

On November 11, 2021, Elsworth Goes-Ahead will stand where his great-great-granduncle, the famous Crow leader Chief Plenty Coups, famously stood 100 years before beside the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C.

In 1921, the Apsáalooke (“people of the large-beaked bird”) chief captured the world’s attention when, after a speech by President Warren G. Harding, he placed a wreath of flowers, his war bonnet, and his sacred coup stick on the tomb, which was dedicated that day. Speaking in the Crow language, Plenty Coups prayed that “the Great Spirit will grant that these noble warriors have not given up their lives in vain, and that there will be peace to all men hereafter.”

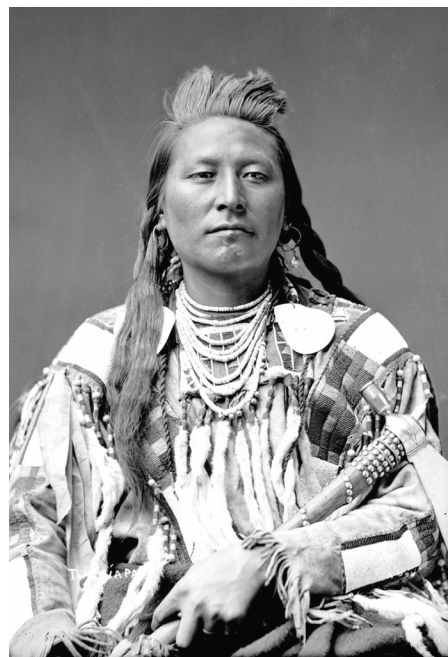
This year, the Office of Army Cemeteries invited GoesAhead, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran, and seven other members of the Chief Plenty Coups Honor Guard to take the national stage and present flags at the centennial of the tomb’s dedication.

“It’s very emotional for me, especially given my own military background, to be representing Plenty Coups, the Crow Tribe, and the state of Montana on such hallowed ground for such an important historical event,” says GoesAhead, who has carried the Chief Plenty Coups flag since 2017 as the Honor Guard’s post commander.

#### GREAT CHIEF

Plenty Coups, whose Crow name *Aleekchea-ahoosh* means “many achievements,” is regarded as one of the great Plains Indian leaders. He was born in 1848 near present-day Billings and became a chief while only in his late 20s. Plenty Coups lived through the wars between the United States and Plains Indian tribes and the Indians’ eventual forced assimilation and removal to reservations. An exceptional warrior, he was particularly skilled at capturing tethered horses from an enemy’s camp, a prerequisite display of spiritual power required for becoming an Apsáalooke chief.

*Tom Dickson is the editor of Montana Outdoors.*



## FROM WARRIOR TO WARRIOR

Crow leader Chief Plenty Coups will be among those honored in November at the centennial of the dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

By Tom Dickson

As a Crow leader, Plenty Coups traveled to Washington, D.C. repeatedly to negotiate with the U.S. government, railroad companies, and other powerful interests that wanted to remove the Apsáalooke people from their land. He successfully fought for their right to stay, though their reservation

was eventually reduced to 2.2 million acres, a fraction of the size originally granted in a treaty with the U.S. government.

During his frequent visits to the nation’s capital, Plenty Coups earned a reputation for statesmanship and was renowned for his wisdom, eloquence, and compassion. He was chosen by the U.S. War Department to represent all Indians at the dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on Armistice Day (now called Veterans Day), 1921. Thousands of Native American men and women had enlisted to serve in the U.S. military during World War I, which ended in 1918. Also attending the ceremony were high-ranking officials from England and France and reporters from the Allied nations.

#### “KNOWN BUT TO GOD”

In the center of Arlington National Cemetery on a hill overlooking Washington, what was officially called the Tomb of the Unknowns contains the remains of an unidentified World War I soldier. It was built in tribute to the thousands of soldiers who died in battle but could not be identified. Engraved on the tomb are the words: “Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God.” In later years, unidentified soldiers from other U.S. wars have been buried in the tomb. The site is guarded 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, by special sentinels chosen from the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment, the oldest active-duty U.S. Army unit, dating to 1784.

