

Another long day on the road serving Native American Veterans. First was a great drive through the badlands of Western South Dakota on our way to visit the new Lakota Freedom Veterans Cemetery near Wamblee and Kyle, South Dakota. Along with way I got to stop and see a great high school friend on the reservation. Parkinson Disease has taken a tool on this proud man. Was nice to spend a few minutes reminiscing about our youth oh so many years ago.

After a few more miles on the road it was time to visit the new cemetery. This is the final resting place for many of the Lakota Service Men and Women of the Oglala Lakota Nation on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Many of the Northern Plains Tribes are establishing these cemeteries. It was a beautiful setting amongst the pine trees and rolling hills. We will partner with these places to provide the families with items needed for the funerals. Yes, 22 a day is real here too.



*Lakota Freedom Veterans Cemetery overlooking The Pine Ridge Indian Reservation*

The manager also told us he could not afford flags. We will provide flags to fly and for the families.

Then we had a great stop with a Pets and Vets partner--the Oglala Pet Project. There are many animals who need a good home and the director of this program, whom we partner with, is a valuable resource to the community. She never turns down abandoned or lost animals. What a great person and program. Pets and Vets a Win/Win.



*Lakota Freedom Veterans Cemetery*

When you are traveling to many locations in one day, it is more driving than visiting. So our next stop was the Anpetu Luta Otipi Treatment Center. Another incredibly valuable program serving Native American Veterans and others with addiction issues. We also partner with them to meet the needs of veterans. We are the resource many programs can turn to who need help serving Native American Veterans. They got our attention with the request for clothing. Everything from sweats to socks to underwear. WE will get them what they need because they are warriors who served this great country and we serve them with your help.

I might add that many travelers on the reservations do so by hitchhiking. So we gave a few rides on this long, hot day. It was a great day for the long drive. The sun was shining bright in the month of the returning thunder and green grass. The time when the buffalo get fat as many prepare for the upcoming Sundances.

Our next stop was a familiar place where veterans and elders go to get a hot meal on this poverty stricken reservation where unemployment is often over 50%. Isn't that crazy when most of America is experiencing the lowest unemployment in years, yet unemployment is still a huge factor on the reservations we serve?

We arrived at the center with beds to be delivered. We also had to try the noon meal. It was great. The upside down pineapple cake was as good as I have ever had. Much thanks to the crew who feeds the elder and veterans every day. Geraldine Thunder Hawk is a treasure.

The miles were getting long now over 200 miles driven and we were not half way done for the day. The next stop was the homeless veterans shelter in the community where my grandmother was born in 1899—Pine Ridge, South Dakota. We met with the new Veterans Service Officer for the tribe. Always good to visit with another Devil Dog.



*Oglala Pet Project*

We delivered much needed supplies. It was time to get back on the road to our next destination--snacks at the famous Big Bat's Convenient Store. We met a NAVA board member there for a quick meeting. Great conversation about helping veterans and programs who serve veterans on the reservations in the northern plains states. We reach out to North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Wyoming and Montana. All with mission of Helping Native American Veterans.



*Major Ramsey at Lakota Freedom Veterans Cemetery*

After a quick meeting we were back on the road to Oglala. There we had a great surprise conversation with Wilma Thin Elk. A 79 years old elder of the tribe who is outspoken and brilliant. She spoke with passion and conviction about helping people. She told us of a couple of struggling elderly veterans in another community who are pretty much forgotten by all. We will find them and help them in any way we can. After the longer than intended meeting with Carol Bravo and Wilma, with heavy hearts we had to continue on. As we drove back the 90 miles, we had a somber discussion of doing more and more.

When you hear of a 73-year-old USMC veteran on the reservation who is handicapped and confined to a wheelchair who often goes without basic necessities, it brings a lump to my throat and tears to my eyes. Then a passion to do more comes, and we have to do more. We have to reach more.

There are too many struggling Native American Veterans. There are some from Korea and Vietnam who are elders struggling to make ends meet daily. Then there are younger veterans from the Iraqi and Afghanistan wars who are dealing with every thing from missing limbs to moral injury, who are struggling to find their way.

We cannot be everything to everyone, but we can do a lot to help them. That is why we do what we do. Help Native American Veterans and their families. We help with food, clothing, hygiene supplies, holiday meals and energy assistance. They are worth it.