

**STATEMENT OF**  
**THE HONORABLE GORDON H. MANSFIELD**  
**BEFORE THE**  
**COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS**  
**UNITED STATES SENATE**  
**September 22, 2004**

Good Morning Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee.

I am pleased to be here to present the Department's views on the presentation of Gold Medals to Native American Code Talkers and to discuss the Department's outreach efforts to American Indian veterans. VA commends you for acknowledging their distinguished service in performing highly successful communications operations through the use of their unique languages that greatly assisted in saving countless lives and hastened the end of both World War I and World War II.

**Contributions in Combat**

VA has long acknowledged the honorable service of our American Indian veterans in the defense of this great nation. They have served with distinction in United States military actions for more than 200 years. Their valor and courage is well documented and it is only right that we further honor that same valor and courage with appropriate accolades.

American Indians have served in every war fought by the United States of America. During World War I approximately 12,000 served with the American Expeditionary Force and many distinguished themselves in the fighting in France. In World War II over 44,000 fought against the Axis forces in both European and Pacific theaters of war. These Americans compiled a

distinguished record of courage and sacrifice. Of those Indians in the Army, the Office of Indian Affairs reported in November 1945 that 71 Indians received the Air Medal, 51 the Silver Star, 47 the Bronze Star, 34 won the Distinguished Flying Cross, and two received the Medal of Honor with a total of five American Indians having received this highest award. Those in the Army Air Forces saw duty as pilots, navigators, gunners, bombardiers, and transport crews in all theaters of the war. Battle-experienced American Indian troops from World War II were joined by newly recruited American Indians to fight Communist aggression during the Korean conflict. The American Indians' strong sense of patriotism and courage emerged once again during the Vietnam era. More than 42,000 American Indians fought in Vietnam. American Indian contributions in United States military combat continued in the 1980s and 1990s as they saw duty in Grenada, Panama, Somalia, and the Persian Gulf. They continue to play a major role in the armed services with nearly 11,000 on active duty today. (Census 2000)

### **VHA Outreach to American Indian Veterans**

Over 220,000 Native American veterans self-identified in a single race category as American Indian or Alaska Native according to Census 2000. Due to privacy issues mandated with veteran records, VA cannot determine the exact number of American Indian veterans now enrolled in the system; however the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is sensitive to the fact that these veterans currently report four times the unmet health care needs of other veterans. To begin to address this healthcare disparity, VHA and the Indian Health Service (IHS) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in February 2003. The goal of this agreement is to use the strengths and expertise of both organizations to deliver quality health care services and enhance the health of American Indian and Alaska Native veterans. Five mutual goals were set forth in the MOU:

- To improve communications among agencies and Tribes;

- To promote sharing and collaborations;
- To expand access for American Indian and Alaska Native veterans;
- To ensure that appropriate organizational support and health services are available to these veterans; and
- To deliver effective health promotion and disease prevention services to them.

To accomplish these goals, IHS and VHA have instituted regular communication at the headquarters and field levels. In addition, each VHA network has developed specific implementation plans of this MOU with extensive outreach to Tribal and community representatives since January 2004. Examples of the initiatives underway include:

- Establishment of outpatient clinics for American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) veterans at Tribal and IHS facilities on reservations;
- Cooperative agreements to improve the coordination of specialty referrals for AI/AN veterans from IHS, Tribal and urban clinics,
- Telehealth linkages that permit the delivery of services to remote Tribal sites, including telemental health services and readjustment counseling,
- Sharing specialty medical staff between IHS and VHA to meet the needs of patients in both services where the availability of such specialty providers is limited.

Across the nation, VHA is also working with IHS to upgrade its electronic patient record system to enable IHS to use the additional safety and quality of

care features of the VHA system. Finally, the VHA Readjustment Counseling Service has worked with Tribes and IHS to establish American Indian Vet Centers on a number of reservations across the country.

### **VBA Outreach to American Indian Veterans**

VBA outreach coordinators participate in various events to reach American Indian veterans, such as VA benefits briefings on reservations and with local American Indian groups.

