

Transcript of Oral History Interview (edited)

Interviewee: Christine Igisomar

Interviewer: Karen Lau

Date: August 5, 2022

[Interview Recording Link](#)

Summary: Christine Igisomar is a Lieutenant Commander in the U.S. Coast Guard and is the first native Chamorro¹ woman to serve in the Coast Guard. In this interview, she describes the culture and history of the island of Saipan, the legacy of imperialism and colonialism on current relations between the Pacific Islands and the mainland U.S., and her service as the military aide to the Commandant of the Coast Guard.

Karen Lau

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Hi everyone. Today, I'm here with Lieutenant Commander Christine Torres Igisomar. Thank you so much for being here. My first question is when and where were you born?

Christine Igisomar

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I was born on the island of Saipan which [has been] part of the U.S. Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands since 1984.

Karen Lau

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Could you describe your childhood or bringing in new family?

Christine Igisomar

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I was an only child for 15 years and then my parents had my sister who is now 23. I'd say as an only child, my parents really took advantage of the opportunity to travel. From a young age, I was really well traveled. I also believe growing up on the island of Saipan was really the best upbringing a kid could have, having your run of the beautiful beaches, the jungles, and the farms. It was just such an idyllic childhood, and I wouldn't trade it for anything else.

¹ The [Chamorro](#) people are the indigenous people native to the Mariana Islands of which Guam is the largest island.

Karen Lau

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Does your family have a history of military service? If not, what was it like for you to be the first in your family to serve?

Christine Igisomar

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Absolutely, I think extended family members have served in different capacities. No one close to me had ever been commissioned as an officer in the Armed Forces. As I was going through that process, I didn't think that hindered me in any way. My parents instilled in me from a young age to always look for opportunities to engage people who are doing what you want to do in the future. So, I sought out folks that were [attending] other academies at the time as cadets ... I talked with people who were retired officers who may not have been related to me. All these opinions and perspectives really informed my view on what I was going to do with my future. The one thing that I recognized early on was that I never spoke to any women. This small island has so many opportunities for women, but I don't think being a military officer was something that women thought of as I was growing up and so I didn't notice that that all the people I had spoken with happened to be men.

Karen Lau

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Thank you for sharing. What motivated you to attend the Naval Academy Preparatory School and the Coast Guard Academy? What were your experiences as a cadet at the Academy like?

Christine Igisomar

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The way one gets into the Naval Academy Prep Schools is you first have to apply to the Coast Guard Academy and when they see that you have officer potential, but they feel like you need a little bit of work in some areas of your academics or your physical fitness ... to make sure that you're ready for the academic rigor of the Coast Guard Academy, they offer you the Prep School. I was offered the Naval Academy Preparatory School in Newport, Rhode Island. It was a year well-spent. I made friends, I got to experience college-level math and science, and really prepared myself for what was going to come at the Academy.

Christine Igisomar

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[During] my Academy experience, I found a core group of friends that I still am close friends with to this day. I felt that the Coast Guard Academy, having been a quarter of the size of the other service academies, allowed us to be a lot closer with our classmates because we were only about 250 strong when we graduated. The academy was so busy. From 6:00 a.m. in the

morning to 10:00 p.m. at night, you were always doing something, whether it was class, sports, meetings for extracurricular activities, [or] homework.

Karen Lau

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What was the hardest part of the military lifestyle for you to adapt to?

Christine Igisomar

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The hardest part was not being able to see family when I wanted to. We're limited in the amount of vacation days we can take, although it is quite generous at 30 days a year for all the Armed Forces. Being that I'm from so far away, a ticket for Thanksgiving [or spring break] was just impossible. I could only limit my visits home to the three weeks of summer, and the two or three weeks of Christmas holidays. Having been in the military 20 years now, the one thing that I feel that's been the hardest is having to miss out on so many wonderful cultural things.

Karen Lau

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If you could go back to the start of your military career, what advice would you give yourself?

