



Native Hawaiian Organization (NHO) 501(c)3 Nonprofit

More Than Contractors: NHOs Are The Cultural Force Behind Pacific Security

By Mel Yokoyama

Baghdad Iraq: During the height of ISIS's invasion into Iraq in 2016, I served as the U.S. Ambassador's Senior Advisor to Iraq's Minister and Chief of Defense. In Iraq's tribal society, trust isn't given—it's earned through shared experience, respect, and humility.



08 February 2017: His Excellency Erfan al-Hayli, **Iraqi Minister of Defense**



09 November 2016: General Othman al-Ghanmi, **Iraqi Chief of Defense**

That came naturally to me. Growing up in the rural community of Ka'ū on the Big Island of Hawaii, I was raised with the belief that your word is your bond, relationships are built on authenticity, and true strength is measured through service—not status.

As descendants of Native Hawaiian warriors, the people of Ka'ū carry a legacy of guardianship and toughness—shaped by the district's rugged terrain and isolation. It's a legacy rooted in humility, loyalty, and service. That foundation gave me the ability to build trust and navigate complex relationships in Iraq—skills that directly apply to the strategic challenges ***we now face across the Pacific.***

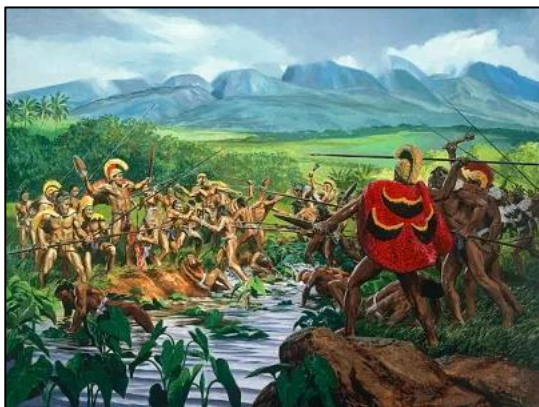
Native Hawaiian Organizartions (NHO) I founded the **Mālama Ka'ū Foundation** to give back to the place that made me. But our mission goes beyond my hometown. Native Hawaiian Organizations like ours are more than nonprofits or 8(a) contractors—we are trusted connectors in the Pacific, especially with our South Pacific 'ohana. In a region where trust is earned, not granted, we bring cultural fluency and strategic relationships that matter.



Native Hawaiian Organization (NHO) 501(c)3 Nonprofit

Warrior Ethos: Native Hawaiian culture is a warrior culture. We are protectors, navigators, and defenders of our 'āina and people. **This warrior ethos is in our DNA.** It shaped how I earned the trust of senior Iraqi leaders and built durable partnerships in a high-stakes combat zone.

This same ethos is what the Department of Defense needs in the Pacific region today. Native Hawaiian Organizations (NHO), **led by Native Hawaiian board members**, carry a unique blend of cultural fluency and mission-driven purpose. We can speak the language of both diplomacy and readiness. We understand the Pacific not just geographically, but spiritually.



Ancient Hawaii: Island rulers (Ali'i) ascended to power through warfare.



Modern Hawaii: 25th Infantry Division, rapid deployment and strength in the Pacific

Building Trust Across Oceans: In Ka'ū, when conflict arises, we turn to *ho'oponopono* — a sacred practice of reconciliation and healing. In Baghdad, *ho'oponopono* became my guide for building trust with the Iraqi military leadership. It wasn't about imposing our will, but about restoring balance, resolving tensions, and building lasting relationships.

That same approach can be applied across the South Pacific—to **Tonga, Samoa, Fiji, and our other Pacific 'ohana**. These are not transactional relationships. They require cultural respect and deep commitment. NHOs, through **Native Hawaiian** board leadership, are uniquely equipped to serve as trusted partners and connectors.

In many South Pacific nations, China is expanding influence by building infrastructure and offering financial support. **But what China lacks is aloha.** NHOs bring what money can't buy: authentic, culturally grounded relationships that support stability and defense readiness.



Native Hawaiian Organization (NHO) 501(c)3 Nonprofit



Native Hawaiian and Indigenous Taiwan Partnership: Cultural exchange in Taiwan to celebrate our shared “Austronesian” heritage. The Austronesian language family, to which the Hawaiian language belongs, originated in Taiwan. The early speakers of this language group developed maritime sailing technology that enabled them to voyage throughout the Pacific and

NHOs: More Than Contractors. We must reframe how the Department of Defense views Native Hawaiian Organizations. **We are not just 8(a) small business contractors.** We are cultural allies, community anchors, and strategic assets. Our Native Hawaiian board members have deep roots across the Pacific, and our organizations are **committed to advancing military readiness while empowering indigenous communities.**

Our value lies in trust—the trust we build with warfighters, the trust we foster across oceans, and the trust we uphold with our own people.



Our Kuleana, Our Time



Native Hawaiian Organization (NHO) 501(c)3 Nonprofit

A Call to Arms. To my fellow Native Hawaiian board members: our time is now. Military readiness in the Pacific **requires more than winning DoD contracts**, delivering equipment and logistics—it requires deep, authentic relationships. We are stewards of that responsibility. **We must step up as Native Hawaiians, not in competition to line our pockets with kālā (money), but in culture, diplomacy, and leadership.**

Let us use our platforms as NHOs to protect not just Hawai'i, but our South Pacific 'ohana. Let us demonstrate that readiness begins with trust, and trust begins with those who live the culture.

The warrior ethos lives on. And it lives in us.

Imua!!