

Opening Remarks: Gun Lake Tribal Chairman D.K. Sprague

Grand Opening of the Native Words, Native Warriors Smithsonian Exhibit

Air Zoo, Kalamazoo Mich., January 27, 2007 11:00am

Boo-Zhoo Ji-yek (Hello everyone)

DK Sprague n-desh-na-kaws (I am called DK Sprague)

Matchebenashiwish Bo-deh-wad-mee O-gen-mah n-daw (I am the chief of the Match-E-Be-Nash-she-Wish Pottawattomi)

Vietnam o-gich-chee-dah n-daw (I am a Vietnam veteran)

Jee-jak n-do-tem (I am a member of the crane clan)

I say Boozhu because we're gathered this morning on the aboriginal homelands of the MBPI, also known as the Gun Lake Tribe

We're very happy to have everyone here to learn something about the many contributions Native Americans have made in defending our collective homeland – the United States of America.

On behalf of the Tribe, I offer a chi miigwetch, or "big thank you," to the Air Zoo and its staff. They are wonderful hosts for the Native Words, Native Warriors exhibit.

A big thank you also goes out to the Smithsonian Institute and its Women's Committee, the National Museum of the American Indian, Elizabeth Hunter Solomon, and the AMB Foundation (Arthur M. Blank). This exhibit would not be possible without the vast contributions of these groups.

The Native Code Talkers, memorialized in the Native Words, Native Warriors exhibit, exemplify the service of Native Americans in the military.

Native American customs of serving the greater good is a bedrock principle of the U.S. Armed Forces.

Native Americans have answered the call of duty impressively. We love this land today as much as our ancestors did prior to European arrival. We will always defend these lands because they will always be our homelands.

Native Americans have served in the United States military since the American Revolution.

During the Civil War 3 Confederate units and 1 Union unit (about 4,000) served honorably.

The Spanish American War saw many Native Americans serve with high valor. One of those soldiers was Jonas Shawandase (SHA-WAN-DAY-SEE), an ancestor of Michigan's Grand Traverse Band. He fought bravely with Teddy Roosevelt on San Juan Hill.

In World War I, 6,000 of the 8,000-plus Indians who served in this war were volunteers. This tremendous act of patriotism was followed by the Indian Citizenship Act in 1924. Prior to this time Indians were not considered citizens of the United States, and could not vote in elections.

During World War II, 25,000 Native American men and women served and fought on all fronts in Europe and Asia. These warriors received more than 71 Air Medals, 51 Silver Stars, 47 Bronze Stars, 34 Distinguished Flying Crosses and two Congressional Medals of Honor.

Ira Hayes, a Pima Indian of the Gila (HEE-LA) River Indian Reservation in Arizona, was one of the men to raise the flag on Iwo Jima. His story was featured in the movie "Flags of Our Fathers."

In the Vietnam War, of which I am a veteran, more than 41,500 Native Americans served in the United States Armed Forces. Of those, 90% were volunteers, giving Native Americans the highest record of service of any ethnic group in the country.

On a personal note, I'd like to share with you my families' story. During World War II I had three brothers enlisted. Brother Amos Sprague killed in action in North Africa. Brother Phil Sprague wounded in Europe. Brother Joe Sprague wounded in Europe. My brother Henry served during the Korean War era. Brother Roger Sprague served in Vietnam in the U.S. Navy, and I served in Vietnam May 1966-May 1967.

Prior to the present Middle East conflicts, in 1990, over 24,000 Native American men and women were in the military.

In Iraq in March 2003, Pfc. Lori Piestewa (PIE-EST-TA-WA), mother of two and member of the Hopi Tribe of Arizona, became the first Native American woman to die in combat. (*Source: Sen. Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) remarks on Senate Floor April 7, 2003*)

Two days before Thanksgiving 2006, Derek Gagne (GON-YAY), twenty (20) years old and a member of Michigan's Hannahville Indian Community was hit by shrapnel and lost hearing in one ear. His sergeant died in that attack. He could have left then, and returned home to his wife, but instead chose to stay in honor of his fallen sergeant. He received a Purple Heart for being wounded in action.

Only five days ago, on January 22nd, Derek lost his leg, his sight in one eye, and suffered other injuries when his humvee was hit by enemy fire. After all his injuries, Derek wants to continue serving our country in Iraq. (*Source: mother, Faye, and father Leonard*)

Let's keep Derek and his mother Faye and father Leonard in our prayers.

For every man and woman in uniform there's a loved one waiting for their safe return, a wife, husband, mother, or father. If I could make one request it would be that the next time you see someone in uniform be it at the airport, train station, bus station, or restaurant, wherever; thank them for serving our country and let them know you will keep them and their family in your thoughts and prayers.

Let's keep all of our comrades who are in harms way in our thoughts and prayers.

Today one of every four Native American males is a veteran of the U.S. military.

Veterans are highly respected throughout our Native communities. At our traditional gatherings of singing and drumming, commonly known as pow-wows, the veterans are afforded special recognition and given the high honor of carrying the flags during grand entry.

It is indeed an honor to be recognized for the sacrifices Native Americans have made to the United States of America.

Again, on behalf of the Gun Lake Tribe, thank you for attending the grand opening and taking the time to learn about Native Words and Native Warriors.

Source for statistics of Revolutionary War; Civil War; Spanish American War; WW I; WWII; Vietnam War; Pre-Gulf War Native troops:

Senate Concurrent Resolution 137 – Sen. Carl Levin
House Concurrent Resolution 403 – Rep. Bart Stupak