

## Honoring American War Heroes

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31

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<http://newiproggressive.com/images/stories/S5/veterans-012015-s5.jpg>



***Sen. Smith writes about the Ho-Chunk Nation's Code Talkers role and their contributions to our country during World War I and II and the need to commemorate their service and sacrifice in Wisconsin.***

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EAU CLAIRE - In the horrific wars of the early twentieth century (World Wars I and II) members of Native Tribal Nations were just as willing as their non-native neighbors to enlist and defend our shared values.

Some tribal nation members who enlisted were recruited for a special duty, a special force you might say. The secret skill these soldiers possessed wasn't new, it was very old and persisted despite immense pressure and attempts to strip this cornerstone of their culture away here in the United States.

It was literally the words they spoke! The U.S. military realized that by using native languages, it would be much harder, if not impossible, for our enemies to intercept and decipher critical messages on the battlefield.

This is one of the most interesting stories from those world wars. It is this sort of contribution to our own heritage as a nation of many cultures, religions and ethnicities that we should lift up and celebrate. Telling the story of the native "Code Talkers," as they were known, tells the story

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of this nation. How we endured and came together using the unique skills and strengths we possessed.



The stories about Ho-Chunk code talkers are amazing and offer a glimpse of what America was like during this tumultuous time of war. An enlisted man was asked if he spoke his native language and he replied that yes he did. They then assigned him to the code talker unit. This gentleman was thrilled because it was an upgrade in his quarters as well as his meals and other amenities. When it came time to begin his new assignment someone accompanied him to the radio room. He sat before a receiver and someone spoke over the radio. The officer hovering over him asked him what the message was.

The soldier responded that he didn't understand the sender. The officer was puzzled and demanded to know why he had told them he could speak his native language but couldn't understand this message. He responded that he is Ho-Chunk and what he heard came from someone speaking Navajo. That is a humorous anecdotal story that also reminds us of the misunderstanding we can suffer about other cultures and the presumptions we all make at times.

The efforts and sacrifices of the Code Talkers were kept secret for decades until the program was declassified in 1968. Even then, it took several more decades until native code talkers were finally recognized and honored by our nation for their unique and significant contributions to our military success.

In 1982, President Ronald Reagan proclaimed August 14th as National Code Talkers Day in

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honor of all Native American veterans who served the United States in times of war dating back to the American Revolutionary War. And in 2013, with the support of Rep. Ron Kind, Congress honored the contributions and sacrifices of these veterans with a Gold Medal Ceremony where members of the Wisconsin Ho-Chunk, Oneida and Menominee Nations were among the 33 tribes recognized for their heroic efforts.



We may never know the whole story, but we do know their service made an impact on the world.

Last session, I was proud to author bipartisan legislation to designate the stretch of Interstate 90 from La Crosse to Tomah for the Ho-Chunk Code Talkers who were so instrumental in our efforts to protect freedom and democracy. As I continue to talk with Native leaders across our state, it is clear we can all do better to educate ourselves about these unique and important stories 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.