The Chinook Tribe has fewer than 3,000 members, but as in olden times, there is something in the Chinookan spirit that sometimes places them at fulcrum points of history.

Remarkably, Chris Stevens, the dynamic young American ambassador who lost his life in Libya last week, has a direct link back through time and blood to the Chinook men and women who helped keep the Lewis and Clark Expedition alive through the long winter of 1805-06.

The Chinook are fearless voyagers with a gift for seeing the best in all cultures. When we’re at our best, perhaps this can be said of Americans in general. The Chinooks and Clatsops greeted all who came to their shores here at the mouth of the Columbia River, initiating the age of Pacific Rim trade. Their very language came to form the basis of international exchange for a couple key generations in the Pacific Northwest, borrowing words from other peoples and lending itself to adaptation by speakers of everything from Russian and Hawaiian to English and French.

It’s impossible to image a better historical and cultural background for an American ambassador. Chris Stevens would make his ancestors extremely proud by venturing out into the strange wide world and making friends out of strangers. He played a pivotal role in saving thousands of lives. The good people in Benghazi, Libya, have openly acknowledged their debt to him and their shame at his murder in their city.

If the world were more just, Stevens’ killers would endure the traditional Chinook punishment for murderers. They would be bound with cedar-bark twine and left without water for five days. If they survived, they would be allowed to drink and to eat five mouthfuls of burnt food a day. After 30 days, they would be painted bright red and never again be permitted to eat in the company of other people.

But as Chinook people know all too well — awaiting, as they do, federal recognition they have been so long denied — the world is unjust. Common decency suggests honoring this American hero by delivering justice to his tribe. The innocent suffer while the guilty often go free. Will it be any different this time?

The Chinook people and their neighbors here in Oregon and Washington mourn Chris Stevens, but celebrate the life he lived.