

Six Nations people join

U.S. forces in gulf

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By Vicki White, Expositor Staff

OHSWEKEN — Last summer, Mohawks confronted members of the Canadian forces in the Oka conflict.

This winter, Mohawks are working side by side with those forces in the Persian Gulf.

At least seven members of the Six Nations community are fighting with United States and Canadian forces in the Gulf war.

And many others are at home waiting anxiously for their turn.

Ray Hill, a Mohawk, served with the U.S. navy during the Vietnam war. His 21-year-old daughter, Laurie, is now on a U.S. repair ship near Saudi Arabia.

"My grandfather served in the First World War, and my grandson, he's four ... he's a real navy man," said Mr. Hill, a band councillor.

"You can't take that out of your family blood."

The Hills are only one example of many Six Nations families who have a long tradition of military service.

The Iroquois — a union of six nations, including the Mohawks — had a well-respected military reputation before Europeans arrived in North America.

Role repeated

During the American Revolution they were loyal and powerful allies of the British, a role repeated in the War of 1812.

They continued to enlist in vast numbers for the First and Second world wars and the Vietnam War. Now there's a war in the Middle East.

About 12,700 native people currently serve in the U.S. armed forces.

Many are Canadian.

It is difficult to get similar figures for the Canadian forces.

A spokesman for the Department of National Defense said they don't keep track of information regarding race or sex.

Hugh Taylor, former president of the National Indian Veterans Association, said about 4,000 native people served with the Canadian forces in the First World War and more than 11,000 volunteered for the Second World War.

Laird Christie, an anthropology professor at Wilfrid Laurier University, said native people may be prompted to join the forces because they have a close bond with the Crown, now represented by the government of Canada.

In addition, military service is a career that may be more appealing to people who live in remote areas or don't have much formal education.

"My hunch is that the armed forces have provided for Indian people in remote or isolated communities a way to get up and out," he said.

Since the Six Nations people originally lived in upper New York State they still have many ties to the U.S. and may be more likely than non-natives to volunteer for the American forces.

Bob Johnson, a Mohawk who was in the U.S. marines during the Vietnam war, said that will probably continue in the next generation.

Mr. Johnson, community health services director for Six Nations, said his two teenage sons watched Canadian soldiers line up against armed Mohawks during the Oka conflict.

"My boys aren't too keen on joining the Canadian forces — I won't tell you what they say about it.

"They're interested in the American forces," he said, noting that neither son has chosen a career.

Ray Hill went to Oka and was angered by the actions of Canadian Armed Forces personnel.

But he does not feel individual soldiers were at fault.

"I have problems with the prime minister and how he does things, but I don't hold it against the Canadian soldiers because they're just doing what they're told, and the army is just doing what the government tells them."