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**ROBERT L. COWLES**

Wisconsin State Senator  
2nd Senate District

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**Testimony on 2021 Senate Bill 969**  
Senator Robert Cowles  
Senate Committee on Transportation and Local Government  
February 16, 2022

Thank you, Chairman Petrowski and Committee Members, for allowing me the opportunity to testify on 2021 Senate Bill 969. This legislation authorizes the Oneida Nation to erect Purple Heart Reservation Signs in a highway right-of-way.

I want to thank the Oneida Nation for its centuries of support to the United States military. From Chief Shenandoah during the Revolutionary War providing aid to General George Washington at Valley Forge through today, Oneida Nation has provided its support and its citizens to serve on behalf of the United States in every war since the birth of America.

Senate Bill 969 looks to honor this tradition and remove the administrative red tape to allow for the Oneida Nation to place signs in the right-of-way of a highway, within the boundaries of the reservation, designating Oneida as a Purple Heart Reservation. This designation raises community awareness of the Oneida Nation's military sacrifices provided to the United States and honors the 15 tribal veterans who have received a Purple Heart.

Due to the location of Oneida Nation's Purple Heart Memorial along Wisconsin Highway 54, Senate Bill 969 is necessary to provide the legal authority for the signs to be erected.

Attached to my testimony is an article from the Oneida Nation about its 2019 declaration as a Purple Heart Reservation and also detailing some of the heroic tales of some of the Oneida Nation's Purple Heart recipients.

I am eternally grateful to the men and women who have served in our military under the United States flag and further grateful for the members of the Oneida Nation who have served under two flags to protect one home.

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# Oneida Nation declared Purple Heart Reservation

Posted on [May 2, 2019](#) by [Christopher Johnson](#)



*Kali photo/Christopher Johnson*

*Several veteran's organizations and the Oneida Business Committee were in full support of a recent measure declaring the Oneida Nation a Purple Heart Reservation. Only a handful of Native tribes hold this distinction.*

*Front (L-R): VFW 8<sup>th</sup> District Commander Chris Cornelius, Councilman Kirby Metoxen, Secretary Lisa Summers, Wisconsin MOPH Chapter 164 Commander George Greendeer (Purple Heart), Chairman Tehassi Hill, Roger Metoxen (Purple Heart), and Councilman Daniel Guzman.*

*Back (L-R): ONVAC Secretary John Breuninger, MOPH State Chaplain Al Johnson (Purple Heart), Councilman David Jordan, MOPH Chapter 164 Vice Commander and VFW Post 7784 Commander Cletus Ninham (Purple Heart), and Oneida Veterans Services Manager Kerry Metoxen.*

To help remember Oneida Nation veterans who were wounded or killed in action the Oneida Business Committee (OBC) took official action and proclaimed the Oneida Nation a Purple Heart Reservation during the April 24 OBC meeting. This resolution recognizes the service and sacrifices made by combat wounded Oneida Nation veterans and makes Oneida one of only a handful of Tribal Nations across Turtle Island to hold this designation. The Oneida Nation Reservation signs will soon reflect this designation around the boundaries of the undiminished Oneida Reservation established in 1838.

The request for this resolution was brought forward by Military Order of the Purple Heart (MOPH) Wisconsin Commander George Greendeer and MOPH Chapter 164 Vice Commander Cletus Ninham, both combat wounded Purple Heart recipient Oneida Nation Warriors.

“The reason we took on this project is because we’re hoping that seven or eight generation from now there will only be a memory of combat Purple Heart veterans killed or wounded in conflict,” Greendeer said. “The memory will be a Purple Heart monument to honor our warriors that fought during the various wars.”

The Purple Heart is a United States military medal awarded in the name of the President of the United States to those wounded or killed while serving their country in wartime. Numerous Oneida Nation Warriors have distinguished themselves in combat across the ages fighting to protect two governments under two flags: the Oneida Nation and the United States of America.

