**How WWI Changed America**

**Podcast Series**

**Dr. Herman Viola – Native Americans in WWI** (19m 23s)

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**3 speakers** (Announcer, Libby O'Connell, Herman Viola)

**[0:00:11]**

**Announcer**: Welcome to the How World War I Changed America podcast series, sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation with host Dr. Libby O'Connell.

**[0:00:26]**

**Libby O'Connell**: My name is Libby O'Connell. Today our topic is Native Americans in World War I and our guest expert is Dr. Herman J Viola. He's a curator emeritus at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, and author of such a long list of books that I can't even begin to to give just one title. So we're just thrilled and honored to have you with us today, Herman. Thank you for joining us.

**[0:00:55]**

**Herman Viola**: Well thank you for inviting me.

**[0:00:57]**

**Libby O'Connell**: So we're going to talk a little bit about Native Americans in World War I and you know, although not required to serve, Native Americans volunteered in large numbers when the United States declared war in 1917. Why did they volunteer in such large numbers? They weren't even citizens.

**[0:01:15]**

**Herman Viola**: Well, that's a very fascinating question, and it's one of the things that few Americans today even realize. But American Indians are a warrior people and they are extremely patriotic and they have been in our armed forces in every conflict since the American Revolution. And when you tell non-Indians this, they say, "That can't be true. We treated the Indians so shabbily. We try to take away their land, their languages. Why would they be so patriotic?" And when you ask Indians this, they say, "This is our country. We've been here for generations. Our ancestors bones are buried here and we are protecting our homeland. And if you white people who want to come along for the ride, that's fine, but we're in the military and we have a need to protect our homeland." And so in truth, some 12000 Indians served in World War I and that is, or was 20% of the adult male Indian population, an astounding statistic. And 600 of them died. And that was 5% of those who served as opposed to 1% of the non-Indians that the rest of the expeditionary force. So anyhow, they had a great contribution to the war effort and we can go into that a little bit later. But they volunteered in huge numbers and most of the volunteers were not citizens. The Indians did not get citizenship overall until 1924, but some of them were citizens because if they had accepted allotments, certain different government programs, they became citizens. And one of the other factors is that if they served in the military, they would become citizens. So it's a rather complicated story. But yeah, they serve not because they were drafted, but because they wanted to serve.

**[0:03:05]**

**Libby O'Connell**: So when they returned from the war, what was the response or the reaction of their communities, the Native American communities? How were they greeted?

**[0:03:15]**

**Herman Viola**: Well, Indians honor their veterans to an amazing degree, something that we just don't see in our non-Indian society. And so they are so proud of their soldiers. They saw them as warriors. They fulfilled ancient traditions. And so there are great many ceremonies to honor them privately, publicly, but they got a great warm welcome. Now, you can't say the same for the federal government or society at large. Indians at this time period were really poverty stricken. Most of them were still on reservations. The government was trying very hard to get their Indianness out of them making, them go to schools to learn English and to give up their culture. So there were two factors there. One, how Indians treated their veterans and how the rest of the American community did.

**[0:04:05]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Right. A very different way of one community honoring you and the other community not interested in your service at all, not even recognizing it.

**[0:04:15]**

**Herman Viola**: And that's true. In fact, a lot of people believe if they were Indians, they didn't even have to get paid because they felt that Indians were already getting these kind of benefits from being on reservations. So there's just a very complex area there that few people understand.

**[0:04:29]**

**Libby O'Connell**: So many of them died, 5%. That is a big number of loss in the Army during World War I. So they're overseas when they die. For those who do not return alive, for the ones who died over there, where they returned to their communities for traditional burials, or did they say overseas?

**[0:04:47]**

**Herman Viola**: Well first of all, the reason so many Indians died, is there another factor in the story. There was a great deal of stereotypes about Indians. So they all believed Indians were just extremely brave, could see in the dark, you know, find their way anywhere. And so they often gave Indian soldiers the more dangerous things to do, even though they themselves are probably scared themselves, but they would never let on. So they would do the dangerous things. And so that's one reason that you had the factor there of the increased mortality rates.

**[0:05:19]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Right.

**[0:05:20]**

**Herman Viola**: And I had a friend Joe Medicine Crow, who was in World War II and he said to me privately said, "Yeah," he said, "they called me chief. And the commanding officer always had me do the more dangerous things cause he thought I was not afraid." He says, "I was more afraid than the white boys, but I would never let on." So then these boys that... Most of them are buried over there, but we really don't have the exact total. A lot of those Indians didn't even admit they were Indians. So the Battle Monuments Commission monitors all that. There are all these Americans buried there from World War I. But for example, just a short time ago, I was over at the Rowan American cemetery and [inaudible 00:05:57]. And a lot of American soldiers who were killed during the Normandy conflict and one of them was a Choctaw code talker. And I was there. I brought his niece over there to see the grave and we chatted a while and she said, "You know, I took my mother here once to see his grave and they offered to have him sent back to Oklahoma to be buried at home. And my mother said, 'Oh no.' She said, 'Look at how well they're taking care of his grave here. And if we took him back home to our community, the grass would be overgrown? No one had ever known is there. So let's keep them here.'" And I think that was a lot of the thinking about Indian people and their ones who died and didn't get back.