Christine Igisomar

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I would say there's a reason why you have two ears and one mouth. You should be listening twice as much as you are talking. I think something I didn't know well enough to do in the beginning of my career, to really listen and internalize so many things I was being told. I think if I had done more listening and trying to understand things, I would have been a better officer.

Karen Lau

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That's good advice. Could you describe some of your experiences serving on a Coast Guard Cutter in Hawaii?

Christine Igisomar

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Life on any Coast Guard cutter is rough, even the ones in Hawaii. We maintained a pretty rigorous schedule of being three months in port in Hawaii, and then three to four months out at sea, either up in Alaska, or in the Eastern Caribbean. We actually also completed a patrol through Samoa. The South Pacific was also part of where our mission was. Now that I'm more senior in my career, I encourage so many young, enlisted officers to try and be out at sea as

much as possible. There's something about being out in the middle of the ocean and seeing stars that are so clear and knowing that you are such a small part of this big world.

Christine Igisomar

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When you're in the middle of the ocean, and there's not a ship or landing site, there's a sense of adventure that goes with being able to see parts of the world that you probably wouldn't be able to afford to go to on a regular basis ... Although it was really hard work and the hours were long, both in Hawaii and while we were doing our patrols, I think that sense of adventure of seeing the world was the most fulfilling part of my time on a cutter in Hawaii.

Karen Lau

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That's wonderful. In your different services assignments, including a tour in international affairs in the Caribbean and two tours in response operations, what were the biggest challenges you faced and how did you overcome them?

Christine Igisomar

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I would say the Coast Guard does a great job of pushing responsibility down to its most junior members. Within the Coast Guard, we have an understanding that age, gender, or background doesn't necessarily matter when it comes to completing the mission and doing it well. In my time in the Caribbean, I always felt that I had to be extra judicious in how I conducted myself because there are some cultures, including within the Caribbean, that have no women in senior ranks. I would walk into a government building for a meeting, and I noticed that the only women in the building were the ones in the administrative stuff, which is very important work and that's the backbone of any organization ... But I noticed that I met with few women in senior positions that were the decision-makers within the Coast Guard.

Christine Igisomar

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In my time in response operations, I would say being able to take different inputs from people that have different backgrounds and knowing that you don't have all the answers, it does matter to take time to allow everybody to say their piece. If you are the senior decision-maker, go with what you think is right. I believe people [will] respect you if you allow them the opportunity to provide input, even though they know that eventually you will have to make the final decision.

Karen Lau

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What do you recall about your relationships and your camaraderie with your fellow service members throughout your career?

Christine Igisomar

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I have two families, the family that I was born into ... and the Coast Guard family that I've built [during] my 20 years in the Coast Guard. There are people that I've been stationed with sometimes for only one year or two years, but these are people that I could absolutely trust with my children ... I believe that they trust me with the same level of seriousness and responsibility. I love the fact that I've created a family of people that I'm not related to who I can count on [to] be there for me at the drop of a hat. I'm really grateful that I can lean on these two families.

Karen Lau

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That's amazing. Throughout your career, you've been stationed in many places, including Hawaii, the Caribbean, Texas, California, and now, Guam. What have been your most memorable experiences interacting with the people and the cultures at these places?

Christine Igisomar

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I've appreciated the opportunity to live in these communities. Something that's unique about the Coast Guard is we don't have large military bases where everybody lives on the base and that there's a very fine line between what's on the base and what's off the base. A lot of Coasties tend to receive housing allowance and they live in the communities that they serve. Being part of a community and being neighbors with people that are not necessarily military-affiliated, or maybe don't even necessarily like the military, this [was an] opportunity to immerse ourselves in the cultures of all these places. [Living in] California, Virginia, and Texas has really enhanced my ability to get along with people. If not for the Coast Guard, I'd probably be in another military service where I'm only interacting with military-affiliated people on base, and I think there's a limitation to that. I enjoy [being] part of whatever community I serve in.

