

Interview by Judy Allen on John Burleson by phone 2021

Honor Guard conceptor, leader throughout life

The original concept of the Choctaw Honor Guard began with a conversation between John Burleson and former Choctaw Nation Chief Greg Pyle. "I decided to wear my military uniform to the 1997 Veterans Day event at Tvshka Homma," said John. "Chief Pyle came up to me and said he had not realized I was a veteran. I told him 'Yes, and I think it would be a great thing if we had our own guard to honor our veterans.'"

John went on to tell Chief Pyle that he would be happy to volunteer to help get a group together and even assist and help train someone.

"About a month later, just before Christmas, Chief Pyle called and said, 'You are right and you are going to be in charge of the Guard. You have until May 2nd to get it all together.'"

John said he protested, telling the Chief he was a full-time worker at Choctaw Housing, and only meant to "assist", not "be in charge", but Chief Pyle insisted, and John Burleson was the new leader of the new Choctaw Color Guard. The annual Commemorative Trail of Tears Walk was scheduled for May 2, so the Guard had to get outfitted and trained in record time.

Getting people signed up wasn't difficult. John advertised through the Bishinik (now Biskinik) and through word-of-mouth. "Everyone was excited to join. We didn't even get paid for travel to training or travel to the first events, but there was such pride in being a part of the Color Guard!" There were 18 Choctaw Guard the first year.

John ran into a bit of difficulty when outfitting the Guard with uniforms and weapons. He found what he needed at Ft. Sill, but was told he couldn't purchase for "civilians" even though John told them the Guard were all veterans. John simply called a friend of both the tribe and himself, Lt. General Leroy Sisco. The retired General was a tremendous supporter of the idea of a Choctaw Color Guard. John said General Sisco made a phone call and the uniforms and weapons were suddenly available, along with anything else that was needed.

Now called the Choctaw Nation Honor Guard, processes have been streamlined. "Today, the Guard is able to order items we need from a catalogue. We all vote on our preference and we place the order," said John.

"We are all very proud of being a part of this. We are the boots on the ground – we represent the Choctaw Nation everywhere we go. We want to represent well with our appearance."

The Guard has been all across the U.S. "We have represented the Choctaw Nation at events from Bakersfield, Calif., to Washington, D.C.," said John.

The Honor Guard members rotate assignments and duties so it is fair to all of them on travel assignments. The members attend funerals, parades and special events. In 2019, John said the Guard attended over 50 funerals, but in 2020 only attended 12 or 15. "Because of COVID, the funeral homes were not able to call us – for a long period of time, funeral attendance was so limited, we couldn't go." He said he thought the Guard had only went to 2 parades in 2020 because of the virus.

John is also a volunteer for his home fire department in Daisy. "Six years ago, we almost lost our fire department, due to an individual who embezzled funds." The prosecution has just recently occurred on that crime and the repayment of a portion of those funds is slowly occurring.

When the Fire Department was in danger of closing six years ago, the community held a large meeting, and John was nominated for President of the Board. "I agreed to try it for a year – I

have been there ever since. Instead of fighting fires, I work to get them the equipment they need.”

John grew up in the Daisy community, so it makes sense he wants to take care of it. He went to Goss school up until fourth grade, when the little school shut down. “After that, we rode the bus to Clayton. Those kids looked down on us Choctaws because we got free lunches.” John said he experienced a lot of racism in his early years. “It hurt. Now it makes me mad that everyone who isn’t Choctaw wants to be!”

John continued, “My grandmother went to Wheelock Academy and was forced to speak English. She hated it so badly she ran away from Wheelock and walked all the way through the mountains back home. They didn’t make her go back.”

John can recite the exact dates he enlisted in and was discharged from the Army - May 26, 1971 until June 30, 1991. He served two tours in Germany; was at Ft. Hood, Texas; Ft. Sill, Oklahoma; Ft. Knox, Kentucky; and the last ten years as Recruiting Command for the Army in the North Country, Nebraska, South Dakota and Wyoming. John said his favorite place while in the Army was Germany.

John has made a lot of friends in his lifetime, and has found leadership opportunities in work, church, and military in addition to the Honor Guard and Fire Department. “Life has its ups and downs. I have been down before, and the Lord had a place for me even when I didn’t know Him,” said John. “I also want to credit the military for helping me. You had to have friends there. You made friends. I still talk to friends today I made there. You either have leadership skills or not. You can hone leadership skills but you can’t teach leadership.” John realizes two-way communication is important. “I like to listen to people, and I like to talk to people.”

John said, “A message I would like to share is that fathers should support their children, teach them right from wrong, teach them the values of an honest day’s work, the values of life, and the values of church.”

Cut line:

John Burleson at the Choctaw Nation Veterans Cemetery, Tvshka Homma.

Photo by Judy Allen