Although a work in progress, here are the names of some brave Oneida Warriors who are known at this time to have received the Purple Heart: Cletus Ninham (U.S. Army, Vietnam), George Greendeer (U.S. Army, Vietnam), Roger ‘Reggie’ Metoxen (U.S. Army, Vietnam), Junior Parker (U.S. Army, Korea), Leon House (U.S. Marine Corps, Vietnam), Eastman Skenandore (U.S. Army, WWII), Ernest Skenandore (U.S. Army, WWII), Dave Cannon (U.S. Army, WWII), Edmund Powless (U.S. Army, WWII), Frank Summers (U.S. Army, Korea), Roy House (U.S. Army, WWII), Valdor John (U.S. Army, Korea, Vietnam), Joseph Metoxen (U.S. Army, WWII), Marty Antone (U.S. Marine Corps, U.S. Army, Operation Iraqi Freedom) and Jerry Metoxen (Branch unknown, Vietnam).

One such story of combat heroism is that of Ninham as written by Oneida Nation Secretary Lisa Summers in a recent memorandum. Summers wrote that Ninham was drafted into the United States Army during the Vietnam War. Following Basic Training, Advanced Infantry Training, and Airborne Jump School, Ninham was sent to Vietnam and assigned to the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Division and later reassigned to the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne. On Ninham’s first combat mission, his platoon came under heavy enemy fire which killed or injured many of his brothers-in-arms. Ninham and his platoon sergeant attempted to retrieve their wounded lieutenant, but in the ensuing rescue attempt the sergeant was also hit requiring Ninham to now try to save both men. Under heavy enemy fire, Ninham heroically managed to bring both men back to cover. Ninham was later awarded the Bronze Star with a “V” for valor for his actions during this mission.

Later during the same deployment, Ninham's team was sent on a search-and-destroy mission in the Vietnamese highlands with orders to take down a Viet Cong stronghold. During the mission one of his platoon mates stepped on a booby-trap which exploded and severely injured several soldiers, including Ninham. Near death and with shrapnel wounds riddled throughout his lower body, Ninham was forced to endure more than a day of unimaginable pain without morphine as he waited to be airlifted out of the area. He survived his ordeal but had to undergo several surgeries while recovering from his life-threatening wounds. While in recovery, Ninham was awarded the Purple Heart, and approximately one month later was right back in action with the 327<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. Ninham finished up his tour of duty in Vietnam a few months later and eventually returned home to Oneida. He now serves as Commander of the Oneida Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Robert Cornelius Post 7784.

“This (Purple Heart Reservation designation) is a great accomplishment to be able to honor all the wounded men and women who've served in all the wars from the Revolutionary to the present,” Ninham said. “A lot of people don't realize that, being a sovereign nation, Oneidas fought under two flags to protect two nations that are one home. It's times like this that make me proud to be an Oneida and a veteran. I just want to say, ‘Thank you,’ to all the people that were involved in making this come about.”

The Oneida Nation is currently in the process of compiling a more comprehensive list of combat wounded Oneida Warriors who have received the Purple Heart. If there are any recipients, relatives, or friends of recipients who are aware of any Oneida citizen who received the Purple Heart but is not listed in this article, please contact VFW 8<sup>th</sup> District Commander and Executive Assistant to the Secretary Chris Cornelius at (920) 869-4434.

The Oneida Nation will also be breaking ground on a Purple Heart Memorial dedicated to recipients of the United States' oldest military medal. The ceremony is scheduled to take place May 18 at the Oneida Veterans Memorial Wall grounds on Highway 54 at 1:30 p.m. The project is expected to be completed by Memorial Day 2020.

“I'm really excited about this project because of what it's going to do for Oneida,” Greendeer said. “It's going to help wake up our Memorial park over on Hwy. 54. In addition to the wall and eagle we'll now have a plaque representing the different branches of service. In time as that becomes more popular it will lead to more benefits near the park like washrooms and other things that are needed. One good thing always leads to another.”

