

American Indian Sailor in the U.S. Navy Speaks at NSWC PCD

Nov. 29, 2013

By Jacqui Barker, NSWC PCD Public Affairs - November 29, 2013

PANAMA CITY, Fla. – One of the most senior American Indians presently serving on active duty in the U.S. Navy spoke during the Naval Surface Warfare Center Panama City Division (NSWC PCD)'s American Indian and Alaskan Native Heritage Month Nov. 13, 2013 in Panama City, Fla.

Lt. Cmdr. Kenneth Vargas, a Civil Engineer Corps officer assigned to Naval Facilities Engineering Command Southeast (NAVFAC SE), shared Choctaw memories and perceptions in support of the event's theme, Guiding Our Destiny with Heritage and Traditions. The event was hosted by the NSWC PCD Diversity Council onboard Naval Support Activity-Panama City (NSA-PC).

Event attendees were also treated to a special performance by NSWC PCD employee Bobby June who danced a ceremonial Observance of Sacred Feathers with full American Indian regalia. June, a retired U.S. Navy Hull Technician First Class, from Wind River Reservation in Wyoming and Detroit, Mich., presently works on SEAL Delivery Vehicles at NSWC PCD.

"It is always a good day when you're sharing your culture with people," said Vargas. Prior to giving his keynote speech, Vargas offered prayers to Native American Indian remains that reside on the base. Vargas, whose hometown is Bridgeport, Texas, thanked NSA-PC personnel for taking care of the ancestral remains and said visiting the site was "like a pilgrimage," but later in his presentation Vargas spoke to the need for American Indian artifacts to be recognized for their historical contributions and precious values, and not to be traded or sold liberally. Additionally, he asked for people to take a moment to walk in his shoes and to consider how modern day practices, like professional sports team names and merchandise, are unfair to his heritage.

"I am not a mascot. My grandfather was not a mascot. My heritage is not a mascot. I am a proud warrior of the sovereign Choctaw Nation on loan to the U.S. Navy," said Vargas. "It's not okay and we just want to play by the same rules."

Although Vargas cited several important dates in Choctaw and American Indian history, a common message was ever present: American Indians have a culture and extensive past that has shaped American history. They, too, should be recognized and embraced for their rich and diverse history and their heritage should not be lost. For the Choctaw, many historic decisions continue to shape Choctaw heritage and way of life today. One example occurred in 1933 when the Mississippi tribe of Choctaw was established apart from the Alabama and Oklahoma tribes.

"We're the same people. We speak the same language, but now we're three different tribes," said Vargas. "We still have very mixed feelings about this."

In American history, Vargas said Choctaw Indians have fought in wars since 1812 and continue to fight for the freedoms enjoyed in the United States today. Vargas, who is one of the most senior American Indians presently serving in the U.S. Navy, is affiliated with the Oklahoma band of Choctaw and calls Bridgeport, Texas his hometown.

Vargas is a 1988 graduate of the University of Texas at Arlington and holds a master's of science in engineering from the University of Texas at Austin. He is an engineer in training in Texas, holds a Seabee Combat Warfare Officer designation, is prior enlisted and served in the Fleet Marine Force.

Currently, Vargas serves as the Disaster Preparedness and Contingency Engineering Officer for NAVFAC SE Headquarters at Naval Air Station Jacksonville, Fla.

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American Indian Sailor Speaks at Navy Heritage Month Celebration

The Naval Surface Warfare Center Panama City Division celebrated American Indian and Alaskan Native Heritage Month November 13.

- JACQUI BARKER, NSWC PCD PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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Courtesy Susan Trahan/NSWC PCD

Panama City Division NSWC PCD), dances a ceremonial Observance of Sacred Feathers with full American Indian regalia.

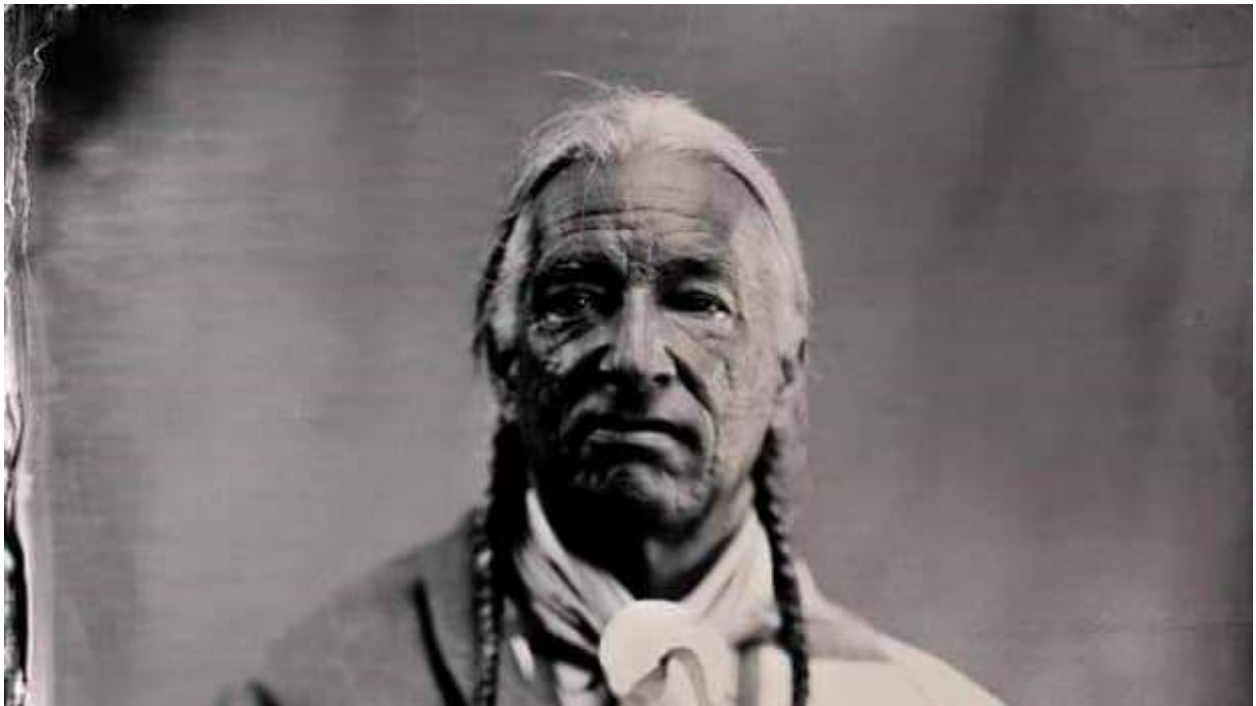
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Naval Surface Warfare Center Panama City Division NSWC PCD) Executive Officer Cmdr. Greg Brotherton, USN, left center) presents Bobby June right) a certificate of appreciation for supporting the 2013 celebration. Also pictured, from left, are Naval Facilities Command Headquarter and event keynote speaker Lt. Cmdr. Kenneth Vargas, USN; event special emphasis coordinator Bobbi Wood, and Naval Support Activity-Panama City Commanding Officer Cmdr. Christopher Serow, USN.

