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Capt. David Bedard: At Home in the Service, Serving at Home

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska — November is National American Indian Heritage month, also known as American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month. During this time, the United States honors and celebrates the diverse cultures, traditions, and histories of America's indigenous people. One such person, currently serving in the Alaska Army National Guard, is Capt. David Bedard, commander of the 134th Public Affairs Detachment, who also serves during the week as the civilian public affairs specialist for the 176th Wing, Alaska Air National Guard.

Bedard is half Inupiaq from his mother's side of the family, and he is part Cree Indian from his Canadian-born father. Though the mix of cultures from either side of his family gives him a more diverse history to draw from, one thing his entire family has in common is a rich tradition of service in the military, which is consistent with the rate in which Native American Indian and Alaska Natives serve this country.

"According to the National Indian Council on Aging," explained Bedard, "Natives serve in the military at five times the rate of the general populace. My father, part Cree, met my Inupiaq mother while he was stationed here at Elmendorf with the Air Force in the 60s. My father's father was a Canadian who joined the U.S. Army during World War I as a French interpreter. My mother's father was a scout in the Alaska Territorial Guard, a militia force comprising primarily of Natives, during World War II. I wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for my ancestors' military service."

Bedard's own journey into service began in Fairbanks, where he graduated from the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, with a degree in history. He chose to go to school in Fairbanks, he explained, because at the time, the program in Fairbanks was geared towards providing opportunities to be commissioned in the U.S. Army.

"After I graduated," he said, "I went to training at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma for the Field Artillery Officer Basic Course to become a field artillery officer, and then I was stationed back at Ft. Wainwright, Alaska."

"For me," Bedard continued, "military service has always been about a deep sense of community that follows a clear code of conduct. I think that tracks with many Natives' sensibilities, as those things are also inherent in their culture's community. When terrorists drove jetliners into buildings on 9/11, I felt a deep sense of injury and an equal sense of responsibility to the community to defend. These experiences aren't unique to Natives, but they are acutely present in my journey as a Native troop."

After a Soldier completes their initial training in the U.S. Army, they are assigned a duty station that may

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be anywhere in the world. In this case, Bedard explained, he included Ft. Wainwright on his wish list of places he hoped to be stationed, but there was no guarantee that he would get the duty station he hoped for. As it were, he ended up having the opportunity to go back home to Alaska, where served with the 172nd Striker Brigade Combat Team at Ft. Wainwright.

Under a program called the Unit Manning System, which stabilized Soldiers in one place for eight years, Bedard was able to spend the entirety of his eight years of service in the active duty Army there. It was with the 172nd SBCT that he deployed to Iraq in 2005 and 2006. During this deployment, he reflected more on his heritage.

“When I was deployed to Northern Iraq,” he explained, “I don't recall seeing a Native, Alaskan or American, for the entire 16 months I was there. I was alone, and I didn't realize how lonesome I felt until I saw a Native family in the Fairbanks airport when I came home on environmental leave. Even though they were Athabaskan, completely different than Inupiaq, it did my heart well to see them. I came to the realization that Alaska is intrinsic to my being, so leaving was no longer an option. My experience serving active duty at Fort Wainwright totally influenced my decision to stay in Alaska.”

Before leaving the Active Duty Army, Bedard explained that his battalion commander had assigned him the extra duty of being the unit public affairs representative. Although not thrilled about the situation, he embraced the responsibility by buying a camera and began writing stories about his unit, four of which would be published from Iraq in Ft. Wainwright's weekly newspaper, Alaska Post, back home.

After leaving the Army, Bedard was hired as a civilian public affairs specialist at Ft. Richardson in Anchorage, which realigned as Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson two years later. Though he worked with Soldiers and Airmen at this job, Bedard explained that he began to miss wearing the uniform.

“In 2015, I got the itch,” said Bedard. “Although it was very fulfilling working with troops, I missed being a troop. I decided that if I was going to go in the Guard and be part time, I was going to go enlisted and have fun with it. I really enjoyed it.”

Bedard resigned his commission, and reentered the service, this time as a noncommissioned officer. After enlisting into the National Guard as a traditional drill-status Guardsman, he transitioned from his civilian job at the 673rd Wing Public Affairs Office, to the 176th Wing, Alaska Air National Guard as their full-time public affairs specialist.

It was in April, 2019, that Bedard decided that he wanted to recommission as an officer, and once again put on his captain's rank, becoming the commander of the 134th Public Affairs Detachment.

“It's been very rewarding,” Bedard said. “Being either a noncommissioned officer or a commissioned officer are rewarding in different ways. Being an NCO, you're where the rubber meets the road, and you work directly with Soldiers and you're in the weeds with them. When you're the officer, you have the vision and dream up stuff, and it's the NCO that has to take that dream and turn it into reality. Both have challenges in their own right.”

Bedard's career has been as intrinsic to Alaska as his heritage has been to his connection with the state and all of its unique qualities, and his degree in history seems equally appropriate, given his understanding of his culture's history.

Reflecting on what it means to be an Alaska Native, Bedard explained that his heritage means having a special relationship to the land and is an important part of his life to reflect on and preserve.

“I know that probably sounds trite,” he added, “but the fact of the matter is I acknowledge how my people, epochs ago, learned how to carve out a living from a land that can be quite beautiful, but also quite foreboding while in the depths of winter. Still, they adapted and thrived, and built a culture around maintaining a symbiotic harmony with the land, plants and animals. That's remarkable,” he said.

“But also, to be Native is to persevere through tough circumstances thrust upon us by colonialism, first by Russia and then by America. Our culture went from only knowing a subsistence lifestyle to immediate exposure to a rapidly industrializing society. Being Native often times means finding our place in the larger American culture while simultaneously holding onto an identity couched in a people whose traditions go back thousands of years.”

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PHOTOS

1. **Attached pdf** includes story and a small selection of low-resolution photos for viewing on screen.
2. **DVIDS link** includes selected full-resolution photos. (Accessible from military computers.)

<https://www.dvidshub.net/news/382580/capt-david-bedard-home-service-serving-home>



Capt. David Bedard, commander of the 134th Public Affairs Detachment, Alaska Army National Guard, poses for a photo on an M2A4 Howitzer cannon on Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska, Nov. 6, 2020. Bedard, a former artillery officer, is an Inupiaq Alaska Native. November is observed as Native American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage month. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Edward Eagerton/Released)