Plenty Coups’s prayer and offerings on the day of dedication were regarded by many in attendance as gestures of peace and reconciliation and were reported as widely as the comments of the president himself. “Taking his war bonnet off and presenting it to an American who he didn’t know, that’s powerful. That says a lot, and it really ties the Crow Nation to that warrior who’s buried on the plaza,” Gavin McIlvenna, president of the Society of the Honor Guard for the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, said on September 4 at the Chief Plenty Coups Day of Honor, an annual event held in Pryor, Montana.



**HALLOWED GROUND** A sentinel from the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment (nicknamed “The Old Guard”) stands watch over the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery. Below: The Chief Plenty Coups flag, a gift from the U.S. Army to honor the Crow Tribe’s service as scouts during the Plains Indian Wars, is based on U.S. military flags flown in the late 1800s. It is one of only two such flags awarded to Indian leaders by the U.S. government. (The other was for the Paiute chief, Winnemucca.) The flag uses the phonetic spelling of Chief Plenty Coups’s name. Facing page: The chief at age 32.



ABOVE: PLENTY COUPS PHOTOGRAPHED 1880 BY CHARLES MILTON BELL IN NATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL ARCHIVES, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION  
OPPOSITE PAGE: U.S. ARMY PHOTOS BY ELIZABETH FRASER / ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY

**AS THE WORLD WATCHED** Right: With President Warren G. Harding and dignitaries from England and France, Chief Plenty Coups, age 73, stands at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Arlington National Cemetery, on November 11, 1921. Plenty Coups placed a war bonnet and coup stick—symbols of spiritual power—atop the unknown soldier’s casket before offering an impromptu prayer in his native language.

Aaron Brien, Crow tribal historic preservation officer, says the chief may have simply been honoring a fellow soldier. “Plenty Coups was someone who had seen combat, who knew what it was like to face the enemy,” he says. Brien explains that the Crow people “place a high value on respecting the dead” and during funeral ceremonies will lay Pendleton blankets and other valuable items on a casket. “So it was not at all surprising that he would place his headdress and coup sticks on the tomb,” he says.

**SPECIAL FLAG**

The U.S. government paid tribute to the chief again years later by presenting him with an official flag bearing his name, one of only two Indian leaders ever to receive such an honor (the other was the Paiute chief, Winnemucca). “He was very proud of it and took it everywhere he went,” says GoesAhead. GoesAhead is the fifth person, starting with the chief himself, to have the honor of carrying the flag at Crow celebrations, parades, and other important events. He and the other members of the Chief Plenty Coups Honor Guard will carry flags honoring the United States, the Crow Nation, and the state of Montana at the three-day tomb centennial ceremony.



**Chief Plenty Coups’s Prayer**

November 11, 1921, at the dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (translated from the Apsáalooke language):

*“I feel it an honor to the red man that he takes part in this great event today because it shows that the thousands of Indians who fought in the Great War are appreciated by the white man. I am glad to represent all the Indians of the United States in placing on the grave of this noble unknown warrior this coup stick and war bonnet, every eagle feather of which represents a deed of valor by my race. I hope that the Great Spirit will grant that these noble warriors have not given up their lives in vain, and that there will be peace to all men hereafter. This is the Indians’ hope and prayer.”*



**Counting coups**

The word *coup*, of French origin, means a hit, blow, or strike. Among the Plains Indians, a coup in battle involved touching an enemy with a stick, weapon, or hand and was considered the highest act of valor. These courageous acts were tallied after a battle with notches on the warriors’ coup sticks, sacred items often decorated with beads, feathers, animals skins, and horse hair.

As a young man, Plenty Coups took part in many raiding parties against other tribes and was renowned for his skill in capturing weapons, tethered horses, and other acts of “counting coups.” ■



**A GREAT DAY** Each September, Chief Plenty Coups State Park holds the Day of Honor celebrating the famous Apsáalooke leader and Crow military veterans. Clockwise from top: Elsworth GoesAhead bears the flag of his great-great-granduncle with other members of the Honor Guard; young dancers in traditional Apsáalooke dress pause to listen to an elder speak at the ceremony; the Pryor Mountain Boys perform traditional Crow drumming during the Day of Honor, which includes a craft fair and a free BBQ dinner.