**[0:06:38]**

**Libby O'Connell**: That's interesting because a lot of the white soldiers, I think the majority of the white soldiers bodies were brought home, but others, the family decided that they should stay because that's where they died and they were with their fellow soldiers, they were with their comrades in arms, so they [crosstalk] there. Was there an immediate call for memorialization? In the white communities, there was this outpouring of grief and drives to build monuments to the Doughboys. Was there that sort of thing among the Indian communities as well?

**[0:07:12]**

**Herman Viola**: No, the Indians really didn't get much recognition after the war and the important factor of them being in the war is that when they came back home, many of them got revitalized. They had been pretty much a downtrodden people. The Bureau of Indian Affairs as I said was trying to eradicate their culture, take away their language. The BIA wouldn't allow them to have dances in their communities. They couldn't do their ceremonies and you just felt like there was nothing they could do. But when they came back home, they had a revitalization and it really started a progressive movement for the Indians. The communities started re-introducing ages-old traditions, dancing, singing. It started the whole thing we know today as the powwow movement. And so the Bureau of Indian Affairs pretty much had to take a step back because just the thought that they would try to keep Indians from being Indians again after they had made such a major contribution, people realized that here were these folks didn't have to go to war, went, volunteered. Two tribes declared war on Germany, the Onondagas and the Oneidas. In fact, the Onondagas did it because one of the Wild West shows had been in Germany and they felt their Indians had been mistreated. So they had a grudge too. So there was just not much happening for monuments. And that's why today, as you probably are well aware, we're building this Memorial on the Mall, the joining the Indian Museum for American Indian veterans. It's a long overdue tribute, but they didn't get much recognition even until quite recently.

**[0:08:50]**

**Libby O'Connell**: So when you were talking about the sort of revival of Native American traditions after World War I, did this differ between different tribal groups or geographic location or was it across the board among all those?

**[0:09:05]**

**Herman Viola**: Mostly with Indian communities on reservations. The Indians that had gone into the cities, as part of this assimilation movement, it took a while for them to get organized. But in the tribal communities, the reservations, that's where this spirit of revitalization really came to life. And you know, it is still going today. I mean, Indian veterans now are just so highly honored. They're the ones who carry the flags at different ceremonies. They're the ones that are asked to dance at powwows. Families are so proud to have veterans in their family and in fact it's amazing. It's just a long line of family members, grandparents, father, cousins, sisters. I travel a lot on Indian reservations. I go to the schools to talk a lot and go to the cafeteria and the walls are plastered with the pictures of graduates of the school who are in the military. By ethnicity, percentage of ethnicity, Indians are the highest ranking group in the armed forces today. So it's just an age-old tradition that they continue and take such pride in up to the very moment.

**[0:10:15]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Wow. I'm going to circle back a little bit now to World War I era, did the memory of Native American participation in World War I continue past 1918 and up towards World War II or did it fade?

**[0:10:31]**

**Herman Viola**: No, it didn't fade at all. First of all, you have to realize that Indians did make a major contribution in the war. We got into the war in 1917. This is a long-suffering engagement there. Trench warfare had gone on for like four years. The Germans were entrenched. No one could seem to defeat them. The Germans were able to intercept all our messages. They were very efficient at intercepting codes, intercepting messages, and it seemed hopeless. And so here come the United States with these thousands of Indian soldiers. And even though the government was trying to eradicate them, there are languages, these folks still could speak their language. And the classic story is with a group of Choctaw signalmen and they were sitting around the campfire one night talking, but in their language. And the white officer in charge could hear them talking and he couldn't understand a word they were saying. So he said, "If I can't understand them, the Germans won't either." And so he then asked these boys, "Would you be willing to use the telephone to send messages?" And they said, "Sure, why not?" So they started using these Choctaws at headquarters and then on the front line and they sent messages. The very first time that a message was sent in Choctaw, we won the engagement and the tide of battle started turn in 72 hours and armistice came three months later. And the word quickly spread through the American forces that you want to have Indians send your messages. And so there were Indians in all these different units. So it wasn't just Choctaws, it was Osages, Cheyennes. There'd be a few in each unit. And they were the ones who was sending the messages. That's the beginning of code talking, but if they weren't talking in code. They were talking in their languages. But because the Indian languages don't have the same words for military equipment, the Indians had a kind of create their own. And so for example, when they talked about tanks, they called tanks, "turtles" and they called poison gas, "bad air." And they said airplanes were "hawks". So anyhow, that's kind of the beginning of what became code talking. And the American military did not forget that. So when World War II broke out, that's when the whole code talking phenomenon occurred. And something like 30 different tribes provided code talkers. Of course, you know the Navajos had 400, so they get all the publicity and a lot of tribes feel resentful about that. They said the Navajos had the best press agent, but still the code talking was a direct result of what happened in World War I. And even the Germans knew that. And Hitler was already anticipating conflict with the United States. He sent supposedly German scholars into Indian country to learn about their culture. Their whole purpose was really to learn languages. So in case Indians were used as code talkers again, the Germans would have one up on them, but of course the Indians didn't have written languages and that little experiment didn't work. But so anyhow, there's a direct relationship between the success of Indians in World War I and their great success in World War II.

