



# Commissioned Officers Association

of the U.S. Public Health Service

July 1, 2019

The Hon. Jefferson Keel  
President, National Congress of American Indians  
Embassy of Tribal Nations  
1516 P Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20005

Dear President Keel:

We need your help. By “we,” we mean the Native American officers who serve, or have served, in uniform in the US Public Health Service.

We need your help because the Smithsonian Institution is proposing to build the national Native American Veterans Memorial and leave off any mention of the officers who earned their veteran status through service in the US Public Health Service (USPHS) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Further, the Smithsonian is blaming Native Americans for this decision, stating that no one raised the issue with them during listening sessions about the memorial.

I know that you are a combat veteran of the US Army, a distinction which few veterans achieve. As you undoubtedly know, most veterans—even those who serve a full career—never see combat. All of our military services have a very low “tooth-to-tail ratio,” as it is called. Most veterans, even those who served in the Army, never hear a shot fired in anger. In the Air Forces, the percentage of veterans who are ever in harm’s way is around five percent. In the Navy it is about ten percent. The Army has a higher percentage of actual trigger-pullers, but even in the Army it is a minority of veterans who have earned the “combat veteran” status and distinction that you have.

These men and women are no less veterans. They are part of the very small percentage of the US population who ever served in uniform.

Historically, officers in the USPHS have served alongside their armed colleagues in time of war. USPHS officers are like Army or Navy or Air Force medical personnel. They don’t carry weapons, as their duty is that of saving lives, not taking them.

This Smithsonian construct totally ignores the fact that all uniformed medical personnel are non-combatants under the Geneva Convention, whether they are part of the USPHS, the Army, Air Force, or Navy. USPHS officers have served in every war we have fought since 1898. USPHS officers especially distinguished themselves during WW II.

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USPHS officers were largely assigned to the Coast Guard during World War II, and some of them lost their lives when their ships were sunk by enemy action. Other USPHS officers were in the Philippines when the war started, providing health care to the troops there. Some of them died in captivity. They were recognized with Purple Hearts and other medals. They served on Gen. Douglas MacArthur's staff and Adm. Chester Nimitz's staff and in the China-Burma-India Theater with Army Gen. Joseph Stilwell. USPHS officers served on surgical teams in both Korea and Vietnam. Almost 900 USPHS officers served in Iraq and Afghanistan, alongside Army and other combat personnel. I have personally seen the Bronze Star Medals on the PHS uniforms of officers who served there.

We understand that Native Americans serve at higher percentages than do members of other groups, and they should be honored for their service. This memorial is designed to recognize all Native American veterans, and not just those who have served in combat. We ask that you tell the Smithsonian to make this into a memorial that honors ALL Native American veterans, instead of only SOME Native American veterans.

Please feel free to contact me at [jcurrie@coausphs.org](mailto:jcurrie@coausphs.org) or 301 731-9080, ext. 7011.

Sincerely,



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