*Special thanks to Wisconsin MOPH Commander George Greendeer, MOPH Chapter 164 Vice Commander Cletus Ninham, Oneida Nation Veterans Affairs Committee, Oneida Nation Veterans Services Office, VFW Post 7784, VFW 8<sup>th</sup> District Commander Chris Cornelius, Oneida Nation Secretary Lisa Summers, and the Oneida Nation Law Office for their hard work in compiling the information contained in this article and support for this measure.*





**Testimony of Councilwoman Marie Summers before the  
Senate Committee on Transportation and Local Government  
Re: Support for Senate Bill 969  
Wednesday, February 16, 2022**

Chairman Petrowski and Members of the Senate Committee on Transportation and Local Government. It is with great honor, that the Oneida Nation submits this testimony in support of Senate Bill 969 that will allow the Oneida Nation to erect Purple Heart signs on state highways within the Nation's reservation.

Our Nation's history has been that our Oneida warriors have fought to defend our land and our people for time immemorial. Our warriors also aided during the birth of the United States. During the Revolutionary War, our Oneida ancestors provided aid to George Washington and his starving army at Valley Forge. At that time, the war was not going well for the Americans as the British had captured Philadelphia, the first Capital to the Rebels and home to the Continental Congress. After Congress escaped, Washington and his troops made their winter camp at Valley Forge. The winter conditions worsened on the weary army and the army's supply system was stifled, and it was difficult to get the necessary goods to the soldiers. The soldiers were starving and had inadequate supplies and clothing. Oneidas, including Chief Shenanadoah who was an unwavering friend to the Americans, traveled over 200 miles from Fort Stanwix to Valley Forge to provide several hundreds of bushels of corn to feed and save the army. It is believed that this historical event had a significant impact on the outcome of the war, and ultimately the birth of the United States. Ever since, our Oneida warriors have served, and continue to serve, in every war on the side of the United States, with several of our veterans having been presented the Purple Heart.

In 2019, the Wisconsin State Military Order of Purple Heart Chapter 164, led by two of our cherished Purple Heart recipients, the late George Greendeer Sr. and Cletus Ninham, worked with the Nation's leadership and veteran's groups to declare the Oneida Reservation a Purple Heart Reservation. Subsequently, a community event was held by the Military Order of Purple Heart to erect a monument honoring our veterans and recognizing Oneida purple heart recipients.





The Oneida Nation believes it's important to recount the stories of our military veterans – lest we forget their service and sacrifice. In this respect, I would like to share one story - the story of Cletus M. Ninham, Commander of the Oneida Veterans of Foreign Wars Robert Cornelius Post 7784 and Vice Commander of the Military Order of Purple Heart Chapter 164. His military story begins with him attending basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky, Advanced Infantry Training at Fort Gordon, Georgia, and Airborne Jump School at Fort Benning, Georgia. After his training, Cletus was immediately sent to Vietnam, and assigned to the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne and then reassigned to the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne.

Cletus was assigned to Tuy Hoa (pronounced TWEE HWA) which was an extremely high-risk mission that caused several of his comrade-in-arms and officers to be wounded or killed. Cletus and his Sergeant courageously volunteered to retrieve his Lieutenant who was wounded in battle. While this time, Cletus was able to escape intense enemy fire; however, the Sergeant was wounded, and Cletus pressed forward to ensure the safe return of both his Sergeant and Lieutenant while under fire. Cletus was awarded the Bronze Star with a "V" for valor for his bravery during this mission.

The next chapter of Cletus's military journey sent him to Qui Nhon (pronounced KEE NYAN). During his tour, he was sent out on a "Search and Destroy" mission in Nhon Co (pronounced KNEE YAWN COW), with orders to terminate a Viet Cong (pronounced VEE IT KONG) in a mountainous region of Vietnam. During his mission, he was injured by a concealed explosive

device and sustained severe injuries from the blast. Shrapnel riddled the lower half of his body, that caused several major wounds, he required immediate medical attention and was airlifted out of his location. While being airlifted he had to be dropped approximately 15-20 feet, which was as high as a treetop however high winds prohibited a safe pick up and return to the ground.

