**Adm. Winnefeld's Remarks at the Congressional Gold Medal ceremony for Native American code talkers**

By As Delivered by Admiral James A. "Sandy" Winnefeld

[Native American Code Talkers Get Congressional Gold Medal](http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=121191" \t "_blank)   (Related Story)

Washington, November 20, 2013 —

ADMIRAL JAMES “SANDY” WINNEFELD: Ladies and gentlemen, please take your seats . . . and if our wonderful Native Americans who have received their medals would like to retire to your seats, I’m not going to make you stand while I talk.

But I will say good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen, and while, while may be taking your seats again, allow me to say
Halito,
O-Si-Yo,
Marú-awe-eka,
Ha-uh,

And I beg your forgiveness if I did not encode my greetings properly into the native tongue of Choctaw, Cherokee, Comanche, or Hopi and I beg your indulgence that I cannot produce greetings in all 33 of the wonderful groups that we have here today.

Mr. Speaker, Leader Reid, Leader McConnell, Leader Pelosi, other distinguished leaders of the House and Senate, distinguished guests, and most importantly, today’s honorees and your families . . . we are very, very proud of you and I’m very proud to be included today.

Here, during Native American Heritage Month, I have the great privilege of representing the finest military in the world.

In recognizing the hundreds of Native Americans who have worn the cloth of our nation in the distinctive way that we celebrate today, and in such a courageous way, defending a country that did not always keep its word to their ancestors.

The 33 tribes and 216 individuals we recognize today . . . represent native warriors who leveraged their native tongues to defend our nation through an unbreakable code.

Patriots who possessed a unique capability and willingness to not only give of their special talents, but also their lives.

As Richard West, founding director of the National Museum of the American Indian, so eloquently captured it, "Language is central to cultural identity.  It is the code containing the subtleties and secrets of cultural life."

As it turns out, the clever usage of our nation’s original, unique, and very special languages, these cultural codes, was also an essential part of defending our great nation.

We’ve all heard the story.

Throughout history, military leaders have sought the perfect code – signals the enemy cannot break, no matter how able the intelligence team.

And it was our Code Talkers who created voice codes that defied decoding.

In an era of slow, “by-hand” battlefield encryption, it was such an elegant way to quickly provide secure communications.

It was doubly clever in that not only was the language indecipherable, the special words used within the language were confusing as well, such as “crazy white man” for Adolph Hitler, or tortoise for tank, or pregnant fish for bomber.

Our Code Talkers’ role in combat required intelligence, adaptability, grace under pressure, bravery, dignity and quite honestly the qualities that fit my youthful stereotype of the brave, American, Indian Warrior.

These men endured some of our nation’s most dangerous battles and served proudly.

The actions of those we celebrate today were critical during significant combat operations, such as:
Choctaws at the Meuse-Argonne.
Comanches on Utah Beach on D-Day.
Hopis in the Caroline Islands.
Cherokees at the Second Battle of the Somme, to name but a few.

These men were integral members of their teams. The 36th Infantry Division, the 4th Signals Company, the 81st Infantry Division, the 30th Infantry Division, and so many more. Learning Morse code and operating equipment to transmit messages quickly and accurately.

In the words of Navy Admiral Aubrey Fitch, “employment of these men has resulted in rapid and accurate transmission of messages which previously required hours. From the start, the service rendered by these men has received favorable comment.” High praise in Navy language.

These men not only contributed in battle, they fundamentally contributed to our military intelligence community’s work in cryptology.

Our very own National Security Agency Museum highlights the Code Talkers of World War I and World War II as pioneers of their specialty.

So here once again we learn that one of the greatest strengths of our nation is its diversity.

And your U.S. military in particular has always found great strength in this diversity.  You may wonder why this is so.

Well, when the chips are down and the bullets are flying and the only way out is to win.

It doesn’t take long to recognize, on the one hand, that one’s heritage really doesn’t matter so much anymore. And at the same time, if you can bring a little something special to the fight through your own diversity, well so much the better.

Your military has always led our way out of the cultural challenges that sometimes accompany diversity. In this life-and-death business, we’re happy to leverage unique skill sets regardless of individual differences and through our Code Talkers, once again, diversity matched innovation with victory.

The heroes sitting among us are a testament to this; 33 diverse cultures, 33 diverse dialects, all fighting together for one unified nation.

Native Americans have long sacrificed for our nation, well-represented by 28 Army, Marine Corps, and Navy medal of honor recipients.

The first American woman killed in Operation Iraqi Freedom was Lori Ann Piestewa, a member of the Hopi tribe. And many others have served nobly, proudly and well in combat.

While we’ve benefitted as a nation from our Native American warriors’ service and sacrifice, we can also learn from how they managed their journey from war to peace.

Thanks to remarkable advances in battlefield and post-battlefield medical care, we have a great many warriors with wounds both seen and unseen who we will need to support for decades to come.

The Smithsonian makes it a point to note that Native American cultures have special traditions to help their warriors return home.  Native American communities remember their veterans’ sacrifices forever.

After the two world wars, most Native American Code Talkers returned to communities that were facing difficult economic times.  Jobs were scarce, and so were opportunities for education, training.  Some of the returning Code Talkers stayed in their communities doing whatever kind of work they could find.  Others moved to cities where jobs were more plentiful.  Many took advantage of the G.I. Bill to go to college or get vocational training.

The Code Talkers accomplished many things during their post-war lives.  Some became leaders in their communities and participated in tribal governments.  Others became educators, artists, and professionals in a variety of fields.  Many are and remain active in the cultural lives of their tribes.  And some worked to preserve their languages.

All remain recognized heroes within their tribes. The lesson for us today?  These men and women who have served know about commitment and are ready to lead in communities across the nation.

They’re a national resource – a wellspring of intelligence, innovation, hard work, and resilience.  They deserve our best.

So as we gather here together in Emancipation Hall, in the long and benevolent shadow of Freedom, I’m reminded by the bronze statue of Chief Washakie to my right, that warriors become great not only because of their competence in battle, but also because of their efforts for peace and unity and a commitment to people when they return.

We can best honor these great warriors among us not just with well-deserved and long overdue recognition, but also within our own efforts to continuing to leverage our nation’s diversity and to forever honor our veterans, including our Native American veterans.

For their narrative is an essential piece of our narrative; their journey is our journey, and as demonstrated by our Code Talkers, our nation’s future is built on their contributions to our history.

And so now, back to where I started, at least trying to speak a familiar language to our wonderful Code Talkers and their descendants.
Yakoke,
'Wa Do,
Ura,
Kwakwha,

All very special code for a very special message, thank you.

And thank you, ladies and gentlemen, may God continue to shower His blessings on our great nation. Thank you.

(END)