



For immediate release
By: Sgt. Karima Turner, DMVA PAO

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Alaska Army National Guard Pins First Federally Recognized Female Alaska Native Sergeant Major

CAMP DENALI, Alaska—Military life is difficult; it’s challenging and sometimes, it’s just downright hard. Soldiers make sacrifices everyday to serve in the military and have the privilege of wearing the uniform.

For one Soldier of the Alaska Army National Guard, those sacrifices and challenges have paid off. Lillian Aukongak, an Inupiaq Alaska Native, is the first female Alaska Native to be federally recognized as a sergeant major, the highest enlisted rank in the Army, in the Alaska Army National Guard. She was pinned Oct. 1 in a promotion ceremony held at the Alaska National Guard Armory.

“Right now I’m still kind of in disbelief,” Aukongak said. “It’s kind of hard for me to grasp that I’d be the first female Alaska Native in the Alaska Army National Guard to be federally recognized as a sergeant major. To me it’s a privilege and a very humbling experience.”

Challenges, however, are nothing new to Aukongak. She faced challenges at a young age. At six-years-old, she was orphaned and entered into the foster care system where she and her seven sisters and two brothers were split up and sent to separate homes. Although Aukongak, the second to youngest of the girls, was paired up with her youngest sister, she continued to look to her older sisters for guidance.

“Everyone has challenges and not everyone goes through what I went through,” said Aukongak, who calls Golovin and White Mountain home but was born in Nome. “But that didn’t stop me from pursuing my goals and following my dreams. I’ve always had very positive sisters who kind of mothered me; because I lost my parents at such a young age, I really looked up to them and admired them from a distance.”

Even at such a young age, her older sisters Emily, Colleen and Nina always encouraged Aukongak to get her education.

“When you’re a child, I don’t think anyone really wants to go to school,” Aukongak joked. “But as I entered my late teens, I decided I really wanted to pursue a civilian education; I really wanted to earn a college degree.”

When Aukongak was 18 years old, she decided that she needed to make a change in her life. She made a decision that would begin her journey to success and enlisted in the Alaska Army National Guard in Nome on Oct. 14, 1986.

Starting out as a radio operator for 1/297th Infantry (Scout) Battalion, Aukongak held several different jobs and moved up the ranks quickly. She joined the Active Guard Reserve program in 1991, but the idea of earning a college degree stayed at the front of her mind. Aukongak began taking college courses while working full-time and received her Bachelor’s degree in Human Services in 2007.

Aukongak, believes that education played a key role in her success and encourages Soldiers to take advantage of all the educational opportunities the Alaska Army National Guard has to offer.

“Attend your military education schools to progress in your career field,” Aukongak said. “I encourage Soldiers to take advantage of what’s offered to them and to do their best.”

Twenty three years into her career, the new sergeant major challenges Soldiers to take control of their careers and see how far they can make it.

“Always have the right attitude because it’s so easy to get complacent in your jobs,” Aukongak warned. “Anyone can do just about anything they want in their career if he or she works hard enough. You can’t succeed by yourself though. I had a very solid support; my sisters, my church family and pastor and the people from my past have always encouraged me.”

Aukongak is aware that because of her ethnicity and accomplishments she is a role model for more than one reason, but insists that everyone can be a mentor and inspirational example.

“I believe that when you wear the uniform, regardless of your rank or background, you are a role model,” Aukongak said. “You have Soldiers who admire you from a distance, whether you acknowledge it or not. The higher grade you make, the more you put yourself in a position to be a mentor and role model; I call it being admired from a distance.

“I personally have a lot of people whom I’ve admired from a distance,” Aukongak added. “Command Sgt. Maj. Pamela Harrington and Sergeants Maj. Jane Dennis and Kerry Averett are just a few people I’ve admired from a distance.”

“I think Sgt. Maj. Aukongak’s accomplishment is a great triumph and success story,” said State Command Sgt. Maj. Gordon Choate, Alaska Army National Guard. “She is a leader who our Soldiers can look up to, and she epitomizes the truth that Soldiers who live the Army Values can achieve the highest ranks through leadership and hard work.”

Sgt. Maj. Lillian Aukongak's daughters, Sasha and Holly change her shoulder boards to the rank of sergeant major Oct. 1 at her promotion ceremony that was held at the Alaska National Guard Armory. Lillian Aukongak, an Inupiaq Alaska Native, is the first female Alaska Native to be federally recognized as a sergeant major, the highest enlisted rank in the Army, in the Alaska Army National Guard. Photo by Capt. Guy Hayes, DMVA PAO