

## HOW WWI CHANGED AMERICA:

# Native Americans in World War I

### VIDEO TRANSCRIPT:

Herman J. Viola, Ph.D.:

American Indians have been here since time in memorial and Europeans came in and pushed them out of the way. By the turn of the 20th century, the Indians were mostly confined to reservations. They had disease, destruction of their culture. They were basically at the low point of their population, and there was a great effort to turn Indians into white people. Make them assimilate into United States society. Give them an education, and they'll be just like everybody else in the country. But, a lot of Indians did not want to do that.

Then there was a program called the Allotment Act, which tried to divide up Indian reservations. Give each Indian family their own piece of property, that would hasten their introduction into white society. So, if an Indian took an allotment, then they would become citizens. Otherwise, they remained as non-citizens in this country.

So they couldn't be drafted. They could not vote, they had no rights to speak of. And yet, World War I broke out and thousands and thousands of Indians volunteered to go fight in Europe. In fact one tribe, the Onondagas, the Iroquois Confederacy, they actually declared war on Germany themselves. And so, people often question why would Indians do something like that?

The Indians would say this is our country. Our ancestors' bones are buried here, and we are going to fight to protect our homeland. Some went into combat because they wanted to maintain their warrior tradition. A lot of Indians though, realized that maybe by joining the armed forces, they would demonstrate to the United States government that they were equal to white people. Some went in because on Indian reservations there was very little employment. So there were a variety of reasons for Indians joining.

It's believed about 10,000 American Indians served in the Army, and about 2,000 served in the Navy.

The Indians contributed to the war effort in numerous ways. And one of the least known at the time, was through their language. The Germans could intercept and break codes, so surprise attacks just never worked. Here were a group of Choctaw soldiers sitting around the campfire one night, talking in their language. And the white officer suddenly thought to himself, "I can't understand a word they're saying. I'll bet you the Germans won't either." So he talked to a couple of the young men and said, "Would you be willing to give some messages using your language?" And the boys said, "Well sure."

The very first time that was done, the American surprise attack worked. So the Indians in different units started doing the same thing. Cheyennes, Osage Indians, Sioux Indians. Now, they can't be called code talkers, 'cause they really weren't speaking in code. But the big difference is that Indian languages do not have the same words for combat that we do in our white language. The Choctaws said "bad air" means poison gas. Army tanks, they called them "turtles". Airplanes were "birds".

The use of the Indian languages had tremendous impact on the outcome of World War I. And in fact, at the end of the war, one of the captured German soldiers said, "We were able to break all of your codes, except this last one. What language were you speaking?" And the soldier said to him, "We were speaking American."

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Indians were highly respected by their fellow soldiers. Overseas, they did not face the kind of discrimination that they faced at home. So a lot of Indians when they got back home, started agitating for rights, to get the kind of rights that their white comrades had. And in fact, because of their extreme patriotism, the government eventually gave citizenship to all American Indians in 1924.

Many of them look back at World War I as the great turning point in their history and culture.

Our students today should be grateful that the American Indian people were loyal, patriotic, and willingly gave up, many of them, their lives to serve this country. And even though they don't appear in the textbooks, you just have to dig a little deeper, and you'll see how big a contribution they made.

And they still make.

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