

STATEMENT OF SENATOR DANIEL K. INOUE  
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BEFORE THE  
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN  
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NATIVE AMERICAN VETERANS

From the earliest days of our history as a nation, men and women have come together to honor America's veterans. There have been presidential proclamations, and some of the most memorable words have been spoken in tribute to those who have served the United States in the Armed Forces. But strangely, in many of these gatherings, the contributions of one group of Americans have been consistently overlooked.

Few Americans know, for instance, that in proportion to their representation in the nation's population, Native American men and women have served their country in far greater numbers than any other group in our society. In fact, nearly three times as many American Indians have served in the Armed Services as compared to their non-Indian counterparts.

Few of our citizens may be aware that when the Armed Forces began mobilizing in the late 1930's, Native Americans began enlisting in unprecedented numbers, or that ninety-nine percent of all eligible Native Americans registered for the draft -- thereby setting a national standard.

By the close of World War II, one third of all able-bodied Indian men between the ages of 18 and 50, had served our nation. But the service of Native Americans did not begin nor end with World War II.

Indian tribes participated in the American revolution, and it is well documented that General George Washington and his troops would not have survived the winter at Valley Forge, had the Indians not sustained them with food supplies.

While history was later to record the devastating impacts on Indian people of this nation's westward expansion, it was Indian scouts who enabled the white settlers to explore the west.

Choctaw Indians were distinguished in the War of 1812, and during the Civil War, Native Americans fought with both Confederate and Union troops.

In the decades which followed the era of the Indian wars -- a time in which our government pursued a deliberate policy of exterminating Native people -- in 1891, the United States Army was still able to enlist one company of Indians for each of the twenty-six regiments, or approximately 4,000 Indian men, to serve with white cavalry and infantry serving west of the Mississippi.

A year later, the Congress authorized the President to "enlist and employ in the territories and Indian country, a force of Indians, not to exceed one thousand, to act as scouts". The Inspector General's Report of 1892 noted that Indian soldiers demonstrated remarkable aptitude for military duty and were proud of their service to the nation. In World War I, three hundred and thirty one Native Americans sacrificed their lives for America, and two hundred and sixty-two were wounded in action.

It is an ironic footnote in our history that a Nazi propaganda broadcast summary during the early months of World War II predicted "an Indian uprising in the United States" if Native Americans "were asked to fight against the axis" countries. This statement was apparently based upon the German view that because Native Americans had been massacred, stripped of their lands, deprived of many aspects of their tribal cultures, and left the most destitute of the nation's poor, they would be reluctant to risk their lives in military service for the United States. However, over 7,500 Native people entered the military in less than six

months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. And a few months before the end of the War — 21,767 Native Americans were in active duty service in all theaters of the war.

In the Pacific, they endured the Bataan death march and were incarcerated in the enemy prison camps in the Philippines. In the Mediterranean theater of operations, Native Americans were part of the 45th division as it fought its way through Sicily and Italy. In the European theater, thirteen Native Americans were in the first wave of paratroopers who prepared the way for the Allied landings in Normandy.

If that earlier Nazi propaganda projection of an "Indian uprising" was widely accepted by enemy troops, it probably came as a great surprise to them that the tribal code-talkers and code-breakers were later to become the instrument of their demise.

In every military action since that time, Indian people have continued to serve this country in unprecedented numbers, in Korea, and in Vietnam with over 42,000 strong, and again with the largest proportionate representation amongst the ranks of those who fought in Desert Shield and Desert Storm. As of December 1993, there were an estimated 209,000 living Native American veterans — or more than eight percent of the total population of veterans in the United States.

With this overwhelming demonstration of their loyalty and commitment to this nation, their courage and bravery throughout our history, I consider it a great privilege and an honor, to have served our Native American brothers and sisters in the Congress as the Chairman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs for the past eight years, and for the past three years, as the Committee's Vice Chairman.

And so today, I ask you to join me in paying tribute to our most distinguished citizen veterans -- this nation's First Americans.