



## Local tribesmen support code talker exhibit at Air Zoo

Saturday, January 29, 2007

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In both World Wars, Native Americans answered the call. But for code talkers, weapons were words.

The Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C. is providing a unique opportunity for people to learn about these brave warriors.

A traveling Smithsonian exhibit, "Native Words-Native Warriors," came to the Kalamazoo Air Zoo on Jan. 27, with a special grand opening celebration, presented by the Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomis Indians (Gun Lake Tribe). The exhibit recognizes the service of American Indian Code Talkers and their work with the U.S. military, said James Nye Gun Lake Tribe Spokesperson.

According to Smithsonian Spokesperson Stephanie Montgomery, the exhibit was developed by the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, and the Smithsonian Institute Traveling Exhibition Service with support from Elizabeth Hunter Solomon, the Smithsonian's Women's Committee, and the AMB Foundation.

"When the United States issued the call to arms in World Wars I and II, American Indians answered the call as warriors," Montgomery said. "Some men discovered that words in their Native languages, would be their most valued weapons."

Native Americans had two key advantages in the wars: They came from cultures that had a strong warrior tradition and they had complex languages that were unknown to the enemy. Their codes were impossible to decipher and the code talkers helped the Allies win the war.

The code talkers spoke of eagles and houses on the water, but they were not referring to birds or dwellings. In the language of the Navajo, "Asta" means "eagle," which was the code word for "transport plane." "Paaki," in the Hopi language, means "houses on the water," and was code word for "ship."

"The U.S. military first enlisted American Indians to relay messages during World War I, even though the United States did not consider American Indians citizens until 1924," Montgomery said.

The role of the code talkers expanded during World War II. There were code talkers from Indian nations including the Navajo, Comanche, Sioux, Crow, Mississauga, and Cree, Montgomery said.

One of the best-known programs was a classified effort called the Navajo Code Talker Program, established by the U.S. Marine Corps in 1942. Twenty-nine Navajo volunteers were trained to use radio communications equipment with their system of code words.

During fighting in the Pacific, over 380 Navajo Code Talkers teamed up with Marine units, and relayed information about troop movements and battle plans.

"Twenty-three years after the end of World War II, the U.S. government declassified the Navajo and Comanche code talker programs, and revealed America's unsung heroes," Montgomery said.

In 1999, a Knowlton award, which recognizes significant contributions to military intelligence efforts, was presented to the last known living Comanche code talker. In 2001, President George Bush presented Congressional Gold Medals to four of the five living veterans of the original 29 Navajo code talkers.

"Through oral histories taken from the veterans themselves, Native Words' celebrates and honors this important, but little reported aspect of American history," Montgomery said.

The exhibit features 15 large-scale banners and videos that examine the development of the codes and battlefield experiences. The videos document the experiences of Native American youth, who were punished for speaking their native languages at Indian boarding schools and later became highly valued in the war effort as code talkers.

At the grand opening, speakers and guests talked about contributions that Native Americans have made in defense of the United States. Vietnam Veteran and Gun Lake Tribal Chairman D.K. Sprague, and language instructor and Tribal Council Member Ed Pigeon provided opening remarks, along with Air Zoo Director Bob Ellis, and the Reverend Calvin Hill, of the Navajo Nation.

The event featured traditional Native American drumming and singing by the Sons of the Three Fires Drum Group, who opened and concluded the program with the "Veteran's Song."

The exhibit, on display through April 8, is at the Air Zoo, 6151 Portage Road, in Kalamazoo.

For more information, visit [www.airzoo.org](http://www.airzoo.org).

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