

## NATIVE AMERICAN MILITARY SERVICE

## Our Indigenous Heroes

Native Americans have served with distinction in every major American conflict since the American Revolution. American Indian and Alaska Native men and women serve at high rates in the military and have a long tradition of protecting their homelands and families.

Native Americans have a complicated history with the United States due to broken treaties, forced removals, and forced assimilation. As a result of wars with the United States, many Native Americans lost their lives and, primarily from the Indian Removal Act of 1830, almost thirty-three different tribes were forced off their lands. Additionally, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many Native children were forced to attend military boarding schools that were often far away from their families and homes and that led to enormous loss of culture and family cohesion.

Despite the problematic relationships and history of distrust between Native Americans and the United States, American Indians have served in the armed forces for more than 200 years. The reasons for service have varied over time and among individuals. A person's family history, a need for employment, or a strong desire to serve were—and are still today—important factors.

During World War I, especially, some Native people served to achieve United States citizenship (many Native people were denied citizenship until 1924). In World War I and World War II, Native languages, once stifled by boarding schools, became a major asset to the U.S. military, to be used in coded messages. In World War II, Native American soldiers, including the Navajo, Comanche, and Meskwaki, developed codes that they used actively on the battlefield as Code Talkers. Members of many other Native American nations did not develop codes but used their languages to convey battle messages. Native American soldiers' knowledge, skills, and languages protected the lives of the people in their homelands and throughout the United States.

Ironically, the Native legacy of military service promoted a stereotype about American Indians: that they were "super warriors," whose combat skills derived from ancient tribal warrior traditions. Although some tribes celebrate time-honored warrior cultures, not all do, and most tribes maintain equally strong traditions of peace and diplomacy.

Native Americans have continued to rise above unparalleled challenges to defend the United States with pride and honor. Native American veterans continue to be greatly respected in their communities and by the nation they served. We encourage you to include Native perspectives when teaching about American history and to honor legacies of Indigenous military service by sharing their diverse experiences serving our country.



Grace Thorpe (Sac and Fox) in her Women's Army Corps uniform. Thorpe received a Bronze Star for her service in World War II. She went on to serve as an advocate and activist for all Native Americans. NMAI-085\_pht\_007\_002

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Caption: The Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) National Native American Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, dedicated in 2020, honors and raises awareness of the exceptional military service performed by Native Americans. Photo by Alan Karchmer for the National Museum of the American Indian.

**Use these veteran-related educational resources:**

Use the NMAI [Native Words, Native Warriors](#) classroom website to learn more about warrior traditions, boarding schools, and Native American military service during World Wars I and II.

Read the blog [Native Words, Native Warriors: Telling a More Complete Story about Native American Code Talkers | The National WWII Museum | New Orleans \(nationalww2museum.org\)](#).

Learn about the NMAI's [National Native American Veterans Memorial](#) in Washington, DC.

Read [Why We Serve: Native Americans in the United States Armed Forces](#) by Alexandra N. Harris and Mark G. Hirsch. Available through NMAI.