Karen Lau

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Currently, you are the military aide to the Commandant of the Coast Guard, and you are also serving in Guam. What has this experience been like and what is it like to live in Guam?

Christine Igisomar

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Absolutely, so I just finished my time as the military aide to Admiral Schultz who was our Commandant from 2020 to just two months ago. In my capacity as his military aide, I traveled everywhere with him, and I was allowed in every meeting he was in. This opportunity to peek behind the curtain and understand our Coast Guard senior leadership's perspective on where this organization is going is so valuable. In those two years ... we traveled quite a bit and the hours were very long, but something I appreciated was the ability to hear straight from the horse's mouth the perspective of where we are as the Coast Guard and what are we doing to move ourselves forward in the right way.

Christine Igisomar

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Something that I noticed in my time was we spoke about the Western Pacific a lot and the opportunity to engage with these small island nations here in the Pacific to ensure that our Coast Guard, and our American values are welcome, but also beneficial to those communities in these specific islands. Having used that opportunity to listen to everything as the aide to the Commandant in Guam and being able to inform people's perspective on what we're doing and why we're doing it, I think it's just so valuable. I hope that I can lend value wherever I can during my time here in Guam.

Karen Lau

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Congratulations on finishing two years with the Commandant. How have your service experiences affected your life and what have you learned about yourself in your service?

Christine Igisomar

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I would say something my husband has noticed about me from the time he first met me as a brand-new graduate of the Coast Guard Academy is that as a young junior officer, it seemed like I knew everything already. Throughout my maturing and reaching more senior levels in the officer corps, I've come to understand that I don't know everything. I am more of a sponge now than I was as a brand-new ensign straight out of the Academy, which is a little bit of a flip flop but I'm just grateful that I understand my limitations and I'm able to adjust. Something that I've appreciated about my service is my ability to grow and change based on where I am, and the situation I am put in. I have become very flexible and amenable to things.

Karen Lau

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Could you tell me more about your heritage as a native Chamorro and the culture and history of the island of Saipan?

Christine Igisomar

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The Chamorros are the native people of the Mariana Islands. Saipan is the island that I'm from. As far as I know, we've been here for hundreds of years ... From the time, I was very young, I knew I was part of a special community. We are a very family-oriented community ...

There was always a family member to visit and help out. You spent your time either visiting with family, helping family, or being in church which is also a community of people that are working towards the same goals and have the same values. The Chamorro community, because of our 300 years of colonization by Spain, is majority Catholic and so I happen to be Catholic. We were also occupied by the Japanese between World War II and while World War II. I also believe that the Japanese customs and values also made their way into our culture. So, when I speak about my Chamorro culture, I don't try to go back to the original Chamorro culture as it was before we were colonized by Spain, Germany, and Japan. I consider what my Chamorro culture is right now as a mixture of all those folks that came to the Mariana Islands and were part of our history. It's very hard to forget about parts of your history. You are a living representation of that history.

Christine Igisomar

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It is a very family-oriented, community-oriented culture in which we take a lot of that from our time with the Japanese where the sense of community is greater than the sense of self. If I were to say there was one shortcoming of me being Chamorro that has affected my career as an officer is when I first started out as an officer, I was very nervous to talk about my accomplishments because in my culture that was something you didn't do. [This] didn't serve me well because every six months, junior officers get evaluated and this evaluation requires you to submit documentation of how awesome you are and all the great things you've done.

Christine Igisomar

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My turning point as a Lieutenant was to think, for the sake of my family, I have to do this. I have to understand how is it that I can talk about my accomplishments in a way that will make sure my superiors know what I've done with the sense of knowing that I never did anything by myself. Right. There's always been a team of people that have worked for me or alongside me that were part of my success. So, I think that when I talk about my success as a Coast Guard officer, I don't put my awards and citations in my biography. I always put that this is a

testament to the people that I've served with. It is a true team effort, which actually matches with my Chamorro culture ... This is about the team, not so much about the individual.

