

#3- Veterans' Honoring

Native veterans honored for World War II service Monday, July 12, 2004 indianz.com

Five Native men and women who served the United States during World War II were recognized for their dedication and commitment at a ceremony in Washington, D.C., on Friday.

The five honorees were among the 40,000 Native Americans who took part in that global conflict. But with World War II vets dying at a rate of over 1,000 a day, they are among the few alive who can still share their wisdom and experience.

"It is a generation that is quickly becoming something that we need to relish and enjoy now in terms of our ability to feel proud of who we are," said D. Bambi Kraus, president of the National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (NATHPO).

NATHPO used its annual meeting to pay tribute to the veterans, who came from around the country and represent a cross-section of tribes, backgrounds and military records. What they all had in common was their willingness to serve their country when called upon, said a Department of Defense official.

"We recognize in the department, we recognize as a nation, the deep commitment of the Native American community to the defense of the United States," said Philip W. Grone, a high-ranking Pentagon official.

To Marcella LeBeau, a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe of South Dakota, it was all in a day's work. She was just 24 when she volunteered to become a nurse in the U.S. Army.

"I was young, I didn't know what war was," said LeBeau, 84.

She soon found out, having treated some of the first casualties at the Battle of the Bulge and on D-Day, two of the biggest actions in the war. She returned to France last month, on the 60th anniversary of the D-Day invasion, to receive the Legion of Honor, France's highest military award.

"I don't consider myself a hero," said LeBeau, 84. "But in the role that I played, accepting the Legion of Honor, it was for everyone -- all of our World War II veterans and especially Native Americans."

Gilbert Horn Sr. was equally humble about his experience. A member of the Assiniboine Tribe on the Fort Belknap Reservation in Montana, he spent five years in the Pacific, where his U.S. Army unit, known as "Merrill's Marauders," helped take Guadalcanal.

But he said the war wasn't only about people like him. "It was a total war effort by everybody in America," said Horn, 81. "It wasn't just the people overseas sacrificing their lives."

Horn said his two of his younger sisters sold beaded buckskins dresses for \$1,000 bonds to help finance the war. His uncles and grandfather built ships and tanks for the soldiers, he recalled.

"That's what I mean by total effort," he said. "Each one of us, and each one of our people behind us, gave all they had to give. So I was proud to serve."

Glenn Moore Sr., a member of the Yurok Tribe of California, served in the Army AirCorps during the war. He said being a soldier was a lot like being a student at Sherman Indian Boarding School.

"When I went to the Army, everyone was complaining about roll calls, bed checks," remembered Moore, 85. "I was used to that."

Moore wasn't the only member of his family who helped the country at a time of need. Three of his brothers served in the Pacific theater in the war, including one who died. His wife of 55 years, Dorothy, was a certified welder, and other California Indians worked in shipyards and aircraft factories, he said.

"The Native Americans took a big part," he said.

Santiago Riley, from Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico, served in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans during the war. For three years, he served on two U.S. Navy warships that narrowly survived attacks from the Japanese.

"It's nothing nice bein in the war, being shot at," said Riley, 80. "You can't tell if you're going to be alive the next day."

Riley said many fellow tribal members went overseas as well. "Most of them came home safe," he recalled.

Benjamin Wright Sr., a member of the Puyallup Tribe of Washington, joined the U.S. Navy in 1941. He spent five years in the service, most of it in the Pacific, where he endured some of the harshest weather and living conditions.

Wright attended the ceremony but, due to a medical condition, kept his remarks short. He currently works for his tribe's employment program.

In addition to the 40,000 in WWII, Grone said 12,000 Native Americans served in World War I, according to Defense Department figures. In Vietnam, 42,000 Native Americans served, 90 percent of whom volunteered.

The military tradition continues today, he said. Currently, 13,000 Native Americans are on active duty, including 6,400 on reserve. Many are deployed in Iraq.

"While we honor the deep contributions of the individuals here," he noted, "we also again recognize the contribution that continues."

Relevant Links:

National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers - <http://www.nathpo.org>

Honoring our Veterans

As the 21st century begins, there are over 190,000 Native American military veterans. It is well recognized that, historically, Native Americans have the highest record of service per capita when compared to other ethnic groups. The reasons behind this disproportionate contribution are complex and deeply rooted in traditional American Indian culture. In many respects, Native Americans are no different from others who volunteer for military service. They do, however, have distinctive cultural values which drive them to serve their country. One such value is their proud warrior tradition.

In part, the warrior tradition is a willingness to engage the enemy in battle. This characteristic has been clearly demonstrated by the courageous deeds of Native Americans in combat. However, the warrior tradition is best exemplified by the followings qualities said to be inherent to most if not an Native American societies: Strength, Honor, Pride, Devotion, and Wisdom. These qualities make a perfect fit with military tradition.

To be an American Indian warrior is to have physical, mental, and spiritual strength. A warrior must be prepared to overpower the enemy and face death head-on.

American Indian soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen have fought heroically in all of this century's wars and armed conflicts. They have not only been formally recognized for their bravery through military decoration but through anecdotal observation as well.

More important, however, is the warrior's spiritual strength. Many traditional cultures recognize that war disrupts the natural order of life and causes a spiritual disharmony. To survive the chaos of war is to gain a more intimate knowledge of life. Therefore, military service is a unique way to develop an inner strength that is valued in Native American society.

Having a strong sense of inner spirituality is also a part of the Indian character. Many Native Americans are raised on rural or remote reservations, an environment that fosters self-reliance, introspection, and a meditative way of thinking. These character traits can be very beneficial when adapting to the occasional isolation of military life in times of both peace and war.

"We honor our veterans for their bravery and because by seeing death on the battlefield, they truly know the greatness of life."

- Winnebago Elder