

American Indian Heritage Month

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The Surface Force joins the nation in celebrating American Indians during National American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month throughout the month of November. This year, we celebrate and reflect on the theme, “Honoring Our Nations: Building Strength Through Understanding.”

Since 1994, in the month of November, we have recognized American Indians and Alaska Natives for their respect of the Earth, having served with valor in our nation’s conflicts, and for their many distinct and important contributions to the United States, including our Surface Navy.

American Indians and Alaska Natives have served honorably in the United States Navy for more than 200 years. Their contributions to the strength and security of our nation attests the rich legacy of the first Americans.

The Surface Force would like to share with you some of the greatest contributions and heroic actions of individuals and teams of American Indian heritage in the Navy.

Navajo Code Talkers

The Navajo Code Talkers applied their ancestral language to create what we remember as an unbreakable code which was critical to our Nation in combatting the Japanese forces within the World War II Pacific Theater. 29 Navajo Radio Operators that were new graduates from Marine Corps boot camp developed the code in seven weeks at Camp Elliot, California. And despite three weeks of intensive cryptologic examination by the Navy’s highly skilled codebreakers, the code was found to be unbreakable.

Once the unbreakable code was authorized, the brave individuals were deployed to the frontlines in the Battle for Iwo Jima. Here, while under enemy fire, the Code Talkers used heavy, noisy radios to convey their coded messages. Major Howard Connor, 5th Marine Division signal officer, had six Code Talkers working nonstop during the first two days of the battle.

Connor once said, “Were it not for the Navajos, the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima.” Following this battle, the Navajo Code Talkers were then leveraged in the Battle of Guadalcanal through the occupation of Japan.

Although the Navajo Code Talkers were a tremendous help in World War II, the program was not unclassified until 1968, so our heroes, who paved the way for our victory during the war were unable to share the story of their unbreakable code until recently. Nevertheless, the shared experiences shaped these veterans into leaders for their people both on and off the Navajo reservation.

Admiral Joseph J. Clark

Admiral Clark, often called “J.J.” or “Jocko,” was a native of the Cherokee nation, and the first Native American to graduate from the U.S. Naval Academy.

During World War I, Clark served on the cruiser USS North Carolina, which was engaged in convoying troops across the Atlantic. Following the war, Clark stayed at sea, serving on destroyers USS Aaron Ward, USS Aulick, and USS Brooks, later commanding the Brooks, and as Executive Officer of the USS Bulmer. Later, he became an instructor at the U.S. Naval Academy, 1923-1924.

Clark was aboard the carrier USS Yorktown when the United States entered World War II, and subsequently participated in the raid on the Marcus and Gilbert Islands in the Pacific. For conspicuous gallantry, he was awarded the Silver Star Medal.

In the rank of Rear Admiral, he was a Task Group Commander for carriers and screening vessels alternately with the First and Second Carrier Task Groups of the Pacific Fleet. For distinguished service in Okinawa, Ryukyus, and the Tokyo area, Clark awarded the Distinguished Service Medal (two awards), the Navy Cross, and Legion of Merit with Combat “V.”

In June 1945, Clark was appointed Chief, Naval Air Intermediate Training Command, Corpus Christi, Texas. The following year, he became Assistant Chief of Naval Operations for Air, and from November 1948 had duty afloat in command of Carrier Division Four and Carrier Division Three, with a tour in the interim, as Commander, Naval Air Bases, 11th and 12th Districts.

Clark was designated Commander, First Fleet, in the Rank of Vice Admiral in March 1952, and three months later, was transferred to command of the Seventh Fleet. He was transferred on December 1, 1953, to the Retired List of the U.S. Navy, and advanced to the rank of Admiral on the bases of combat citations.

Following Clark’s retirement, Admiral Clark was a business executive in New York. His last position was Chairman of the Board of Hegeman Harris, Inc., an investment firm. Clark was made an honorary chief by both the Sioux and Cherokee nations.

Commander Ernest E. Evans

Commander Ernest Evans, (half Cherokee and one quarter Creek), believed to be the third Native American graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, was an American Indian fighting captain we honor for his bravery and strength during the Battle off Samar in the Battle of Leyte Gulf. Evans assumed command of the USS Johnston at her commissioning in October 1943. He commanded Johnston for the entirety of her service, being on board when she met her fate on October 25, 1944.

On the day of USS Johnston’s commissioning, Evans said to his crew on their fantail, “this is going to be a fighting ship. I intend to go into harm’s way. Anybody that doesn’t want to go along had better get off right now.” Not a single member fled the ship, and Evans continued on to create one of the most battle-minded crews in history. He also said that he would never run from a fight, and just a year later, Evans proved true to his word.

On October 20, 1944, Johnston joined the Seventh Fleet’s Escort Task Unit 77.4 – call sign “Taffy 3” – to defend the north Leyte Gulf, east of Samar and off San Bernardino Strait, and the Leyte beachhead for General Douglas MacArthur’s return to the Philippines. Five days later, a pilot reported the Japanese Center Force rushing into Leyte Gulf and heading towards Taffy 3. Evans knew his ship and the others in the task were outgunned, but Evans gave the order to attack the Japanese fleet.

After ordering his engineers to lay a smokescreen between the Japanese force and Taffy 3, Johnston fired more than 200 rounds and 10 torpedoes at Japanese heavy cruiser, Kumano, which later sank. Although Johnston had hit Kumano, enemy shells managed to strike Johnston, causing widespread damage, along with casualties. Evans, himself, was critically injured. One of the shells blew off Evans’ shirt, he lost fingers on his left hand, and shrapnel was embedded into his face and neck. When the ship’s medic attempted to treat him, Evans brushed the man away, saying “go and take care of someone who needs it,” and continued to pilot the ship.

As Johnston sank into the depths off Samar Island, Japanese destroyer Yukikaze closed in on Johnston, with her crew lined up on the rails along with their commanding officer, and saluted the Johnston, paying tribute to the heroism of her crew and her captain.

For Johnston’s supreme courage during the Battle off Samar, she was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation, and Evans posthumously received the Medal of Honor. Evans was the only one to receive the Medal of Honor for the entire battle.

“The skipper was a fighting man from the soles of his broad feet to the ends of his straight black hair,” said Ens. Robert C. Hagen, gunnery officer, Johnston. “He was an Oklahoman and proud of the Indian blood he had in him. We called him – though not to his face – the Chief. The Johnston was a fighting ship, but he was the heart and soul of her.”

If it were not for the Navajo Code Talkers, Admiral Joseph Clark, Engineman Second Class Michael E. Thornton, or Commander Ernest Evans, the United States Navy would not be what it is today. We thank these brave men for their service, as well as the Native Americans and Alaska Natives who continue to fight for our freedom today.

A diverse Navy helps our Surface Warriors to operate successfully around the globe by bringing together Sailors and civilians with different ideas, cultures, and capabilities. Integrating Sailors and civilians from diverse backgrounds into the force allows the Navy to recruit and retain the nation’s top talent from a vast pool of skilled personnel.

We are honored to have American Indians and Alaska Natives in our Surface Force, helping to carry on their centuries-old warrior tradition, serving with pride, courage, and distinction.



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