Read more about Chief Plenty Coups and the state park that honors him at: [issuu.com/montanaoutdoors/docs/plentycoups](https://issuu.com/montanaoutdoors/docs/plentycoups)

PHOTOS: NATIONAL PHOTO COMPANY COLLECTION; THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

PHOTOS BY RYAN BERRY

The eight-member Honor Guard was established in 1995 to pay tribute to the chief and Crow military veterans. It presents the Chief Plenty Coups flag at the annual Day of Honor, held the Saturday of Labor Day weekend at Chief Plenty Coups State Park, in the tiny town of Pryor, about 30 miles south of Billings on the Crow Indian Reservation.

Before his death in 1932 at age 84, the chief and his wife, Strikes the Iron, donated their home and land from their farm for a memorial to the Crow Nation and a token of what Plenty Coups said was “friendship for all people, both white and red.” The site was eventually acquired and is managed by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. In 2001 Plenty Coups’s home was designated a National Historic Landmark. The park also contains an interpretive center with interactive Apsáalooke cultural and historical displays. Visitors can hear recordings of Crow elders talking about their history and the significance of Plenty Coups and his homestead to the Apsáalooke people.

The park’s biggest event is the annual



**HONORING A WARRIOR STATESMAN** The war bonnet and coup stick given by Chief Plenty Coups to the Unknown Soldier are on display at the Arlington National Cemetery museum.

Day of Honor. Hundreds of visitors and community members gather to pay tribute to Plenty Coups and honor Crow veterans. Festivities include Crow dancing and drumming, a local craft fair, speeches by Crow

elders and other dignitaries, and a free BBQ dinner. “The Day of Honor replicates a feast the chief would give at the end of harvest season, free to all comers, where he would talk about important issues of the day,” says Aaron Kind, park manager.

After the Washington, D.C. ceremony, the Chief Plenty Coups flag will be placed in a vault in the state park museum that holds the chief’s other possessions.

Several weeks before the ceremony, GoesAhead was preparing for his trip to the nation’s capital and thinking about his role in the historic event. “I’m trying to get my head around being there representing Plenty Coups before the whole nation,” he says. “I’m just a country boy from the tiny town of Pryor.”

*Chief Plenty Coups Honor Guard members are accepting donations to help cover the cost of visiting Arlington National Cemetery in early November to represent the chief, the Crow Tribe, and Montana. Visit [billingscommunityfoundation.org](http://billingscommunityfoundation.org) and click the “Donate Now” button.*

TIM EVANSON



## Chief Plenty Coups State Park receives historic-preservation grant

On September 10, the National Park Service (NPS) announced that Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks would receive \$140,537 to help preserve Chief Plenty Coups’s house, designated a National Historic Landmark in 2001.

The funding comes from the Save America’s Treasures Program, a partnership of the National Park Service, National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, and Institute of Museum and Library Services. The program preserves and rehabilitates some of the

most significant and iconic American structures and collections. A total of \$15.5 million in grants was awarded to help fund 49 projects in 29 states.

“This is a much-needed grant for us to help preserve a site of tribal, national, and state significance,”



Chief Plenty Coups’s home, now a state park, was made a National Historic Landmark in 2001.

says Rachel Reckin, Heritage Resource Program manager for FWP state parks.

Reckin says the restoration work, which will begin in 2022, will include foundation

repairs, exterior rethinking and redaubing, window rebuilding and reglazing, a survey for rot and repairs, and roof repair and replacement. ■

ANDY AUSTIN



**VISIT THE STATE PARK**  
Clockwise from top: In the state park visitor center, displays tell the story of the Crow people’s westward movement into today’s Montana; a map shows the vast historical Crow territory; the willow frame of a sweat lodge; taking the stairs to the chief’s Honor Room where he kept his most important possessions.

Chief Plenty Coups State Park is open daily in summer and Wednesday through Sunday at other times of year. Visit [stateparks.mt.gov](http://stateparks.mt.gov) for more information.

STATE PARK PHOTOS BY ANDY AUSTIN

