

DONNA M. LORING

Honoring Charles Norman Shay, a quiet warrior and teacher

The passing of Charles Norman Shay has left a quiet but profound emptiness in our community. As a Penobscot elder; as a veteran, and as someone who has spent a lifetime working to ensure our stories are not silenced, I feel this loss in a very personal way. Charles was not only a decorated soldier and a respected elder; he was a keeper of memory, a quiet warrior who carried both the weight of history and the humility of our people.

I have known many veterans in my life, men and women who have served this country even when it did not always serve them. But Charles stood apart. He lived through moments that most of us only read about in history books, and he carried those memories with a gentleness that made you listen more closely. When he spoke, it was never to boast. It was to teach.

Charles was only 19 when he stepped onto Omaha Beach in the first assault wave on D-Day. As a medic, his job was to save lives in a place where death was everywhere. Under machine-gun fire, in the cold and violent surf, he pulled wounded soldiers to safety — again and again. Many lived because of him.

He earned medals for that courage, but he never defined himself by them. What mattered to him was duty. What mattered was helping others survive.

When he returned home to Indian Island after the war, he found a familiar story: Few opportunities for Native people, and even fewer ways to make use of his training. So he re-enlisted and served again, this time in Korea. That was who Charles was — steady, reliable, willing to step forward even when the world didn't make it easy.

Later, he transformed that same sense of responsibility into something just as meaningful: preserving our history. He helped reissue his grandfather Joseph Nicolar's "The Life and Traditions of the Red Man," a foundational text of Penobscot identity. He lovingly restored his Aunt Lucy Nicolar Poolaw's "Teepee" on Indian Island, turning it into a small family museum that kept our culture alive for the next generation.

These weren't grand gestures. They were acts of love. Acts of commitment. Acts that said: Our people were here. Our stories matter.

I always admired the way Charles approached memory. He knew that history doesn't live in textbooks. It lives in the stories we tell, the land we protect, and the courage we pass on. And he understood that Native veterans had too often been written out of America's narrative. He worked to correct that.

His presence at Normandy — year after year — brought attention to Native soldiers who had gone unnoticed.

Thanks to his efforts, a memorial now stands on Omaha Beach honoring Native American service members. That is something future generations will see long after all of us are gone.

Charles never separated his identity as a Penobscot man from his identity as a veteran. He held them together, even when the country he defended did not honor its promises to our people. In that way, he represented the best of us. He showed what it means to serve without losing yourself, and what it means to return home with the determination to make things better for those who come after.

As I reflect on his life, I find myself thinking about the quiet power he carried. Charles never raised his voice, yet he commanded attention. He walked softly, yet he left deep footprints. We often talk about warriors as if the loudest ones are the strongest. But Charles taught us that real strength can be measured in humility, in perseverance, and in the willingness to shoulder responsibility when others turn away.

His passing makes me think about the fragility of memory. We are living in a time when Indigenous history is still being erased or ignored. Charles understood that danger. That is why he dedicated so much of his later life to making sure the world knew who we were, what we contributed, and what we survived. It

is now up to us to continue that work.

For me, honoring Charles means telling his story in full — his courage on the battlefield, his loyalty to his people, and his devotion to preserving our culture. It also means recommitting ourselves to the cause he cared so deeply about: ensuring that Native veterans, and Native history, are given the respect they deserve.

I give thanks for the example he set. He showed us how to serve with honor, how to live with humility, and how to protect what is sacred. His life was a reminder that our people have always stood strong, in war and in peace, even when recognition was slow to come.

Charles Norman Shay has returned to the ancestors now. But his legacy remains with us — in the stories he preserved, in the memories he carried, and in the courage he embodied. Rest well, Charles. Thank you for your courage, your humility, and your devotion to our people. May the ancestors welcome you home and may we never let his contributions be forgotten.

Kci Woliwoni, Charles. Walk well on your journey home.

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