**American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Speech**

The United States Navy is a dedicated team of more than 400,000\* men and women on active duty and Navy Reserve. Many of these heroes come to us from diverse backgrounds with a heritage rich in history and culture. Today, we are here to celebrate the indigenous people of North America, the American Indian and Alaska Native people, or as noted throughout history, the “First Americans,” and their unyielding commitment to defend our national interests today and over the past 236 years.

As the nation celebrates American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month, we would like to take the time to reflect on the courage, determination and spirit that helped shape the diverse face of our Navy today.

Native Americans have long demonstrated their patriotism and commitment to advancing the common goals of this nation.They have contributed their fighting spirit and warrior ethos throughout our history, notably, since 1776, when then President George Washington began enlisting them for his fledgling forces.

Looking back, we see a legacy of service that spans from the War of Independence, the War of 1812, and the Civil War – where as many as 20,000 Native Americans fought alongside Union and Confederate forces as auxiliary troops. Nearly 15,000 Native Americans enlisted and fought valiantly in the military, including the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps during World War I – despite being ineligible for the draft that occurred in 1917. In 1919, Congress awarded full citizenship to all Native Americans who served in the Great War. Their valor and patriotism led to the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, which granted full citizenship and the right to vote to all Native Americans. According to the Department of the Navy, during World War II, more than 44,000 American Indians served in the military – out of a total population of less than 350,000.

The World War II era saw the naming of many ships in honor of American Indians, their tribes and the places where they've lived. Perhaps the best known among the ocean-going tugs of the World War II era were the 205-foot fleet tugs of the Navajo class, also referred to as the Indian class since they were named for tribes of native North Americans.

In nearly every island-hopping assault the Marines launched in the Pacific during 1942 to 1945, Navajo code talkers transmitted messages by telephone and radio in their native language – a code that baffled the Japanese. This unbreakable encryption from the ancient language of their people helped change the course of modern history. The finest hour came, as you may know, at Iwo Jima, where the code talkers directed naval gunfire and close air support to Marines on the island. The Navajos saved the lives of countless troops and helped win at least five major battles.

American Indians continued to serve this country after these wars -- 90 percent of them were volunteers that served in Vietnam.

Today, their commitment is still unwavering with more than 15,000 Sailors and nearly 1,300 civilians of Native American and Alaska Native descent currently serving in the Navy, with one in four American Indian males a veteran of our Armed Forces.

What’s most fascinating is the connection between the Navy’s mission and a deep-rooted tradition in the Native American philosophy. The Navy serves as an outlet for Native Americans to fulfill a cultural purpose – to defend their homeland. The Navy’s mission is to maintain, train and equip combat-ready Naval forces capable of winning wars, deterring aggression and maintaining freedom of the seas. To today's Native Americans, the words "veteran" and "warrior" are interchangeable, and the custom of protecting one's people and homeland has carried over to military service.

American Indian Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Airmen have all fought heroically in all of the wars and armed conflicts in the last century. They have not only been formally recognized for their bravery through military decoration but through anecdotal observation as well.

I want to recognize a few from our Navy’s history, who have served with distinction.

After becoming the first Native American to graduate from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1917, Joseph James “Jocko” Clark, an Oklahoma Cherokee, achieved fame as a pioneer in Naval aviation and carrier-attack strategy. The first Native American to attain the rank of admiral, he was nicknamed the “Patton of the Pacific” because of his flamboyant and daring actions in major World War II battles. You may recognize his favorite saying: “Get things done yesterday, today’s too late.” Good advice!

Another Oklahoma Cherokee, Commander Ernest E. Evans, was awarded a Medal of Honor posthumously for his valiance as the commanding officer of USS Johnston during the Battle off Samar, Philippines in 1944. With severe wounds, Evans managed to relentlessly attack a heavily armed Japanese force to protect his task unit and keep the enemy ships from joining the ongoing Battle of Leyte Gulf. USS Johnston sank at the close of the fierce battle and more than half of the crew was lost, including Evans. To this day, we are grateful for his heroic performance, which led the enemy to believe that they were facing a much larger force, causing them to turn away.

Today, Sarah Self-Kyler embodies the work ethic of her predecessors that devoted their lives to service. A Choctaw, Self-Kyler began her naval career at Annapolis, graduating in 1999. Following a successful tour at U.S. Third Fleet, Self-Kyler became the public affairs officer for the aircraft carrier USS Enterprise and the Carrier Strike Group 12 staff.

INSERT OTHER EXAMPLES FROM YOUR NRD AS APPLICABLE

The requirements for successful military service -- strength, bravery, pride, and wisdom - match those of the Indian warrior. Military service affords an outlet for discipline, combat, strategic thinking, and sense of duty that fulfill a culturally determined role for the warrior. The Navy provides educational opportunities, which allow Native American veterans to return to their communities with competitive skill sets to improve their quality of life.

As we continue to progress in the 21st century, the Navy can be expected to provide continuing opportunities for Native American men and women to carry on their centuries-old tradition of serving with pride, courage, and distinction.

My comments today only represent a fraction of Native American success stories in the Navy. I’d like to take a moment to applaud the thousands of Sailors who make our Navy so powerful today and have helped to do so in the past. Today, we all continue to share our values and our strengths to defend a common goal: freedom.

I am honored to have been here with you today.

Thank you.