

American Indians: Service in War

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During World War II, about 44,500 American Indians—more than 10 percent of the total Indian population at that time, including one-third of all the able-bodied men ages eighteen to fifty—served in the U.S. military’s various branches. In some tribes, 70 percent of men served. Indians received numerous Purple Hearts, Air Medals, Distinguished Flying Crosses, Bronze Stars, Silver Stars, and Distinguished Service Crosses, as well as three Congressional Medals of Honor. American Indian women served in many support organizations, such as the WAVES and the Army Nurse Corps. Soldiers from several tribes worked as “code talkers.” Communicating using their own Native languages, they could transmit sensitive information in a way that foreign spies could not understand.

The ultimate sacrifice

Three American Indians who served during the Korean War received the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest award given to a member of the U.S. military for valor in action against an enemy force. One of them was North Carolina native Charles George. Private First Class George, born in August 1932 in Cherokee and a member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee, was in Army Company C, 179th Infantry Regiment, 45th Infantry Division. On November 30, 1952, he was part of a raiding party near Songnae-dong, Korea. The group faced heavy machine gun and mortar fire and then hand-to-hand combat before beginning to withdraw after completing its assignment of capturing a prisoner for questioning. Three soldiers remained at the rear to cover the withdrawal, when the enemy hurled a hand grenade in between them. George shouted a warning to one man, pushed the other out of danger, and threw himself upon the grenade. He died from his wounds in a field aid station. “Pfc. George’s indomitable courage, consummate devotion to duty, and willing self-sacrifice reflect the highest credit upon himself and uphold the finest traditions of the military service,” his citation read. Overall, 131 Medals of Honor were given for service in the Korean War, 94 of them to people who had died. Approximately 804 North Carolinians died in the war.

Statistics

- About 12,000 American Indians served in the U.S. armed forces during World War I.
- About 42,000 American Indians served in the U.S. armed forces during the Vietnam War.
- Today, there are about 185,000 American Indian military veterans in the United States.

Sources: U.S. Department of Defense and U.S. Bureau of the Census