

Thursday, December 8, 2011

Washington, D.C. – Congressman Ben Ray Luján of New Mexico's Third District spoke on the House floor last night to honor the contributions of the Navajo Code Talkers during World War II. Below are his remarks as prepared.

"I thank my colleague from Arizona, Mr. Gosar, for bringing us together tonight as we get a chance to visit and celebrate heroes that are amongst us, whether it's in spirit or in body. We are still so fortunate to have Chester Nez with us, one of the original 29 Code Talkers.

"With me tonight, I have a few excerpts of articles written around the country that capture some stories. Recently in a Fronteras Desk report, Laurel Morales captured the story of Chester Nez. It starts like this, 'Growing up in New Mexico, Chester Nez and many of his fellow Navajo were punished for speaking their language.' They were sent away to boarding school, so many of the young Navajo across the country. Yet the importance of what they were able to accomplish during World War II was captured in the words of Major Howard Connor of the Fifth Marine Division when he declared that were it not for the Navajos, the Marines would have never taken Iwo Jima.

"The article goes on to read that, 'years later, Nez was shocked to learn he'd been recruited by the Marines, specifically to devise a code using the same language the government tried to beat out of him...It was extremely ironic one of the very things they were forbidden to do – speak Navajo – ended up helping us save us during the war.'

"Mr. Nez says that he and his fellow Code Talkers first developed an alphabet using everyday Navajo words to represent letters or words – submarine, iron fish, beshlo, hummingbird to talk about fighter planes. It's amazing how when we talk about the Japanese and how they were so effective at cracking codes, how they couldn't crack this one.

“The article goes on to say that Mr. Nez is one of the last original Code Talkers, living in Albuquerque with his son as a father of six children, nine grandchildren, and eight great grandchildren. ‘With so many people leaving the reservation, Navajo elders like Nez fear their language is dying. Nez hopes Navajo children learn the story of the Code Talkers so they understand just how critical it is to learn and use their own language.’

“And bringing us together this evening, Mr. Gosar, to help celebrate the history of our Code Talkers is so important. It wasn’t until Senator Bingaman introduced legislation back in 2000 that we were able to give an honor to the original 29 with gold medals, and silver medals to the others that were also trained to go on as Code Talkers.

“So here we have example of a few stories we will be submitting and sharing this evening as we celebrate the lives and the history of our Code Talkers – especially today as we remember Pearl Harbor – the sacrifice of the families we lost that day and so many brave soldiers as well.

“Thank you, Mr. Gosar, for bringing us here tonight. I look forward to many stories and continuing to share many of the articles we have been able to find capturing the history and personal stories of our friends, our heroes, the Code Talkers from all throughout New Mexico, Arizona and Utah.”

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