After Pentagon temporarily purges references to Native American Code Talkers’ contributions to World War II, here’s a look back at

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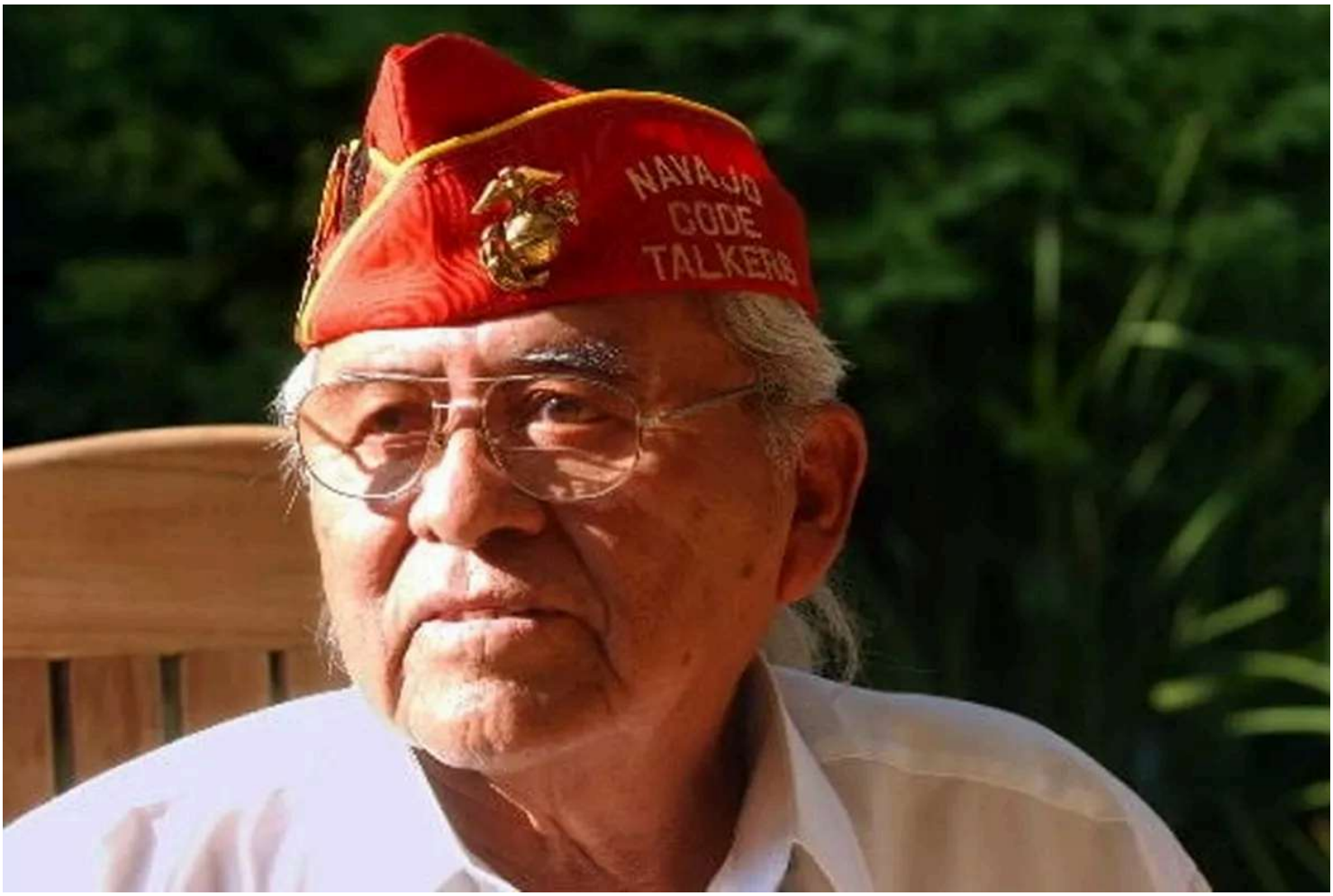

1 of 2

Teddy Draper Sr., shown here on July 25, 2002, in Post Falls, was a Navajo code talker during WWII. Draper, who died in 2017 at the age of 93, was a featured speaker at the 2002 Julyamsh powwow. (Jesse Tinsley/The Spokesman-Review)

By Thomas Clouse

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As part of what an aide to Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth reportedly called a “digital content refresh,” many references on the Pentagon’s website that honored Native Americans who used their ancestral language as an unbreakable code to help American forces in the Pacific Theater of World War II were purged last week.

The outcry was instant, and the Pentagon restored the webpages days later.

The webpages that had been taken down included the story of Pfc. Ira Hayes, a Pima Indian, who was one of six U.S. Marines memorialized in an iconic photograph as they lifted an American flag on the peak of Mount Suribachi in Iwo Jima. Taken on Feb. 23, 1945, the image became a symbol of American resilience and the inspiration for the Marine Corps War Memorial.

Hayes was a Code Talker, a Native American who used his language to baffle the Japanese forces.

