans, holding a downtown parade event.

“Since the Armed Forces Day parade was paused last year due to the pandemic, we are especially excited to honor the veterans in 2021, the 74th anniversary of the parade,” said Choctaw Councilman Robert Karr. “There are numerous tribal members in this area who are veterans, and the Choctaw Nation honors them throughout the year. This parade is a community effort to show how much the entire area appreciates them and all military men and women!”

In addition to being the 74th parade, this year also marks the 30th anniversary having the McAlester-based 445th Military Police Company of the Oklahoma National Guard being mobilized to Operation Desert Storm in the Middle East.

Marching bands, floats, flag-bearers and hundreds of individuals participated in the large celebration to show appreciation to the military men and women.

“I am honored to be here to pay tribute to our veterans. This day and this event is to show respect for the contributions and sacrifices they have made. Our veterans are of utmost importance to our country,” said Chief Gary Batton.

The Chief and Assistant Chief rode the parade route in a Hummer, in keeping with the Desert Storm theme of the parade.

Having an opportunity to talk with people who had served in the various branches of service was the highlight of the day for both Chief Batton and Assistant Chief Austin.

“It is a blessing to meet the many veterans who are here today and to be able to honor the men and women of the armed services. I am humbled when I hear their experiences, their stories. I am grateful for them and for their families,” said Assistant Chief Jack Austin.

The Choctaw Nation Community Center’s float followed the Chief and Assistant Chief in the parade, carrying tribal veterans of Pittsburg County. James Green, an Army veteran who was participating on the Choctaw float said this was the first time he had attended the parade in several years. “It has always been a big parade,” he noted. Other Choctaw veterans on the float included: Darrell Hampton, George Scott, Garry Cartlidge, Jack Haynes, John Pope, Chester Johnson, Bill Parker, Greg Hudson, John Labor, Leon Labor, Evan Staples, Greg Smitherman, Tray Ardesse and Walter Amos.

Tray Ardesse, retired U.S. Marine Corps Col. stated he really appreciated how the Nation honors the veterans. “People have figured out freedom isn’t free,” he said. Ardesse advocated for the care of veterans, “People get sent home wounded, and a lot of those wounds are not actually visible,” he said. “The true cost of this won’t be realized for a long time. I want to stress to the American people to really take care of our veterans. We have been at war for about 21 years – and we will continue to see effects on our veterans for a long time.”

The Choctaw Nation Color Guard helped lead the way for this year’s parade route, along with parade marshal U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer 5 Matt Fitter. The Choctaw Color Guard members who carried the flags for the parade were John Burleson, Shane Harper, Reggie McGirt, Kelly Taylor and Bob Ludlow. The Choctaw Princesses participated, and there was a

float from Choctaw Manufacturing and Defense Corp., a leader in the defense industry that is located in McAlester.