

TESTIMONY OF
CHIEF GREGORY PYLE
GIVEN ON BEHALF OF
THE CHOCTAW NATION OF OKLAHOMA
BEFORE
THE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
OF
THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES
SEPTEMBER 22, 2004

Vice Chairman, Campbell, Vice Chairman Inouye, Senators, and friends, My name is Greg Pyle, and I am Chief of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

I want to thank you for inviting me to testify before the Committee today on the issue of recognition for Members of our Tribe, who, during their service in the United States Armed Forces, used their Native languages as codes to transmit combat information.

For years, the actions of these servicemen were the stuff of legends, but only legends handed down from Father to Son, from Family Member to Family Member and from Tribal Member to Tribal Member. Their actions were an official military secret, and their service went unacknowledged. But what a secret!! During the darkest hours of our Nations history, they had tricked the Country's enemies through the use of their most basic tool, the language of their forefathers. Early in this Century, Choctaw Members proved that secure communications is a weapon that can make or break an enemy.

As we know, there are hundreds of Native American languages spoken throughout our Country. What was only realized under the stress of War is that such languages were useful as codes. Since the language of Native Americans is based on a different linguistic root and syntax than Teutonic/European or Romance languages, it was not susceptible to being broken through common code-breaking means, such as repetition or substitution of characters. Also, since these languages were only spoken by a relatively small number of tribal members, and since there were few, if any, written orthographies (dictionaries or textbooks) for such languages, they were essentially a mystery for any non-Indian code breaker. You couldn't go anywhere to learn about them, since they were oral languages. In fact, they were the perfect languages for transmission of secrets.

After being declassified information for decades, the first recognition was given for the tremendous service of the Navajo Code-talkers of the Pacific. They used their oral language to transmit messages, under general and actual combat conditions, and the Japanese never had any success in understanding their transmissions, saving thousands of allied lives. Their service has been celebrated in official recognition through the Defense Department and the Congress, and they have received public recognition in written books, TV shows, and movies. A medal, struck under the authority of the

Congress of the United States, has been struck and given to the Survivors and to the families of the Navajo Code-Talkers, and we join in recognizing and celebrating their service.

While we recognize their service, we now desire recognition for the service of other Native Americans in similar actions in both the First and the Second World Wars. With respect to Members of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, I would like to bring to the attention of the Committee the action of the Choctaw Code Talkers of World War I. They seem to be the first recorded use of a Native language as a code. In 1918, conditions on the Western Front had been in stalemate for three years. Hundreds of thousands of lives on the German and Allies sides had been lost, with the result that the trenches had moved less than 50 miles in either direction since 1914. However, there was a new factor in the War – the Americans were coming. America entered the War in 1917. Immediately, the Allies began planning major offensives for the new reinforcements. Men and material were massed at the front.

However, communications between forward observers and the Command/Generals at the rear were a problem. There were no radios in this war – communications involved laying land lines between trenches and communicating by voice. Such telephone lines were subject to being intercepted by advance forces, who could, and did, tap in on the telephone lines at many points. In our case, the Germans had “cracked” all codes used by the Allied Forces, and thus would take these intercepted messages and react to them. Additionally, the use of code was a problem, because it meant that communications were delayed, while messages were coded and then decoded. Substantial loss in men and material had been experienced due to such interception or delay.

There was, however, an uniquely American “ace in the hole”. Among the first enlistments in the fledgling U.S. Army were a number of Choctaw Indian men. They had volunteered, even though such service pre-dated the eligibility of most American Indians for citizenship. One of their officers heard them talking together in Choctaw and got a bright idea – why not set them up as a separate unit in the front lines, use them as forward observers, and have them transmit messages in Choctaw? This at a time when specific Federal policy was to abolish Native American languages at home. 18 Choctaw tribal members were recruited for the special communications outfit and they were distributed along the forward positions of the Front. They were especially useful in moving men and material between forward positions, protection of supplies and gun emplacements from German shelling and preparation of troops for the final assault on German lines in 1918. As with the later use of other tribal languages, the service of the Choctaw Code Talkers left the Germans baffled, and provided secure transmission. According to the official record, it served during the remainder of the War, and dispatches credit it with saving many Allied lives.

While I am aware that the bill introduced by Senator Inhofe, S 540, recognizing the service of Choctaw, Sioux, Comanche and other Code Talkers is not within this Committee’s jurisdiction, I would like to cite it today. We thank Senator Inhofe, and the

22 co-sponsors of the bill, for their support, and we would like to ask of the Members of this Committee to co-sponsor this bill. I look forward to working with all of you to recognize the tremendous service of all American Indian Code-Talkers. Particularly at this time of support for our men and women in uniform, such recognition is overdue and welcome.

I want to recognize today the fact that we have several members of the audience who are descendants of the Choctaw Code Talkers of WW 1. I am ready to answer any questions from the Committee, and am sure they would be willing to answer any questions as well.