Karen Lau

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That's an amazing answer. Thank you. How has your identity as a Chamorro shaped your ideals of patriotism and service?

Christine Igisomar

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This is very interesting, especially being stationed in Guam and noticing how acute the word "colonization" and that concept is to the people of Saipan and the historical experience of the people of my territory. The Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands is quite different. Even though the southernmost island is only 40 miles north of Guam distance-wise ... something that I've become more aware of in my short time being stationed out here in the Western Pacific is that the people of these islands are so patriotic. 1 in 8 people in Guam is a veteran of the U.S. Armed Forces which is ironic because we, as territories, are not allowed to vote for the President of the United States who is the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. In addition, none of the territories have voting representation in Congress. We have representatives in the House of Representatives, but they're not allowed to vote on the floor.

Christine Igisomar

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When I think about wearing this uniform, I think about my people and the history of colonization by the Spanish, the Germans, the Japanese, and you could even say by the United States, what I am doing in uniform is paying back the debt of my people all to the American forces who landed on Saipan and liberated Saipan from the Japanese during the war. While staying in the Coast Guard, [wearing] this uniform for 20 years now, in my mind, I'm wearing this uniform on behalf of those people on my island that are unable to. And so, if there's one of me, and I'm able to stand up and serve the United States in my capacity as a Coast Guard officer, then this is me repaying that debt. My loyalty is absolutely to the United States of America. But I also know that one day, I will take this uniform off for good and perhaps my thoughts will change as I get integrated back to my community here in the islands.

Karen Lau

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That was a wonderful response. You're the first veteran I've spoken with who has brought up the topics of colonialism and imperialism. You brought up the topic of how the U.S. has liberated Saipan, but I was wondering if you could give me your perspective on times when the

U.S. has colonized other nations such as the Philippines, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico. As a veteran, could you share your thoughts on this history?

Christine Igisomar

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As someone whose ancestors were directly affected by colonization, not just by the Americans, but also by the other [peoples, including] the Spanish, Germans, and the Japanese, I would say that I use the word “liberated” very loosely. Can you be free if you’re liberated? And if you're liberated, are you truly free? And so, what I see on the island of Guam now that I’m stationed here is there is a very big sentiment that yes, we were liberated, but are we truly free because, at the moment, Guam is not able to decide its political status with the United States on its own.

Christine Igisomar

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In order for one to become an independent nation, or to change its status within the United States, such as to become a 51st state, they are not allowed to decide that on their own. The United States would have to be the ones to take the next step. Now, my perspective having come out here has changed greatly and it has to do with the idea that somehow someone had come along and saved us or made us independent. I believe that the people, having been at the crossroads of several conflicts, such as the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and American Samoa, they were always there, and they were all independent individuals. They lived their lives in their communities and there were other great world powers that [divided] up the earth as they saw it and traded land as they saw it. But the people ... have always been independent and I think it’s an interesting conundrum that as an independent person, I feel that I have autonomy, but I know that the community in which I live in in Guam, and ... others, as you mentioned the Philippines, they have had to struggle with regaining that autonomy after so much colonization.

Karen Lau

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Thank you for sharing your perspective. There’s nothing that the U.S. can do to erase their colonial or imperialist presence in other countries, but at this point, in places like Guam, what do you think would be justice? Would justice be the granting Guam and other places where the U.S. has presence self-determination by giving them the right to govern themselves? Or do you think justice would be making them a state with voting power and representation in Congress?

Christine Igisomar

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The people of Guam who [have] inhabited this particular island for millennia before the arrival of Ferdinand Magellan in the 1500s were able to decide amongst themselves what their status was going to be. Before the arrival of Magellan, it was very tribal right. The clans got together.

They made decisions. They figured out their own system of government, which maybe from an outsider's perspective, [would be called] primitive, but for them, it worked.

Christine Igisomar

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[Let's] use the case of Hawaii. Hawaii had a fully functioning monarchy. It had a government that was headed by a monarch. For the Hawaiian people, that worked for them.

