



Commissioned Officers Association of the U.S. Public Health Service

July 8, 2019

Kojo Nnamdi
WAMU Radio
American University
4400 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20016-8082

Dear Kojo:

A veteran is a veteran is a veteran. That's what federal law says. It's what the Veterans Affairs Department says. And it is what we say. But, the Smithsonian does not think all veterans are really veterans, and it is determined to build a National Native American Veterans Memorial that honors some Native American veterans, but not all Native American veterans.

The approved design for this memorial would leave out veterans who achieved their status through service in the two smallest and least known of the federal uniformed services: the US Public Health Service (USPHS) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). This story has not been covered in the mainstream media. There was a letter to the editor of *The Washington Post*, and that's it. Voice of America ran a story, but their materials do not circulate within the US (though it may have reached as many as 275 million listeners overseas, in 40 languages).

Few people even know these two uniformed services exist, but officers who serve in them—they are both all-officer corps—are recognized as veterans under federal law, entitled to all the rights and privileges thereof. The Veterans Affairs Department recognizes them as veterans and provides them benefits at VA hospitals and the ultimate benefit of burial in a VA cemetery. They have served alongside their armed colleagues in every war we have fought in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, suffering wounds and death and even becoming POWs (in the Philippines during WW II).

We, meaning the non-profit organization that represents the USPHS, has contacted the Smithsonian about this omission on numerous occasions. We wrote to the new Smithsonian Secretary more than three weeks ago and have heard nothing from him. The Smithsonian has given us two different reasons for their position, neither of which holds up. They first said that the 1994 law which allows this memorial (furnished as an attachment) refers to veterans of the "armed forces," and neither PHS nor NOAA officers are part of the armed forces. We believe this was a drafting error, and that the sponsors of the 1994 law meant for the memorial to honor ALL Native American veterans, and not just some of them. We pressed the Smithsonian on this argument, so they changed their reasoning. Now, they say they can't

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include USPHS and NOAA in the memorial because they had listening sessions with certain Native Americans, and no one brought up the idea of including USPHS and NOAA. This is so bogus. Most people—including staffers and members of Congress--don't even know that the USPHS and NOAA exist, so there would be absolutely no reason why any Native American would have brought it up during a Smithsonian listening session, though USPHS officers in uniform provide healthcare to Native Americans on reservations all over the country.

We have been working with Congressional staff to amend the 1994 law to have it read “uniformed services,” rather than “armed forces.” We thought there was going to be no problem until we learned recently that Sen. Brian Schatz (D-HI) is opposed to our efforts, for reasons that we do not understand. We had met several weeks ago with his staff, and they did not tell us of any objection to an inclusive, rather than exclusive, memorial. We don't know what is going on there.

I am attaching a couple of pieces that explain the memorial. One is a recent Voice of America story. The other is an OpEd I prepared for Military.com.

We would be pleased to appear on your program to discuss this issue. Our position has the support of numerous veterans' groups, including the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Vietnam Veterans of America, and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. I am attaching the letter to the Hill they (and twenty-three other veterans' groups) signed last fall. This letter has much in it about how the PHS and NOAA have served alongside their armed colleagues during our country's wars. Half a dozen or so high-ranking Native American PHS officers have sent letters to the Smithsonian on this issue, and their concerns have not been considered.

We look forward to hearing from you. We simply don't understand the Smithsonian's stubbornness on this issue, nor do we understand the position that Sen. Schatz has taken. We don't see why anyone would want a memorial that honors some Native American veterans but not all Native American veterans.

Please feel free to contact me at jcurrie@coausphs.org or 301 731-9080, ext. 7011.

Sincerely,



Col. James T. Currie, USA (ret.), Ph.D.
Executive Director