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A History of Military Service: Native Americans in the U.S. Military Yesterday and Today

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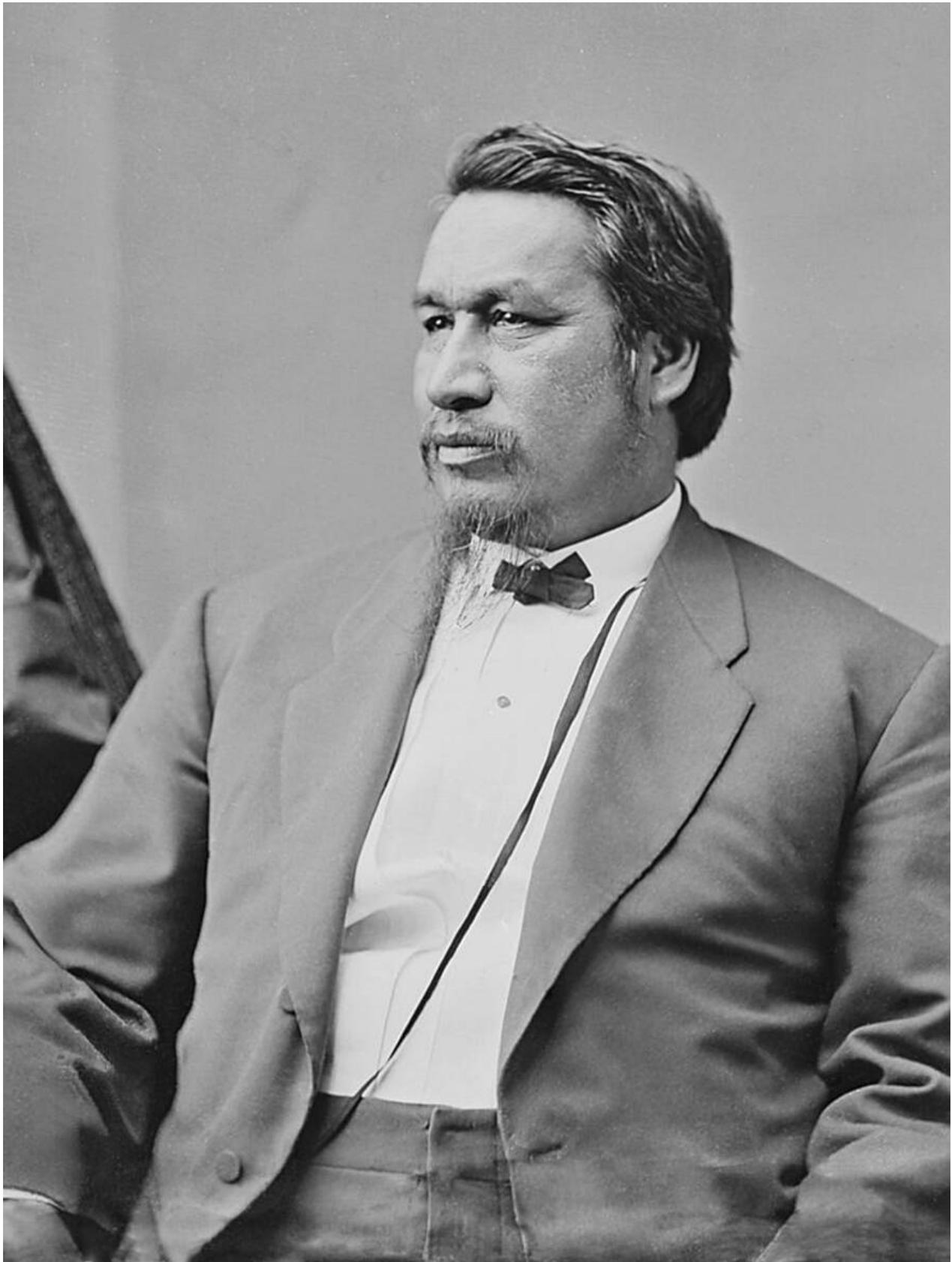
 TWEET 

By Danielle DeSimone

Native Americans serve in the United States' Armed Forces at five times the national average. **For a community that has persevered through decades of challenges, Native Americans – also called American Indians – have remained steadfast in their defense of the United States as members of the Armed Forces for centuries.** And while Native Americans have a long and complicated history of serving in the U.S. military, it is also a proud one.

Here is a look at Native American contributions to the military, throughout history and today.

