

## A LIFE OF HONOR AND COMMITMENT

### **THE STORY OF A NATIVE AMERICAN WHO PROUDLY SERVED HIS COUNTRY DURING WORLD WAR II**

**BY LARISSA COPELAND, CHOCTAW NATION OF OK**

Honor. Courage. Commitment. These are the values on which the U.S. Navy was founded and built. Frank Watson, a Choctaw born in 1924 on his family's 160-acre government allotted farm land near Lone Grove, has lived these values from day one, so it seems fitting, almost destined, that he would someday become a Sailor. Through his actions, Watson has built an honorable life - a life spent in service to his family, his community, his country and his tribe.

He came from a large family, the fifth of six children, and was raised on very modest means, the entire family working the farm to get by. This meant hard work but everyone pitched in.

"It was a lot of fun," says Watson, "but it was also a lot of hard work. But we did what we had to to survive."

Unlike his siblings, Watson chose not to attend an Indian school when given the option by his father. Instead he attended a local public school, walking two miles daily to the two-room school. A "good choice" he was told by his father.

It was during his school days that he developed a love for baseball, which he played often. It was this love of playing the sport that indirectly led him to join the Navy in 1943.

"I was a good baseball player," he says proudly.

In the early 1940s, a minor baseball league was established in Oklahoma and Texas, one team forming in Ardmore. Watson, with confidence and high hopes, tried out for the team, along with many other men his age. He made it past the first day of try-outs and was one of only three players asked to return for a second go-round. At the end of the day though, he was told he didn't make it, which he took hard.

"They said I was good, but not good enough," he says. "That made me angry because I knew I was a good player. After that, I joined the Navy to prove to myself I was just as good as someone else."

Watson enlisted and was sent to San Diego for boot camp. During his training, and for six years of his time in service, he played on the Navy's baseball team.

"We had some great professional baseball players on our team, and I played right beside them. I knew then I was a good enough player."

Baseball aside, over the next 20 years the Navy provided Watson, and later his family, with many worldwide adventures, beginning with his first assignment during World War II along the coastal waters around Australia, New Zealand and New Guinea. There, he worked on an auxiliary repair ship, USS Dobbin.

"My job," he explains, "was to work on ships that could be repaired and send them back to war, or if not, send them back home. During the war years, I was on various ships all over the Pacific waters."

When the war ended, Watson returned to the United States and was assigned to the Naval

Training Center in San Diego for the next three years.

Following the Korean conflict, Watson was assigned to numerous bases and ships around the world. He served on nine different ships during his tenure with the Navy and spent time in Texas, Oklahoma, California, Washington, and many other states, along with a stint at the Iwakuni, Japan, Marine Air Base.

"The Navy was good to me," he says. And Watson did his best to serve the Navy as well, giving back by volunteering in each of the communities he and his family, which included three sons, were assigned. They were very involved with community activities at each base, stressing his pride in his Choctaw heritage in particular. This earned him numerous awards, recognition and commendations for his actions.

After 20 years of service to his country, Watson decided it was time to come home. He and his family relocated to Dallas, Texas.

His transition from military to civilian included many changes, but one thing that remained consistent was his desire to stay involved in his community. He began volunteering with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, helping to welcome Native Americans being brought into the city during the BIA's Native American urban relocation initiative. He felt the program was a good idea in theory, but in practice, saw many flaws. One flaw was the lack of preparation for those being relocated.

"I saw a need, so I recruited some people to help me," he says. "We'd take those new to the area around to get acquainted with things...shopping, doctors, schools, bus stops, places to go in an emergency. Things like that."

This group of volunteers became known as the American Indian Center (A.I.C.) of Dallas and Watson was elected chairman. The group lacked funds to operate effectively, so Watson journeyed to Washington, D.C., to request funds from the BIA, thus setting in motion the major growth of the A.I.C. in Dallas. Eventually, the group would start up a Head Start program, JOM social services, programs for adult education, and numerous other services for the Indians in the area.

The group also traveled to Livingston, Texas, by request, to establish an intertribal pow wow, one that is still put on today and has grown to one of the largest pow wows in the country.

Pow wow dancing was another passion for Watson, one he also passed on to his sons, Glen, David and John.

In 1977, Watson and his family moved from Dallas to Durant, where he still resides today, and he went to work for the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma in the industrial development department.

Along with repeating the role he had with the A.I.C. by going to Washington, D.C., to request funds for programs for the tribe, which he did many times successfully, Watson was also appointed to be a part of the Choctaw Nation Constitution of 1983 Commission. The task of the commission was to revise and establish a constitution that meets the current needs of the entire tribe. A group of six spent close to three weeks drafting the document.

"It's a good feeling to have been asked to be on the commission," he says. "It's a piece of history and I'm deeply grateful and proud to have been a part of it."

Watson, also a grandfather of five, has impacted and affected change for the better in so many ways during his life. Whether through his family by instilling values and a deep appreciation of their heritage, or his community through his volunteering, or his country through his two

decades of honorable service, or his tribe through programs he helped to get funded or, most of all, helping to establish a constitution, his actions - his commitment - has created a lasting impact. This impact, made through his long life of honorable deeds and selfless service, will continue to shape and guide the tribe for years to come.



**Frank Watson, a Choctaw born in 1924, joined the Navy in 1943.**