A group of ... American businessmen, did not like that and did not see it that way. And that was just a travesty and continues to be for the Hawaiian people. Hawaiian people are strangers in their own land. Unless they have the means, they cannot own their own land and Guam is the same way. I would say Saipan, where I'm from, is a little bit different because of our political status. We have something in place that only allows people from Saipan to own property and on an island, land is finite resource. Allowing the people of Guam to decide, just as they had for millennia before the arrival of Magellan, to decide what this looks like, would be the most just thing. If they decide statehood, if they decide independence, if they decide to maintain their status quo and unincorporated territory, at least they would have decided amongst themselves.

Karen Lau

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Would you say that the U.S. military today still has some of those colonial and imperialist values of the past or would you say it's changed?

Christine Igisomar

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I've lived in the United States [for] 20 years now. I left home when I was 18 years old and I'm finally close to home again. I still consider myself an outsider in the sense that I did not grow up in the mainland United States, and my history classes were about other topics that maybe were closer to home so to speak. I will admit that I don't have the full scope of understanding of [whether] the United States has progressed away from colonialism and imperialism. What I can say is here in the Pacific, there is a push to ensure that the United States' values are adopted and are agreed with by these small island nations who historically have had a good history with the United States. There is this feeling that I think, as a Pacific Islander, I feel that we are not yet seen as two equals because I could say that within the space of understanding the military buildup in the Pacific, there's not many local people in the room. That speaks volumes, I think.

Christine Igisomar

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And so, for me, one day, I will put this uniform away for good and I'll hang my bones here in the Pacific. This is where I'll spend the rest of my life when I retire. I care very much what is happening now, because it's going to affect me as a citizen of this part of the world for the rest

of my adult life ... I would say the United States is continuously learning and growing and making strides to be better. I think for these islands, they are watching what the United States is doing [very closely] and are aware that perhaps in some circles, Pacific Islanders are not yet given that for equal participation in these very big decisions affecting the Pacific.

Karen Lau

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My next question for you is what unique challenges, if any, have you faced in the Coast Guard due to your status as a woman of color?

Christine Igisomar

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The times where I haven't done so well as an officer in the Coast Guard was when I tried to sound and be like someone I was not when I became an ensign in the Coast Guard. The ideal Coast Guard officer that people held up and lauded ... did not look or sound like me. So, in my naive mind, I thought that the best way to become a good Coast Guard officer was to look and sound like them. And I didn't do so [well]. I wasted precious time trying to do this when I really should have been learning my trade and learning how to be a good manager and leader of people. When I realized that regardless of how I sound [or] how I look, what matters is how I take care of the people below me and how hard I work for the people above me. Those things will win the day each and every time.

Christine Igisomar

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It's a bonus that I happen to be a woman of color, because I can provide perspective in certain circles where maybe they need to hear it from someone like me. But I don't think I have ever used the fact that I'm a woman and a woman of color to get ahead or to do that. I do not want to be put in a position one day where I was selected solely for those things, and then come to find out I am unqualified to do that particular job. That would devastate me. Because in the Coast Guard, as with other military services, this is the life and death thing that we have to think about. I want a qualified person, and if I am the most qualified person, then I will absolutely take that job, I think people have appreciated that about me, I don't think I have ever played the "race card" [or] the "woman card." I will bring up the fact that I am a Pacific Islander woman and I'm very proud of it, but I don't think that has affected my ability to get the jobs that I've wanted or to move ahead in the service.

Karen Lau

00:31:14.039 --> 00:31:26.369

In my past interview with a Korean American Coast Guard veteran, he described a “bamboo ceiling” in the Armed Forces where it was more difficult for minorities to gain promotions. Do you believe this still exists today?

