



*By Kevin Gover, Director, National Museum of the American Indian*

"I never knew that!"

We hear that every day at the National Museum of the American Indian from visitors of all ages.

Our collection of objects and our groundbreaking exhibitions shatter myths about this country and its people and leave our visitors with a deeper, richer, and more truthful understanding of what it means to be an American. They are often surprised by what they didn't know.

Consider this drum, our October 2018 Object of the Month. It is called Desert Thunder, and it was created by Native Americans from the U.S. Army's 120th Engineer Combat Battalion while they were serving in Iraq.



Desert Thunder, drum, stand, and drumsticks. made by members of the U.S. Army's 120th Engineer Combat Battalion (headquartered in Okmulgee, Oklahoma) and used during their Al Taqaddum Inter-Tribal Powwow, Sept. 17-18, 2004, in Al Taqaddum, Iraq. The items were donated to the National Museum of the American Indian by Battalion members and their chaplain, Sergeant Debra K. Mooney (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma), in 2005. (NMAI photo)

Those soldiers were part of a tradition that goes back more than 200 years and continues to this day. It is a tradition of service and sacrifice. And it is based on a fact that most Americans never learned in school.

With Veterans Day approaching—a day that honors all those who sacrificed for our country, we should remember that Native Americans have served in America's armed forces, at times of war and peace, going back to the Revolutionary War—in greater numbers as a percentage of population than

almost any other ethnic group.

Didn't know that? If not, you're not alone. It's part of America's story that was left out of most of our history books.

It's one reason this Museum and our collection are so important—because every object tells a story!

In this case it's a story of service, and also of identity. The Native Americans stationed at Al Taqaddum Air Base, near Fallujah, Iraq, were proud to be serving, but also (like many servicemen and women) they were feeling homesick. They wanted a reminder of home, and a chance to celebrate their heritage.

So they crafted this drum using metal from an oil barrel and canvas from a discarded cot, and used it to host a powwow—a two-day event featuring Native regalia, dancing and singing, and traditional games and foods, including genuine fry bread.

"The beat of the drum is part of the heartbeat of a Native American," says Sergeant First Class Debra Mooney (Choctaw), who planned the event. Sgt. Mooney would later visit the Museum and share her story.

I hope you enjoyed this Object of the Month. Look for more fascinating stories to come your way as part of this series in the coming months, and please continue to support the Museum.

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Originally Printed by The Semipalatinsk Tribune