Honoring the Native American tradition of service

Patriot Nations

Eagle-feather war bonnets adorn U.S. military uniform jackets at a Ton-Kon-Gah (Black Leggings Society) ceremonial, held annually near Anadarko, Okla., to honor Kiowa tribal veterans. (Courtesy of the National Museum of the American Indian)

Beginning with the Revolutionary War and including every major U.S. military conflict since, Native Americans have served in the armed forces in higher numbers per capita than any other ethnic group.
In 1994, Congress passed a bill authorizing the creation of a memorial honoring Native American veterans. Twenty-three years later, that vision is well on its way to becoming a reality.

“This is a tremendously important effort to recognize Native Americans’ service to this nation. We have so much to celebrate. Like so many others, I was compelled to serve to honor the warrior tradition that is inherent to most Native American societies—the pillars of strength, honor, pride, devotion and wisdom,” said former U.S. Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell, a Northern Cheyenne veteran of the Korean War, in American Indian, the membership magazine for the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI).

To honor the indigenous people who served and sacrificed, the museum is hosting the yearlong exhibition “Patriot Nations: Native Americans in Our Nation’s Armed Forces.” The exhibition outlines the history of Native American military service and explains why the creation of a National Native American Veterans Memorial is important to not only native people but also all Americans.

“Tens of thousands of Native Americans joined the U.S. armed forces during World Wars I and II,” said Herman J. Viola, curator of the exhibition. “Forty-four thousand Native Americans served in World War II; the entire population of Native Americans was less than 350,000 at the time.”

With the contentious history between the U.S. government and Native American nations, many might find the high rates of service for indigenous people surprising, according to NMAI Director Kevin Gover.

The exhibition has personal meaning for Gover, who is Pawnee. His grandfather, Phillip Gover, was a code talker in the Second World War, serving in the famed Thunderbirds, part of the Oklahoma Army National Guard. He lost an arm during the Battle of Monte Cassino. Even more devastating, he lost his
brother, who served alongside him in the 45th Infantry Division. Grant Gover was killed in action in France.

“Native veterans were willing to fight and die for the land that was taken from them, despite the U.S. actively deconstructing American Indian nations,” explained Gover.

DAV life member Tyson Bahe served in the U.S. Army, deploying to Afghanistan twice.

“The Native American culture is one of warriors,” said Bahe, who is Navajo. “The elders pass down stories of warrior ancestors, and it is viewed as an honor to serve.”

Bahe followed in the footsteps of his mother, father and grandfather by joining the military.

“Serving in the Army was important to me because of both my family and tribal legacy of service. We have a long history of standing up to protect our land,” said Bahe, who is a member of DAV Chapter 21 in Gallup, N.M.

Serving those who served

Unique challenges face Native American veterans following military service.
Jeff Eller is an assistant supervisor in the Muskogee National Service Office, and he also plays an important role as a liaison to area Native American veterans for the DAV Department of Oklahoma.

“There are many Native American tribes headquartered within our state, and we saw an unmet need—too many veterans did not have access to the benefits they earned through service,” explained DAV Department Adjutant Danny Oliver. “We established a Native American Veteran Outreach Program, which Jeff serves as the director of, and we now have service officers located in tribal veteran centers. This program enables us to better serve our Native American brothers- and sisters-in-arms.”

A combat-disabled Army veteran, Eller is a member of the Cherokee Nation; his wife is Creek.

“The treatment Native Americans received in the past didn’t impact their pride in their land and the commitment to protect it. That is why there is such a legacy of service from the tribal community,” said Eller.

He said that, while Native Americans did serve in the military, some veterans may still be distrusting of the government and therefore less likely to seek out the benefits earned through service.

“It is extremely important for me to bridge that gap between the elders and the government and let the veterans know there are benefits they have access to,” said Eller. “We have to break down that barrier so that they feel comfortable and trusting of us to represent them.”

A recent change in the Code of Federal Regulations allows eligible tribal organizations to become accredited to provide representation for claims and appeals before the Department of Veterans Affairs. The tribal representation will have to meet the same stringent requirements facing DAV and other veterans
Eller, along with other Oklahoma service officers, has conducted training at Cherokee, Chocktaw and other area native nations and helped with the benefits process.

DAV assists veterans with nearly 300,000 benefit claims annually, and in 2016, DAV attained more than $4 billion in new and retroactive benefits to care for veterans, their families and survivors.

“DAV’s history of helping veterans speaks for itself,” said Eller. “Benefits assistance is a learned experience, and we want to take that to all veterans, including Native Americans who might be more difficult to reach due to cultural or logistical barriers.

“There is so much pride in their tribe and in the nation,” he added. “There is honor in what Native American veterans have done and what they have endured.”

DAV life member Tyson Bahe, Cherokee, followed his family’s long history of military service when he joined the Army as a
cavalry scout in 2008. He served for five years and deployed to Afghanistan twice. (Courtesy of Tyson Bahe)

“Native American veterans served a country whose government did not always keep its promises to them,” said DAV Washington Headquarters Executive Director Garry Augustine. “DAV honors these men and women who served, including the 140,000 living Native American veterans. ‘Patriot Nations’ and the forthcoming National Native American Veterans Memorial recognizes these veterans who went above and beyond in answering the call of duty.”

Honoring the patriot nations

Jerletta Halford-Pandos is the assistant adjutant of the DAV Department of Oklahoma and of both Cherokee and Chocktaw descent. She said she looks forward to the creation of the National Native American Veterans Memorial, which is slated for a Veterans Day 2020 dedication. The call for design proposals will soon be underway.

“Land was taken from my ancestors, but they still vowed to protect it. That’s a part of my history, and I’m proud to be a veteran who has continued this Native American legacy of service,” said Halford-Pandos, a 22-year Army veteran who also serves as adjutant for Chapter 9 in Sapulpa.

While the exhibition and museum will be educational for anyone, regardless of their heritage or military service, it holds special meaning for Native American veterans.

“There is a strong sense of camaraderie within the native
community. It wasn’t often, but when I did see another Indian on deployment, especially Navajos, we immediately had a unique bond. Seeing fellow natives provided a sense of home during a time of war,” said Bahe.

He added that the memorial will honor this bond between native veterans and their land, and it will show American citizens how long indigenous people have been fighting for them.

“We are warriors with a history of service,” he said.

See “Patriot Nations: Native Americans in Our Nation’s Armed Forces”

The Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian reveals the remarkable history of Native American veterans through art, photography and essays in a 16-panel exhibition documenting 250 years of native peoples’ contributions in U.S. military history. The exhibition will remain on view until January 2018 in the museum’s Sealaska Gallery in Washington, D.C. A companion traveling exhibition can be seen across the country, with the following stops:

- Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina, Pembroke, N.C., April–July 2017
- Mid-America All-Indian Center, Wichita, Kan., May–September 2017
- Potawatomi Nation Cultural Heritage Center, Shawnee, Okla., June 2017–January 2018
- United States Military Academy, West Point, N.Y., October–November 2017