

## Wyandotte Nation of Oklahoma

<http://www.wyandotte-nation.org/>

### Wyandotte Chief Bearskin dies

Chief Leaford Bearskin Wyandotte Nation Chief Leaford Bearskin, 91, an American war hero and leader, died Nov. 9, 2012. Born in Wyandotte, Okla., in 1921 to parents John and Myrtle Bearskin, Leaford Bearskin ... began his active and historic life on the territory of the Wyandotte Nation. A proud leader, he first and foremost wanted to be known as a Wyandotte Indian. Living the proud life of a young Wyandotte, Bearskin developed into a leader at an early age with his 12 brothers and sister. Chief Bearskin is survived by his wife, Barbara, son, Ron and daughter, Nancy. Shortly after graduating from high school in 1939, Leaford

Bearskin set out on a career in the Army Air Corps, as it was called in those days. By the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Dec. 7,

1941, he was a sergeant serving in Alaska. Not long thereafter he was enrolled in pilot training and looking forward to his "wings." As with many young men of the time, he had hoped to be assigned to a P-38 fighter squadron. In that he was disappointed. Instead, he went to the 90th Bombardment Group where he would soon be flying a B-24, one of the great heavy bombers of World War II. The 90th soon became known as the "Jolly Rogers" Group and was destined to gain fame in the skies above New Guinea. In the absence of fighter cover on one mission he

volunteered to fly top cover and was forever respected by his fellow pilots. Engaged in dangerous air missions he was proudest to never have lost a crew member. Capt. Bearskin flew a plane called "Big Chief" on 46 combat missions before he and his war party returned to the United States. The young Wyandotte was made squadron commander and his service to his country did not end when peace came. In 1948, he flew 29 missions during the Berlin Airlift. Later, while a deputy commander of a fighter base in Georgia, he participated in the first flight of jet fighters across the Pacific. Later still, he served as a squadron commander during the Korean War. For his service to his country, Bearskin received numerous honors and citations including the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Medal for Humane Action. He retired from the military in 1960 but continued in government service and worked on various missile systems at Vandenburg Air Force Base. Eventually he really did retire and headed home to Oklahoma. Not content just to ride his horses and to catch an occasional fish, Bearskin took an active interest in his tribe. Since September 1983,

Bearskin has been chief of the Wyandotte Tribe of Oklahoma. He worked hard for his people and brought to fruition a number of innovative and imaginative projects for the advancement of his tribe. He was key in the establishment of the 7th Street Casino in Kansas City, Kan., and many of the monuments throughout Wyandotte County, Kan. Today he is recognized as one of the historic leaders of Native Americans throughout the country. A recipient of numerous awards Bearskin received the Indian Achievement Award presented by The Center for the History of the American Indian in Chicago and was honored by the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Under Chief Bearskin's leadership, vast improvements in healthcare, education, social services, employment, emergency services, culture and heritage, have been possible. "His influence has not only been felt by our Nation, but throughout the state of Oklahoma and across the United States. He was a loyal and fierce advocate of tribal sovereignty and rights for not only the Wyandotte Nation, but for all tribes across this great nation," presiding Chief of the Wyandotte Nation Billy Friend said. "The citizens

of the Wyandotte Nation are deeply saddened by the passing of our great leader. He was a member of the greatest generation and one of the best of that generation. He served the nation and the Wyandotte Nation and helped bring our tribe to where we are today,” Chief Friend said of his friend and mentor. At his retirement honors held this past spring, Chief Bearskin said, “I have seen many countries but I will say it again, and again, and again, we have the best country in the world.” Chief Bearskin went on to honor his wife Barbara at the event, and said, “She has been with me all of these years. She has been by my side wherever I’ve been and I want to tell you she has been one of my greatest supporters. I have another message for Barbara Bearskin. I met you a long time ago in California, I loved you then, but if it’s possible I love you more today.”

Chief Bearskin ended his remarks that day by saying, “I want to say thank you, thank you a thousand times. I am the proudest Indian in the whole country.” And with that the great warrior, leader and Chief of the Wyandotte Nation left the stage.