In FY 2002, working with the Center for Minority Veterans, VBA developed benefits training for Tribal Veterans Representatives (TVR). TVRs, designated by tribal officials, serve as points of contact for tribal veterans, are a resource for information and referral on benefits and services, and provide assistance in submitting claims. Through this program, 35 TVRs from Montana and Wyoming have been provided comprehensive training on VA benefits and services, on the claims process, and on health care enrollment. Training sessions continued in FY 2003 and FY 2004, at the Ft. Harrison VA Medical and Regional Office Center. We expect that this program will expand to other states in FY 2005.

Recognizing that housing on reservations is an issue for our American Indian veterans, VA administers the Native American Veterans Direct Loan Program for Indian veterans living on trust lands. This program assists American Indian veterans in financing the purchase, improvement or modification of homes on Federal trust territory. Loan Guaranty Service provides program information and materials to all interested parties and to VA personnel who assist American Indian veterans wishing to use this program. VA has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with 68 participating American Indian tribes. Since its inception, VA has made almost 400 loans to Native American veterans under the program, closing 120 loans in FY 2003 alone.

## **NCA Outreach to American Indian Veterans**

Recently, Secretary Principi strongly supported the enactment of H.R. 2983, Native American Veterans Cemetery Act of 2003 to amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for eligibility of Indian tribal organizations for grants for the establishment of veterans cemeteries on trust lands. This bill would authorize the Secretary to make grants to tribal organizations to assist them in establishing, expanding, or improving veterans cemeteries in the same manner and under the same conditions as grants to states are made under 38 U.S. Code 2408. H.R. 2983 would create another means of accommodating the burial needs of American Indian veterans who wish to be buried in tribal lands. Currently, the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) encourages participation of tribal interests in state efforts to establish state veterans cemeteries. NCA has received a pre-application from the State of Arizona for the establishment of a state veterans cemetery that will be located geographically and designed with the cultural needs of local American Indian tribes in mind.

NCA continues to provide burial benefits to all veterans. When a family wishes to have a burial at a VA national cemetery, NCA attempts to accommodate any special needs, including religious customs during committal services at its cemeteries. American Indian veterans and their families are able to perform tribal rituals in VA's national cemeteries and many state veterans cemeteries.

For example, at the Nashville National Cemetery, cemetery staff works closely with the Tennessee Native Veterans Society to provide an option for families so they can incorporate tribal rituals into the committal service, if requested. American Indian performers have been participating in the cemetery's Memorial Day ceremonies since 2002, and just this April 2004, the cemetery director staffed an information booth at the Society's second annual Powwow.

The chairman of the Southern Ute Indian Tribe, chairman of the Northern Ute Indian Tribe, and acting chairman of the Ute Mountain Ute Indian Tribe participated in the July 17, 2002, dedication of the Veterans Memorial Cemetery of Western Colorado in Grand Junction, built with a VA State Cemetery grant of \$6 million. The tribe has been actively involved and on March 14, 2003, the Southern Ute Indian Tribe and the Southern Ute Veterans Association dedicated a black granite memorial to American Indian veterans at the cemetery.

The new Idaho Veterans Cemetery in Boise recently conducted its first interment, an Idaho soldier killed in Iraq. American Indian veterans played a prominent role in the burial service. These examples are typical of the types of outreach and involvement of American Indian veterans at state and national veterans cemeteries.

American Indian representatives have also participated in new national cemetery dedication and consecration ceremonies. For example, a representative of the Muckleshoot Tribe was one of several honored guests at the Tahoma National Cemetery's 1997 consecration service and a member of the Comanche County Veterans Council was an honored guest at the Fort Sill National Cemetery's 2001 dedication ceremony. A chaplain from the Tohono O'odham Nation participated in the rededication ceremony at the National Memorial Cemetery of Arizona in 2001. In addition, NCA senior managers have visited tribal reservations and burial grounds, attended Memorial Day events and increased efforts to communicate memorial benefits to the American Indian veteran community.

NCA also provides government-furnished headstones and markers for placement in cemeteries around the world. When choosing the inscription for a headstone or marker, a family may choose an authorized Emblem of Belief, including the Native American Church of America emblem.

## **Conclusion**

VA will continue to explore all opportunities to increase eligible American Indian veteran participation in the benefits and healthcare services we provide. Again we acknowledge the honor and pride with which American Indians have served their country in the military and especially salute the extraordinary contributions of the Native American Code Talkers. We stand ready to serve them as they have so gallantly served their country.

This completes my statement. I will be happy to respond to any questions you might have.