Lighting the past, present, future

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The cold choppy waters of the Mekong River lapped at the feet of six teenagers as they began their escape from the communist run country of Laos. Sgt. 1st Class Samboun Sengsy, then 16, and the other teens swam for two hours using plastic bags as makeshift flotation devices.

"We all were nervous, tired and scared. I knew that being captured was not an option. I knew that the only options I had were make it across the river to Thailand or die," the Greensboro, N.C. resident, brigade paralegal non-commissioned officer in charge, 8th Military Police Brigade said.

May was the designated month to celebrate contributions Asian Pacific Americans, like Sengsy, have made to the United States. To celebrate the contributions, Servicemembers gathered May 29 in the Al Faw Palace, Camp Victory.

Guest speakers Dr. Dave Matsuda and Miaie Sung spoke about the different traditions that Asian Pacific Americans have and the hardship that many have faced.

Matsuda deployed with a Human Terrain Team to Iraq 2007-2008 and currently trains team members for deployment.

Sung received recognition from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence for her support to the intelligence community 2006 during the North Korea missile and nuclear event. She also volunteered to be the liaison to Multi-National Corps-Iraq.

"The U.S. is a melting pot and it's important to recognize the different cultures that make up the nation. The ceremony displayed a great variety of culture and exposed people to traditions," Air Force 1st Lt. Shaun Y. Robinson, a native of Honolulu, Hawaii, communications officer, Combined Partnering Operation Center, Multi-National Corps-Iraq said.

Photo by Pvt. Karin Leach

Servicemembers watch members of the Pilipinas Dance Group dance during a ceremony to celebrate Asian Pacific American Heritage Month at the Al Faw Palace May 29 Camp Victory.

The ceremony encompassed five different groups displaying traditional Filipino dances, Pacific Islander dances and Filipino martial arts.

"Asians and Pacific Islanders have contributed so much throughout history. I am very proud to be a part of this celebration," 1st Lt. Memorina Barnes, a member of the Toa Samoa Dance Group and a native of Pohnpei, Micronesia, executive officer for Headquarters Service Company, Division Special Troops Battalion, 1st Cavalry Division said.

The pride on each of the dancer's faces could not be hidden even though many had thick layers of colorful paint covering their entire bodies.

"Nine years later, after all that was given to me, I wondered what I could do to show my appreciation," Sengsy said. "I wanted to give back to this great country; this country that transferred my family's lives from nothing to something. I wanted to show my gratitude. I asked myself what I could offer. I decided to join the Army on April 29, 1998. The Army has taught me even more about freedom and preserving the rights that I pursued when swimming across the Mekong River almost 30 years ago."