



Walking Shield helps American Indians

by Staff Sgt. C. Todd Lopez
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3/5/2004 - **WASHINGTON** -- For 10 years now, the Air Force has helped house and provide assistance to American Indians living on reservations in the United States through its participation in Operation Walking Shield.

The Air Force deputy assistant secretary for installations, Fred Kuhn, co-chaired the OWS Management Conference recently in Las Vegas. According to OWS program director and creator, Phil Walking Shield Stevens, conference attendees planned for OWS activities during the next 24 months.

"We did a review of each project to make sure everybody was ready to perform the missions coming in the spring," Mr. Stevens said. "We have to assure all the materials are available for the military. This was a management conference between tribal members and the military to make sure everybody was ready to go."

According to Mr. Kuhn, the program teams federal agencies with American Indian groups to help improve living conditions on American Indian reservations. Air Force participation includes donating surplus military-housing units and supplies, developing infrastructure and administering medical care. The program also provides training opportunities to military members.

"The program is an endeavor on the part of the many federal agencies and in particular the Department of Defense, to assist Native American tribes in the United States," Mr. Kuhn said. "When you go to a reservation, you find great opportunities for bare-base training, in particular for Airmen involved in civil engineering."

Since the program's inception, the Air Force has donated 885 surplus military-family housing units to American Indians. The homes came from Grand Forks and Minot Air Force bases in North Dakota, and Malmstrom AFB, Mont. The Air Force would have had to pay more than \$6 million to have the homes demolished and the debris hauled away, Mr. Kuhn said. By donating the homes, that cost was avoided.

The homes now belong to tribes in North and South Dakota, Minnesota and Montana. The arrival of the new homes changed the lives of those who now live in them, said Mr. Stevens.

"The families in those homes are extremely grateful for the support the Air Force has provided," Mr. Stevens said. "In some of the cases, these families may have had as many as nine people in a one-room building. They were all jammed together in a house that was about 280 square feet. They are now in one of the Air Force homes that is about 1,300 square feet, and they are absolutely delighted with the situation."

Today, as many as 5,000 American Indians are living in the homes the Air Force provided. But the homes did not arrive at the reservations ready-for-occupancy. The homes needed running water, electricity and sewage lines. Because Air Force civil engineers do that work for a living, fitting the transplanted homes with utilities provided an opportunity for them to exercise their skills.

"When those houses get to the reservations, you can't just plop them down," Mr. Kuhn said. "You have to hook them up to sewers, electricity and other utilities. You have to put them on a foundation. Military personnel, in particular our Guard and Reserve personnel, assisted the Native Americans in doing that."

American Indian reservations are in some of the most remote areas of the country. They are in wilderness areas, deserts and arctic regions. Being able to conduct military training in such diverse areas prepares Airmen for deployments to similar areas overseas, said Mr. Kuhn.

Besides infrastructure support and free housing, the Air Force and its sister services provide much-needed medical service to people living on reservations.

"Air Force medics, doctors, nurses and dentists have helped, in joint environments, to provide health care to over 60,000 Native Americans," Mr. Stevens said.

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Houses and medical care are the most obvious benefits of having Airmen participate in OWS, but there are benefits beyond the obvious. Simply having Airmen there swinging hammers, pouring cement, installing plumbing, and exuding confidence and discipline, has an effect on young American Indians.

"These young Native Americans see these young Airmen with technical skills, with expertise, with focus and with direction," Mr. Kuhn said. "As they watch an Airman with a welding torch, they learn how it operates. They gain a tremendous skill base. They are also seeing a role model and think they can maybe get there someday. I think that is one of the things that senior leadership of those tribes sees."

Showcasing the skills of Airmen in front of young American Indians demonstrates what can be achieved by enlisting in the military. Mr. Kuhn said it helps with recruiting. Mr. Stevens agrees.

"Almost every young Native American joins the military," Mr. Stevens said. "It is a way to get off the reservation and see what the world is like.

"The Native American's have the highest enlistment record of any group in the (United States)," he said. "I have seen a lot of bronze stars, silver stars and purple hearts on the reservations."

The familiarity of American Indians with the military was important in getting the services to participate in OWS.

"When I first started this program, the military asked if Native Americans would be welcoming," Mr. Stevens said. "I told them that some of these men have fought on the island of Iwo Jima. They bled on the battlefields of Europe. They died in the jungles of Vietnam. They fought right next to some of the people that are in the military today. Now they need the military to come out there and help them get decent homes for them and their family. They would welcome the military."

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