Christine Igisomar

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I would say I have yet to come across a bamboo ceiling in my career, and I say that because I don't know how far up I'll go. I may hit what is called that “bamboo ceiling.” But what I know is I use my personal traits to my advantage. There is there is this idea that to be a good officer, you have to be loud, and you have to be the biggest person in the room. Perhaps for some Asian American Pacific cultures right, that is just not the way we operate. For Coast Guard officers ... that perhaps are not the loudest in the room, there's something to be said [about] walking into the room and commanding attention. And there is a beauty, I think, in silence. Silence allows you the opportunity to really hear the person and what they're saying to maybe dissect it and interpret it ... When you do finally open your mouth [and] when you finally act, people are just blown out of the water.

Christine Igisomar

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In my career personally, I've done my job to the best that I can. Along the way, I believe I've been able to share my unique culture with my colleagues and my superiors. I hope that they've appreciated the opportunity to learn from me. I've not tried to find a bamboo ceiling somewhere ... I firmly believe that you find what you're looking for. I'm not going around looking for a bamboo ceiling, at least in my career.

Karen Lau

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Is there a specific rank or goal that you would like to achieve by the end of your career? What is your vision for your future in the Coast Guard?

Christine Igisomar

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So, I'm at a crossroads. I have 4 years before I hit the 20-year mark when I'll retire. I believe that if I continue to do a good job, I believe one more promotion is going to happen before I hit that 20-year mark. I believe that if I do make my 20-year career, and then I decide to retire from there, I will do so with my head held high. I also know that my family has a big part to play in that. I have a husband and two boys ... I want to make sure that if I continue past 20 [years] that it is with their full support, which means that my boys have to be independent and

hardworking, doing well in school and doing well in their activities in order for me to have the bandwidth to be able to move onto the next thing past 20 years and same with my husband. Right. As long as my husband is able to be a support system.

Karen Lau

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What legacy you hope to impart to future Pacific Islanders, Chamorros, and women who will enlist in the Coast Guard?

Christine Igisomar

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I think something for them to live by when they do this career of theirs in the Coast Guard is to do right by people. I've always found that when you do right by others, your subordinates, your colleagues, and your superiors, your career takes care of itself. Regardless of what background they come from as Pacific Islanders, my hope is that they'll do right by others in the time that they're in the Coast Guard and I believe that [advice] will keep them climbing the ladder ... We exist not to earn accolades; we exist not to put more gold on our uniforms and to wear bigger shoulder boards. I think we exist to be good to others and treat others well. If that is any type of legacy that I leave as an example to others coming behind me, then I would have done my job.

Karen Lau

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My last question for you is, why should Asian American and Pacific Islander history and the stories of AAPI veterans be taught in schools?

Christine Igisomar

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I believe that the story of America is the story of all that shared heritage and history that we bring to the United States of America. To leave any part out would only be a disservice to our fellow citizens. I believe that in order for a citizen of the United States to really achieve their full potential, they need to be well-educated and well-aware of their neighbors, the people in their community, the people who serve in uniform on their behalf, and that includes Asians and Pacific Islanders. And so, AAPI history is the history of all of us. We are only made better if we understand people and where they come from, because that fosters a sense of unity, a sense of esprit de corps² in the United States Armed Forces. If you have that, you can really take on any enemy, any adversary.

² [Esprit de corps](#) is a French term meaning group spirit, good morale, comradeship, and a shared purpose.

Karen Lau

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Is there anything else that you would like to share today?

Christine Igisomar

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I think AAPI Heritage Month should be every month of the year ... At some point, Asians and Pacific Islanders have emigrated to the United States ... The values ... that we all hold, taking care of our elders, respecting our neighbors, thinking of the community versus thinking of [ourselves] first, I think these are contributions that should be celebrated and should be adopted by people who aren't Asian or Pacific Islander. Imagine if everybody did that. I think we would be better off as a society, as a community, as an armed force.

Karen Lau

00:38:21.180 --> 00:38:27.000

Thank you so much, Lieutenant Commander Igisomar. It's been a pleasure to get to know you and learn from you today.

Christine Igisomar

00:38:27.000 --> 00:38:35.370

Thank you, Karen. I really appreciate you doing this. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share and I really wish you the best in this project.