

Mr. Speaker, today the House will vote on H.J. Res. 98, which will designate May 25, 2000 as the Day of Honor to celebrate minority veterans throughout the country. This day will be set aside to recognize the service of African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans in World War II. The service and sacrifice of these men and women is all the more moving because, in many cases, they fought to protect freedoms that they themselves did not fully enjoy.

Today, we understand that part of what makes a community livable is respect for diversity and an appreciation of our differences. Understanding our history, even when it contains difficult memories, is an important part of bridging the ethnic and cultural divisions that still trouble us.

African Americans were the largest group of minority Americans to serve in World War II. More than a million African American men and women served in the United States Armed Forces in the war. The famed 332nd Fighter Group of the Tuskegee Airmen never lost a bomber under their escort to an enemy fighter in 200 missions.

The Day of Honor was celebrated in Portland last Saturday at Reflections, a coffee and book store in my district. African American servicemen from all branches of the United States military were recognized for their sacrifice and heroism on the battlefield. I was especially pleased that Mr. Edgar L. Bolden, who served with the Tuskegee Airmen and now lives in the district I serve, was the guest speaker at the event. Mr. Bolden trained as a fighter pilot with the Tuskegee Airmen, serving his country honorably, and then went on to receive an engineering degree and work for the Federal Aviation Administration and in the private sector.

Another outstanding group of African Americans who served our country in World War II was the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion, the Army's only all-African American parachute infantry unit. Born within an armed forces that had typically relegated African Americans to menial jobs and programmed them for failure, the 555th or 'Triple Nickels' as they were called, received new orders as the war was drawing to a close--a change of station to Pendleton Air Base in Pendleton, Oregon.

The 555th acquired a new nickname, the 'Smoke Jumpers' and they were on emergency call

to fight forest fires in any of several western states. Their other mission was 'Operation Firefly' in which they would parachute into areas where there were suspected Japanese 'balloon bombs--incendiary devices that had traveled across the Pacific on hydrogen balloons and posed the risk of setting fires and were a danger to people. Indeed, a woman and five children were killed by one of these bombs near Bly, in southern Oregon. The Triple Nickels carried out the hazardous mission of locating and disposing of these bombs. Two years later in 1947, the 555th became the unit that integrated the Army when they became members of the 82nd Airborne.

These are just a few of the many examples of sacrifice and bravery displayed by minority veterans in World War II. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all of our veterans. It is because of them that we were able to exercise the freedoms that are central to our Nation's character.