**[0:13:43]**

**Libby O'Connell**: I'm so glad you told that story because I think so few Americans know about the code talkers of World War I and so many people have heard of the code talkers of World War II. I think that kind of sums up a lot of the history of World War I. We only associate women working in factories with World War II and food conservation programs with World War II and code talkers with world war II, when in fact all of those have antecedents in World War I and very strong antecedents as well.

**[0:14:12]**

**Herman Viola**: Absolutely.

**[0:14:13]**

**Libby O'Connell**: In general, have Native American commemorative and memorialization practices changed over the course of the 20th century?

**[0:14:21]**

**Herman Viola**: No. The Indians have ages-old traditions and they just keep them alive so they don't see any need to get modern. Important thing is if they have their languages still alive, then they can do their ceremonies and say their prayers in their traditional tongue. So they haven't changed much but they are very excited about this memorial.

**[0:14:42]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Herman, earlier on you mentioned the memorial being built on the National Mall. Can you tell us a little bit more about this memorial? It's going to be right next to National Museum of the American Indian, part of the Smithsonian. It's very exciting project. Describe it a little bit more.

**[0:14:59]**

**Herman Viola**: The past two years myself and a couple of other colleagues at the museum have gone around Indian country to talk to veterans about this proposed memorial. Congress gave the museum the assignment a few years ago. But the important thing is to get the Indian community on board with it. You know there's something like 570 Indian tribes and they don't all agree with each other. And so the idea of trying to get them all on board, you know, that was a challenge. So anyway, we went around to different reservations to Indian communities and we'd announced that we were coming to talk about a proposed memorial and we wanted veterans to show up. And then we had a microphone there. And then the veterans who are willing to speak would get up and give their name and when they served, what unit, and it was men and women. You know, some communities we'd have five, sometimes we'd have 105. But it was astounding to me how many of these veterans, once they started talking publicly about their service and the idea that we'd have a memorial for honoring Indian veterans, they would get all choked up and some would actually start crying. And then almost invariably the last question they would ask, "Does this mean now kids in American schools are going to learn that Indians have been their friends and not their enemies?" So it's really a profoundly important moment.

**[0:16:20]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Wow. That is so important for kids all over America to understand. And adults too. And I really thank you for sharing it with us.

**[0:16:28]**

**Herman Viola**: Now, I have one story I can share with you. It's really not World War I, but it really says everything you want to know. And you can erase it if you want. I was visiting with the Kiowa and Comanches in Oklahoma. And so we had the usual thing, you know. There were about 70 Indian people in the room and this one woman got up and she got on stage and announced that she said, "I want you to know that I'm a full blood Indian. I'm a Colonel in the United States army right now." And she said, "I'm one fourth Kiowa, one fourth Comanche, one fourth Delaware, and one fourth Apache." And she said, "When I was in Afghanistan," she said, I caused kind of a stir everywhere I went because here I was a woman officer in charge of these men." And she said, "In one village I went to," she said, "a crowd gathered around me." And she said, "You know, I'm a little dark skinned and so one of the first questions was, 'Who are you?'" And she said, Well, I'm an Indian," and they started shouting, "India, India." And then she said, "No." She said, "Tell them you know, I'm an American Indian." And the interpreter finally understood and said, "Oh, she's a red American." And then right away the next question was, "Well, if you're a red American, you're tribal and these people are tribal themselves." And they said, "Then what's your tribe?" And then she said, "Well, you know, I'm Kiowa, Comanche, Delaware," no comment. And then she said, "Apache," and they started shouting, "Geronimo Geronimo and John Wayne, John Wayne." And then there was silence. And then a man asked a question and said, "We are puzzled. How can you be a red American? We have heard that the American people killed all their red Americans." And then she told us that she started sobbing and then she said, "That's why this memorial is so important. It's going to tell the world that Indians are still here. And also we'll tell the American people we're still here and still fighting for our country."

**[0:18:24]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Well, that's a wonderful story, Herman. Thank you for telling that story and thank you for joining us today on this. US World War I Centennial Commission podcast series. We're so proud to have you here talking about Native American history.

**[0:18:38]**

**Herman Viola**: All right.

**[0:18:39]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Goodbye and thank you very much. This is Libby O'Connell signing off. Our guest today has been Dr. Herman J. Viola, curator emeritus at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian

**[0:18:56]**

**Announcer**: Thank you for listening to this episode of How World War I Changed America. The podcast series is made possible by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the collaboration of the US World War I Centennial Commission, the Doughboy foundation, the National World War I Museum and Memorial in Kansas City, National History day, and the Gilder Lehrman Institute for American History.

**[0:19:19]**