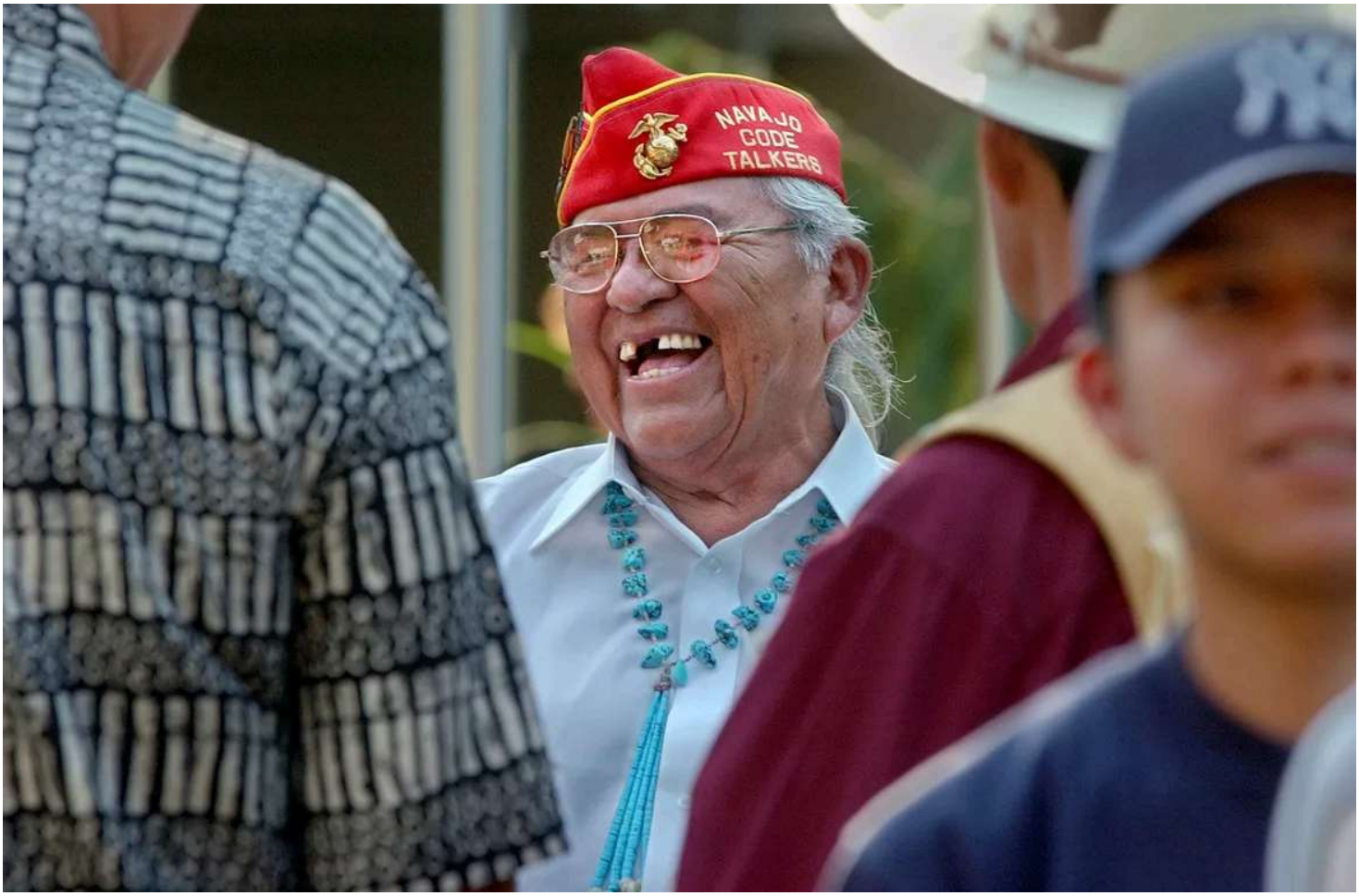
Descriptions of that moment and the contributions of other Code Talkers, who mostly were Navajo and Comanche service men, had been erased as part of the Trump administration’s crackdown on what it calls “diversity, equity and inclusion” efforts by the federal government.

That history had a connection to the Spokane area when the Coeur d’Alene Tribal Council invited some Code Talkers as their featured guests for the 2002 Julyamsh Powwow.

Among those who spoke in Post Falls that day was Teddy Draper Sr.

Draper, who died in 2017 at the age of 96, made the radio call in 1945 announcing that Marines had hoisted the flag on Suribachi.

Here’s a Spokesman-Review story documenting that 2002 event with Draper. It has been lightly edited:



Teddy Draper Sr., shown here on July 25, 2002, in Post Falls, was a Navajo code talker during WWII. Draper, who died in 2017 at the age of 93, was a featured speaker at the 2002 Julyamsh Powwow. (Jesse Tinsley/The Spokesman-Review)

Code Talkers' secret helped win war: A language that saved lives is worth saving, Navajos say

As five U.S. Marines struggled to erect an American flag on Iwo Jima's Mount Suribachi, Marine Teddy Draper Sr. laid down cover fire and grabbed his radio.

Some 30 yards away from the scene that later became the memorial for all fallen Marines, Draper, a Navajo "Code Talker," made the call that the flag had been raised.