To keep Cletus safe from the elements of the weather, a makeshift shelter was made of ponchos. As he laid under those ponchos, without any pain relievers, he knew he was close to death. A combat medic cared for Cletus until a landing zone was cleared the next day to airlift him to receive the necessary surgeries and medical care. Cletus spent about a month in recovery before being shipped back to his unit at Phan Ran (pronounced FAN RAN). He was sent back to the front lines at Dak To (pronounced DAK TAO) because the 327<sup>th</sup> unit was being overrun by Viet Cong (pronounced VEE IT KONG). Cletus spent about another month in the country between the front lines and the base camp, before returning to the United States.

Like other servicemen, Cletus took leave before reporting to his states-side duty assignment; however, a few days after returning home he was shipped off to the Milwaukee VA Medical Hospital for approximately one month because his legs started to swell and turn bright red. Eventually, Cletus made it to Fort Campbell, Kentucky. He was issued a uniform upon return and he concluded the remainder of his two-year tour of duty. Today, Cletus continues to serve his fellow comrades as the Oneida VFW Post Commander. He proudly represents the Oneida Nation and the United State of America, as a military veteran and recipient of the Purple Heart.

This is one story of one man's life in the military. The Military Order of Purple Heart Chapter 164's commanders wanted to be sure that all Oneida Nation veterans who served and received a Purple Heart were recognized for their service, be honored for their sacrifice, and their stories kept alive.

The Oneida Nation is proud of our military service, as Oneida people have served in every war on the side of the United States since the Revolutionary War. We hold our veterans in the highest regard, and it is with the utmost honor and respect that the Oneida Nation comes forward and submit this testimony to the Committee on behalf of those who have sacrificed to defend our Nations. We ask the Committee to continue to support our efforts to honor and recognize our Purple Heart veterans by voting to support the passage of Senate Bill 969.

Yaw^ko

A good mind. A good heart. A strong fire.





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## Testimony on Senate Bill 969

*Senate Committee on Transportation and Local Government*

*Wednesday, February 16, 2022*

Chairman Petrowski and members,

Thank you for the opportunity to come before your committee today to discuss Senate Bill 969, which would allow for the Oneida Nation to erect Purple Heart signs within the Nation's reservation and on state highways.

Wisconsin is home to over 17,000 Oneida tribal members, of whom nearly 8,000 live on the reservation or in the Northeastern part of the state. The Oneida reservation, located in Brown and Outagamie Counties, totals 65,400 acres to which 23,122 acres are tribally owned. Recently, it was brought to my attention that the Oneida Nation would like to erect Purple Heart Reservation signs that would recognize the service and sacrifice made by combat wounded veterans. In fact, the Oneida nation passed a Government Resolution in 2019 proclaiming the Oneida Nation a Purple Heart Reservation.

However, discussions with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (DOT) and research into the issue have identified some barriers that would require state statute changes. Currently, the DOT dual language signing program does not allow the department the ability to install the Purple Heart Reservation signs due to the following:

- WI State Statute 86.19 (highway signs, regulation, and prohibition) only allows for signing on the right-of-way that guides, warns or regulates motorists.
- Federal regulations also require all roadways open to public travel to follow the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices. Section 1A.01 of the 2009 MUTCD indicates that traffic control devices or their supports shall not bear any advertising message or any other message that is not related to traffic control.

The Purple Heart is a United States military medal awarded in the name of the President of the United States to those wounded or killed while serving their country in wartime. Numerous Oneida Nation Warriors have distinguished themselves in combat across the ages fighting to protect both the Oneida Nation and the United States of America. Allowing the Oneida Nation to place these signs are a public and civic way to recognize Purple Heart recipients and to help bring awareness to veterans who have selflessly served.

Chairman Petrowski, again, I appreciate the opportunity submit testimony before the committee on this important legislation.