Native Americans Have a Long History of Service



Gen. Ely S. Parker served as secretary to General Ulysses S. Grant during the Civil War and later became the first Native American to hold the post of Commissioner of Indian Affairs. | Photo credit National Archives and Records Administration

Native Americans have served in the U.S. military in every major conflict for more than 200 years. From the battlefields of the Revolutionary War, to the beaches of Normandy on D-Day to the front lines of today, American Indians and Alaska Native people have defended this country for centuries. Native Americans were even instrumental in the unification of the United States – Gen. Ely S. Parker, a member of the Seneca Nation, served as Gen. Ulysses S. Grant’s military secretary during the Civil War, and Parker would eventually write the final draft of the Confederate terms of surrender.

Years later, of the 42,000 Native Americans who served in the Vietnam War, 90% of them were volunteers. Regardless of the role, Native Americans have always been present and ready to step up when duty calls.

Navajo Code Talkers Were Crucial to U.S. Victory in World War II

In recent years, the Navajo Code Talkers have become legendary for creating a special code using their indigenous language to transmit sensitive information during World War II. The Navajo people’s unique and largely unwritten language made it an ideal fit for creating a code, and 29 Navajo men initially joined the Marine Corps for this highly sensitive operation. By the end of the war, there were approximately 400 Native Code Talkers in the military from the Navajo, Cherokee, Choctaw, Lakota, Meskwaki and Comanche tribes, all translating encrypted messages in their native tongues from the front lines in real time as they received them.

Although Japanese forces were incredibly adept at breaking codes throughout the war, they never broke the Navajo Code. It was this code that helped the United States win the war in the Pacific in 1945.

Native American Service Members and Civilians Contributed to the WWII War Effort

Aside from the code talkers of WWII, many other Native Americans contributed to the war effort. **Of the 350,000 American Indians living in the country at the time, nearly 45,000 of them enlisted in the Armed Forces, making them the demographic with the highest rate of voluntary enlistment in the military throughout the entire war.** In certain Tribal Nations, 70% of the men of a single Nation enlisted.

From those who served on the beaches of Normandy to Cpl. Ira Hayes of the Pima people, who was one of the six Marines who famously erected the American flag on Iwo Jima, American Indians were a part of some of the most important moments of WWII.

If they did not serve directly on the front lines, they served in other ways as well - 65,000 Native Americans left their homes to work in factories to support the war industry. Many more purchased war bonds and donated to charities that supported service members.

Native American Women Have Answered the Call to Serve for Years

Like many women in our nation's history, American Indian women first supported American war efforts as nurses. In World War I, a handful of Native American women volunteered to join the Army Nurse Corps; they, like the approximately 15,000 Native American men who served in the military during WWI, were not even American citizens (citizenship would not be granted to Indian Nations until 1924 with the passing of the Indian Citizenship Act), but they still chose to join.

In World War II, the numbers of female volunteers would grow – 800 Native American women joined the war effort in the various women’s branches of the military formed during WWII, including WACS, WAVES, Women Marines, SPARs and WASPs. 10,000 more would join the Red Cross.

Today, Native American women not only serve as fully capable members of our Armed Forces, but also serve at a much higher rate than all other demographics. Almost 20% of all Native American service members are women, compared to the approximately 15% of all other service members who are women.

Native Americans in the U.S. Military Today

Mitchelene BigMan, president and founder of the Native American Women Warriors (NAWW), performs a tribal dance for attendees of the National American Indian Heritage Month observance at Redstone Arsenal, Alabama, in November 2019. BigMan was there with two other members of the NAWW, an all-female group of Native American veterans who started as a color guard but have since grown and branched out as advocates for Native American women veterans in areas such as health, education and employment. | Photo credit Stephen Baack/DVIDS

In our modern U.S. military today, American Indians and Native Alaskans have carried on a tradition of service and sacrifice, as they serve at a higher rate than any other demographic in the entire country. **Since September 11, almost 19% of all Native Americans have served in the Armed Forces – in comparison to an average of 14% of all other ethnicities.**

Regardless of the challenge, Native American service members have stepped up to serve the United States with distinction, dedicating their lives to protecting this country no matter the cost.

-This story was originally published on USO.org in 2020. It has been updated in 2021.

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In Chinle, located in the Navajo Nation, three Arizona National Guard members of Navajo descent are using their indigenous language to help in the local fight against the COVID-19 pandemic at an alternate care site.

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