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President Begaye orders flags at half-staff for Navajo Code Talker Kee Etsicitty



Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye ordered flags across the Navajo Nation to be flown at half-staff in honor of Navajo Code Talker Kee Etsicitty, who passed on July 21. The Nation is in mourning for the loss of a national hero today, he said. (Courtesy photo)

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz.— The Navajo Nation lost a national hero on July 21, with the passing of Navajo Code Talker Kee Etsicitty.

“The Navajo people are in mourning for the loss of Kee Etsicitty, one of our beloved Navajo Code Talkers and role models for our nation,” said Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye.

All flags across the Navajo Nation will be flown at half-staff in honor of Etsicitty, beginning today and ending at sunset on Saturday.

“These defenders of our Navajo way of life demonstrated the strength and power of the Navajo language and utilized it to end World War II,” President Begaye said. “It is only appropriate that we honor Kee

Etsicitty’s faithful service with this display of respect across our Nation.

“Our prayers and condolences to his family,” he added.

Vice President Jonathan Nez said there are very few Navajo Code Talkers remaining and that they must be honored and respected.

“If you see a Code Talker, take the time to thank them for their service and shake their hand. They are truly living legends,” Vice President Nez said.

“We lost a living legend yesterday,” he added.

Kurtis Etsicitty said his father lived a very long life and that he was very proud of him for his service as a Navajo Code Talker.

“(My dad) said our Navajo language is very sacred. He told the kids to speak the language

because it was handed down to us by the Creator,” Kurtis said.

When participating at book signings, Etsicitty was fond of telling young kids that the Navajo language is in their bloodline and the only way they would learn it is by trying to speak the language, Kurtis recalled.

Etsicitty was well known in his community of Chichiltah, where he was one of six Navajo Code Talkers that lived there. The last living Code Talker from the chapter is Thomas H. Begay.

Etsicitty worked for the Navajo Nation School Board and oversaw 67 tribal schools alongside former vice chairman Ed T. Begay, a term of service he was very proud of.

Kurtis said his father was good worker and a humble man with a surname that’s common on the Navajo Nation, but a very uncommon spelling.

“The last name was spelled like that because the Marine recruiter didn’t know how to spell it. He took a guess and my dad kept that spelling from there. We’re the only ones from the Navajo Nation that spell our name like that,” Kurtis said.

Etsicitty’s Marine Corps brothers couldn’t pronounce his last name, so they took to calling him “Electricity,” Kurtis said.

From 1943 to 1945, Etsicitty served in the South Pacific as a Navajo Code Talker for a period of two years, two months and two days. He saw combat in the Battles of Guadalcanal, Bougainville, Guam, Saipan, and Iwo Jima.

He was a member of the second group of Navajo Code Talkers after the first 29, the

all-Navajo Platoon 297. The 60 troops of Platoon 297 were trained at Camp Pendleton before getting shipped off to war.

Kurtis said his father lied about his age to enlist in the U.S. Marine Corps and was actually 16 when he enlisted. Etsicitty volunteered because he wanted to protect the Navajo Nation from foreign invasion and prevent them from “taking away Navajo heritage.”

Etsicitty talked to Kurtis about how he and the other Code Talkers would crave mutton.

“My dad said somebody would run over the hill to a village and steal a sheep. They would bring it back and then butcher it. They even made a sweat lodge out there and had a sweat,” Kurtis said.

Etsicitty was a devout Catholic and often said the only reason why he was able to return home safely was because of prayer. His first night at Guadalcanal, Etsicitty heard a bomb whistling down to earth and believed it was coming for him.

In addition to his service as a Navajo Code Talker, Etsicitty was rodeo announcer for more than 50 years. His vision was always for the future of the Navajo people.

“He’d get all choked up when he saw kids playing basketball or rodeoing. He’d say, ‘This is what we fought for – liberty,’” Kurtis said.

An account has been setup for the family for funeral expenses under the name Kurtis Etsicitty at Wells Fargo Bank, just reference account number 1044509014.