

Honolulu Civil Beat

[Hawaii](#)

The Complicated Pride Of Native Hawaiians In The Military

Native Hawaiians have fought in America's battles from the War of 1812 to Iraq and Afghanistan.

By [Kevin Knodell](#) / Feb 17, 2021

Shad Kane never had any doubt what he would do after high school. He followed his brother into the Navy and ended up fighting across the rivers and swamps of Vietnam.

"Every one of us that went to Kamehameha Schools was expected to join the military," the 75-year-old Vietnam veteran said in a recent interview.

He didn't really pay attention to his Hawaiian heritage until he and his wife visited an American Indian reservation on the mainland, years after he retired from the military and became a police officer.

When an elder asked him what tribe he belonged to, Kane responded that he was Hawaiian. "I must have said that thousands of times before that day, but for the first time I heard myself say it," Kane said.



Vietnam veteran Shad Kane at Kalaeloa Heritage Park, formerly Naval Air Station Barber's Point, where he and other veterans work to preserve Hawaiian culture.

Back home, he became passionate about preserving the ruins of ancient Hawaiian cultural sites, including some discovered on former military bases. He and other veterans helped found the Kalaeloa Heritage Park, formerly Naval Air Station Barber's Point, in Kapolei.

Native Hawaiians have had a long and complicated history with the U.S. military, with many generations of the same families becoming service members.

The military, which is one of the state's biggest employers and has bases sprawled across the islands, has provided jobs, housing and health benefits and a way to see the world that otherwise would elude many Hawaiians, who along with other Pacific Islanders make up a disproportionate number of Army recruits.

But many veterans and their family members must balance a pride in service with the shadow of the military's dark past in Hawaii and concern about its current impact.

Hawaiians have served in the American military since the days of the Hawaiian Kingdom. The first known Hawaiian to serve in the U.S. military was George Humehume, a prince from Kauai who fought in the War of 1812. Dozens of Native Hawaiians fought in the American Civil War.

But Marines also were involved in the 1893 overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy. The islands fell under martial law and locals were subject to the draft after the Pearl Harbor attack that propelled America into World War II — years before Hawaii became the 50th state.

Native Hawaiian activists have clashed with the military over access to lands, preservation of cultural sites and its environmental impact. Military policies have even been blamed for driving up rents on Oahu.

“There are a lot of problems and cultural issues and access issues, and just communication and collaboration with the host community that need to be addressed,” says U.S. Rep. Kai Kahele, a Hawaii Air National Guardsman who had multiple deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan.



The Hawaii State Veterans Cemetery in Kaneohe is constantly decorated with bouquets, leis and a mix of Hawaiian and American flags.

A Family Tradition

Oahu artist Haunani Hess was born at Tripler Army Medical Center in 1968, just like her father, a career military man who served in the infantry as an Army Ranger and a Green Beret and married a Hawaiian woman.

Her father was the son of a Korean War veteran who had married a Chinese woman from Hawaii while serving here. Both men served in Vietnam, and both eventually returned to Hawaii to live out their retirements.

Hess spent her childhood traveling the world as her family went to different duty stations while returning to Hawaii during the summer. Hawaiian uncles and cousins also served in the military.

“It was very strong in my family,” she said. “I think it’s strong in a lot of Hawaiian families.”

Growing up, Hess didn’t feel a strong connection to her Hawaiian heritage. “It wasn’t until I went back as an adult to Hawaii where I really understood what I had been missing,” she said. “I don’t feel any regrets, I’m very glad to have grown up all over the place.”

In the waning days of the Vietnam War, President Richard Nixon ordered the end of the draft and the creation of a professional all-volunteer military. Today fewer than 1% of Americans serve in the military, increasingly drawn from families with a tradition of service.

“Every one of us that went to Kamehameha Schools was expected to join the military.” — Vietnam veteran Shad Kane

Among Pacific Islander communities, in particular, traditions of military service still run deep. A study of 2003 recruiting data found Pacific Islanders, which includes Hawaiians, joined the U.S. Army at a rate 249% higher than that of other ethnic groups.

“My dad’s brothers all graduated high school here in Hawaii, all went into the service, every single one of them,” said Kahele, whose father was a Marine. “Joining the military was just a part of our life.”

Tradition isn’t the only reason Native Hawaiians join. Hawaii’s high cost of living and troubled economy have taken a toll on Indigenous communities facing unemployment and homelessness.

“Oftentimes, the military is one of the only avenues for Native Hawaiian kids,” said Kahele.

The military will pay for veterans’ education, and interest-free VA home loans have given some Native Hawaiians a way of returning home and elbowing back into Hawaii’s expensive housing market. But those benefits come at a cost — Pacific Islanders were also overrepresented in casualties during the Iraq War.

U.S. troops have deployed continuously for the last two decades. Last year Hawaii National Guard troops returned from a deployment to Afghanistan. Some of those same guardsmen deployed to DC last month to provide security for President Joe Biden’s inauguration.

Shane Kelly grew up in California but has Hawaiian roots on his mother’s side and periodically visited family in the islands.

“If you want to get out of the hood you can be good at sports, somehow get lucky and become an entertainer or join the military. And that’s essentially what I ended up doing,” he said.

Kelly enlisted in the Air Force and ended up stationed in Hawaii for a time. He said it allowed his children to get in touch with their heritage. “It was good to have that actual part of the family around,” he said.



Hawaii National Guard troops deployed to Washington, D.C., last month for the inauguration of President Joe Biden. Many of them had been deployed in Afghanistan less than a year earlier.

While stationed in Hawaii, Kelly deployed to Iraq with the troop surge of 2007, one of the most violent periods of the war, but he stressed he wasn't in the most dangerous part of the country. "We got rocketed a couple of times when we were over there, got shot at a couple times," Kelly said. "Nothing too crazy."

Currently serving in the reserves in Texas, Kelly has deployed overseas three times.

“Every place I’ve gone, all the islanders have congregated to each other,” he said. “Since I’ve been in the military, from Hawaii to when I got stationed in California, the islanders all find each other.”

In Hawaii even those who don’t enlist or commission as officers often find themselves working for the military. The Pearl Harbor Naval Ship Yard is the state’s number one industrial employer with more than 6,000 employees. In 2018, military spending made up 7.7% of Hawaii’s GDP.

But military and civilian communities also have come into increasing conflict.

Recently a plan to move munitions [from the Leeward Coast](#) to the Navy’s West Loch Annex riled local residents who felt that the plan put powerful explosive ordnance too close to homes.

Opponents evoked the legacy of a military ordnance explosion in the same area that killed dozens of troops and filled the West Loch with burning fuel during World War II. The Navy covered it up until the 1960s.

Hess, who can see the West Loch Annex from her home, was among those concerned. She said subsequent conversations with military officials have eased some of her worries about whether the military is taking the safety of the community seriously — but only to a point.

“I don’t think the military should be completely gone, but I don’t think they should be doing training here,” said Hess. “It’s just so not sustainable.”

And her frustration with the military as an institution doesn’t affect her pride in the veterans in her family, many who are buried at veterans’ cemeteries in Hawaii.

“My personal connection to my family members that have been in the military, there’s not been one negative thing,” said Hess. “There was never a black cloud around it. It was always an honor. It was an honorable thing to do.”

About the Author



[Kevin Knodell](#)

Kevin Knodell covers the military and veterans in Hawaii and the greater Pacific for Civil Beat as a corps member for Report For America, a national nonprofit that places journalists in local newsrooms.