Draper, and more than 400 other Navajos, used a code made up of words they spoke every day. The Japanese never broke it, even though they had solved every previous U.S. military code.

"Our language is very important," Draper, 79, said on July 25, 2002. "I hope people understand that this language saved many lives.

"It saved the liberties that we have."

Draper and Bill Toledo, 78, were the featured guests at a preview of Indian art to kick off the 2002 Julyamsh Powwow.

Coeur d'Alene Tribal Council member Cliff SiJohn introduced the Code Talkers – who belonged to a group that was the basis of the 2002 movie "Windtalkers," starring Nicholas Cage.

“Park this in your mind that you were able to see these gentlemen,” SiJohn said of Draper and Toledo. They “stood forward for all Indian nations and for (their) country.”

The contributions – which came at a time when Indians couldn’t even vote – helped win the war.

Their story started on a reservation near the Arizona-New Mexico border.

Draper was in school on Dec. 7, 1941 – the day Japan attacked the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor.

Early the next year, as the Navy began to engage Japanese forces, 29 Navajos were selected to create a military code using their unwritten and extremely complex language.

The Navajos developed a code made up of fewer than 500 words to help platoons and companies communicate with battalion headquarters during intense battles.

Because military terms are not a part of the Navajo language, the code developers used words such as “lo-tso,” which means whale, for battleship; or “dah-he-tih-hi,” hummingbird, for fighter plane.

Draper and Toledo – two of only about 150 Code Talkers still alive in 2002 – fought in the island-hopping campaign that inched ever closer to Japan.

They landed in the Solomon Islands, in Guam and in one of the bloodiest battles of the Pacific campaign – Iwo Jima.

Trained as Marines, it was the Code Talkers’ job to string telephone lines between units.

“We had really good preparation before we invaded Iwo Jima” in February 1945, Draper said.

On the landing craft that hit the Iwo Jima beach, Draper was in the same group as Marine Pfc. Ira Hayes, a Pima Indian.

Hayes died drunk in a ditch 10 years after the war. He suffered from shell shock, which is now known as post-traumatic stress disorder. His life and demise was later memorialized in the song “The Ballad of Ira Hayes” made popular by Johnny Cash.

“After we landed, there was a lot of resistance. The bullets were buzzing over us, behind us, among us. We were pinned down,” Draper said. “A lot of Marines got killed on the beach.”

During the lengthy battle, an artillery shell blew up, destroying Draper’s nose and injuring his eyes. Draper’s loss of hearing is also attributed to that blast, said his son, Ted Draper Jr.

The elder Draper didn’t discuss the other significant incident in the battle.

“He saved a whole platoon and shot six Japanese,” Ted Draper Jr. said. “He doesn’t tell it a lot. It’s not the Navajo way – telling about killing. It’s not easy.

“We try not to glorify war,” he continued. “It’s the people who do things, not one single warrior.”

Draper’s injuries were treated on a hospital ship, and he was sent back into action.

As of 2002, Draper had not received a Purple Heart or any other commendations, though that was rectified when he received one in 2004 some 59 years after he was wounded.

In addition, Draper and 300 other Native American servicemen were later awarded Congressional Silver Stars following interest sparked by “Windtalkers.”

After Japan surrendered, Draper used the code as American forces occupied the Japanese mainland.

As he was being discharged from the Marines in San Diego, military officials told him to keep the code a secret or they would throw him in jail.

He, and every other Code Talker he knew, kept the secret.

The younger Draper said he grew up not knowing about the contributions of his father or uncles.

Finally, in 1968, the secret was made public. Ted Jr. had already graduated from high school.

“It was kind of like a story that was unbelievable. This isn’t right. Our language was used … to win the South Pacific battle?” said Draper, who had five uncles who were Code Talkers. “Not a single one of them said a word of what they did in the war. My uncle Howard went to his death bed without breaking the code of being a Code Talker.”

For Code Talker Bill Toledo, the wait was even longer.

When he was discharged in San Diego, a Marine colonel stopped Toledo as he walked past his office.

“He said, ‘You keep your mouth shut about the code you used, because it might be used again.’ I kept my mouth shut until 1981,” he said.

One day that year, he came home to find his daughter and wife standing at the door. Earlier that day, his daughter dropped his service picture and discovered Toledo’s discharge papers between the photograph and the frame.

The papers identified him as a Code Talker.

“They asked why I never told them I was a Code Talker. I said, ‘Nobody asked.’ They never knew they had one with them for all those years,” he said.

Toledo, who died in May 2016 at the age of 92, and the younger Draper had mixed reviews in 2002 of the movie about the Code Talkers’ exploits.

“There was a lot of action and some of the things we did. It was good entertainment,” Toledo said. “But too much Hollywood.”

But even the best movie couldn’t replicate the progress Code Talkers gave their people, Draper said.

“Up until 1968, our kids were being severely punished for speaking Navajo at school,” Ted Draper Jr. said. “Then they saw our language won a war.

“When that happened, there was a tremendous renaissance of Navajo history, language and culture,” Draper continued. “It then became required in our schools and still is to this day.

“And that is their greatest contribution.”