

## Honoring the Ho-Chunk Code Talkers

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***Sen. Smith writes about his work with Ho-Chunk members to advance the Ho-Chunk Code Talkers Memorial Highway bill through the State Senate. These dedicated and brave soldiers helped turn the tide in World War I and II.***

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MADISON - Four years ago, a dedicated individual named Sandy Winneshiek, contacted my office. She had an idea and she was motivated to get the job done, but she didn't know where to start. Sandy served as the Ho-Chunk Nation's Veteran Service Officer and she knew the rich history about the contributions Native Americans made as code talkers throughout World War I and World War II.

Her stories about the sacrifices made during these pivotal wars were incredible and she wanted everyone to know about these brave individuals who helped turn the tide in both of these tragic and prolific events. She pitched the idea of designating the stretch of Interstate-90 from the Minnesota state line to the Interstate-94 interchange near Tomah as the Ho-Chunk Code Talkers Memorial Highway. As a child of someone who served in WWII, I thought this was an incredible idea. I worked with her to draft a bill and introduce it.

As with most good ideas, it didn't get done right away, and we saw no action from the legislature to advance the bill. We were patient and Sandy pushed harder. She built a coalition of Ho-Chunk members and charted a path with Republicans to gain their support. Just last week, the senate passed Senate Bill 633 unanimously and now it heads to the State Assembly before Governor Evers has the opportunity to sign it into law.



The code talkers' service is an example to the fortitude and social fabric within Native American tribes. Their role in World War II tells the story of American endurance, collaboration and the importance of sharing our strengths and skills.

Our country has a complex, painful history regarding the treatment of Native Americans. Despite attempts to help European settlers when they first arrived, Native Americans were forcibly removed from their land, introduced to deadly diseases and became victims of mass genocide. For many decades, even as late as the 1950s, white Americans suppressed members of the Tribal Nations, forcibly placing children in boarding schools and promoting assimilation policies in an attempt to destroy their culture.

Many Native Americans still held onto their native languages, despite this traumatic history and the attempts to strip them of their heritage. During the World Wars of the Twentieth Century, members from Tribal Nations were willing to enlist and fight for the same values that other soldiers believed in. As Native American members joined the military, they realized their ability to speak another language would make it difficult for enemies to interpret intercepted messages. These enlisted members of Native American tribes became known as code talkers.

Although Native Americans were enlisted for this important duty, they still faced challenges working predominantly with English-speaking soldiers.



I heard a story about an enlisted Ho-Chunk Code Talker, selected for this role because he could speak his native language. He began his assignment in the radio room waiting for a message with a commanding officer. When a message arrived, the code talker couldn't understand the sender's message. The officer was puzzled and demanded to know why he told them he could speak his native language but then couldn't understand this message. He replied that he is a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation and the sender was speaking Navajo. This anecdote reminds us of the presumptions we may have of others, but the importance of learning from each other's backgrounds.

As a nation of many cultures, religions and ethnicities, we should celebrate the code talkers' legacy and their contribution to our country's history. With this in mind, I hope we can get Senate Bill 633 through the Assembly and signed into law.

This bipartisan proposal is one small measure to honor Native Americans in our state, but we must do better to educate ourselves of these vital roles that are, too often, overlooked in our country's history. Be sure to do what you can to learn more about our country's history by listening, reading and having conversations with others.

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*Senator Smith represents District 31 in the Wisconsin State Senate. The 31st Senate District includes all of Buffalo, Pepin and Trempealeau counties and portions of Pierce, Dunn, Eau Claire, Jackson and St. Croix counties.*

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