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Sgt. 1st Class Herbert Alex: An Alaskan Legacy

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska — Over 200 miles northeast of Anchorage, on Mt. Sanford, three souls were lost in a tragic plane crash on February 19, 1971. Intended as a straightforward ferrying mission from Fort Richardson to Fresno, California, the trip was one of the many test flights for the Army U8-D, the first multi-engine aircraft for the Alaska National Guard.

The impact claimed the lives of Lt. Col. William Caldwell, Maj. Steve Hanault, and Sgt. 1st Class Herbert Alex. Alex was the Alaska Army National Guard's first aviation mechanic and a pillar in the Alaska Native community. Decades later, Charleen Shaginaw, one of Alex's five daughters, remembers her father's service to his country and the love he bared for his family and heritage.

Alex, born in a small Eklutna village, was the son of Chief Mike Alex, the last traditional leader of the Alaska Natives of the Knik and Eklutna area. In his formative years, Alex's family taught him the discipline of living off his ancestor's land and, according to Shaginaw, taking only what was needed for nourishment.

"My father was a lifelong Alaskan," said Shaginaw. "Life, for his whole family, was subsistence hunting and fishing. Everyone worked on those lands. They chopped wood, carried water and built their own homes. It was definitely an independent type of lifestyle."

In 1951, Alex enlisted in the Army where he discovered his passion for aircraft and aptitude for all things related to aviation mechanics and maintenance. For three years, Alex served in the active duty U.S. Army in locations including Fort Knox, the Aberdeen Proving Grounds and Fort Eustis. Even after fulfilling his oath, Alex would continue his devotion to service and join the Alaska Army National Guard in 1960. Through his dedication, Alex and his family helped expand the military presence and tradition within the Alaska Native community.

"He was very proud to be part of the Alaska National Guard and of being able to engage with the community through it," Shaginaw said, fondly remembering her father marching with his unit in the Fur Rendezvous parades. "He loved the men he worked and trained with and was always sure to promote military service."

As the Guard's first aviation mechanic, Alex's expertise was integral in pioneering the country's first ever aviation component for a state's National Guard. With the aviation unit in its infancy, Alex and his fellow Guardsmen worked in tandem with the Air National Guard, combining their knowledge and bringing Alaska to the forefront of progress.

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Alex had established himself in the Alaska National Guard and sought to implement his military values in service to his Alaska Native community. His daughter, Shaginaw, remembers the days upon days he worked with the Alaska Native community to protect the land and culture of his people.

Only children then, Shaginaw and her sisters were inspired to see what their father achieved throughout his lifetime. Shaginaw's elder sister, Eleanor Wilde, would later prove the influence her father had when she followed in his footsteps and enlisted in the National Guard herself.

"My sisters and I, as very young children, saw our dad continuing his education and dedicating himself to his career and country. We observed the leadership role our father took and the difference he was making for his community and because of that, I think we became more well-rounded individuals," said Shaginaw.

Next year, February 19th marks the 50th anniversary of the fatal plane crash that took the life of Sgt. 1st Class Herbert Alex. For his service in the military and his efforts to advocate for the Alaska Native culture, Shaginaw shared that she wants more people to know her father's story, to appreciate his life and honor his legacy.

Shaginaw worked with the state Office of Veterans Affairs to ensure her father's memory was honored with a headstone at Fort Richardson National Cemetery.

"Now that it's there, I can go there to pay respects to my father," she said.

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PHOTOS

1. **Next** page includes low-resolution photos for viewing on screen.
2. **DVIDS link** includes full-resolution photos. (Accessible from military computers.)
<https://www.dvidshub.net/news/382799/sgt-1st-class-herbert-alex-alaskan-legacy>



Portrait of Sgt. 1st Class Herbert Alex. (Alaska National Guard Courtesy Photo)



Sgt. 1st Class Herbert Alex poses in front of an aircraft. (Alaska National Guard Courtesy Photo)