

Summit promotes benefits

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

In the wake of the national controversy regarding exceedingly long waits for veterans to receive health care nationwide at Veterans Affairs hospitals, the second annual Native Wellness Institute's "Veterans Summit: Gathering of Warriors" concentrated on helping veterans – Native and otherwise – access benefits they deserve for service to their country.

Hosted by the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde at Uyxat Powwow Grounds on Thursday and Friday, July 10-11, the summit brought representatives from the Portland Veterans Affairs Medical Center out to Grand Ronde to talk about how veterans can navigate the federal agency, which has a reputation for its bureaucracy.

Even Joanne Krumberger, the new director of the Portland facility, traveled to Grand Ronde on Friday to participate in an afternoon listening session.

A similar Thursday informational panel featured five staff members from the Portland Veterans Affairs Medical Center to talk about the MyHealthVet program (www.myhealth.va.gov), programs specifically for veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, suicide prevention, the women's veterans program and minority veterans. The Department of Veterans Affairs mobile Vet Center also was parked on the powwow grounds.

The Veterans Affairs representatives were not immune to the frustration that veterans across the country feel about their post-service care, or lack thereof, from the federal government.

About 20 veterans and family members during the Thursday afternoon informational panel chastised Veterans Affairs representatives for everything from difficulties in obtaining a needed walker, a long delay in obtaining an identification card and speaking a bureaucratic language that most Native Americans, and Americans for that matter, do not comprehend.

One of the primary organizers of the Veterans Summit, Charles Tailfeathers (Cree/Blackfeet), commented on the issue during his opening speech on Thursday.

"It has been 43 years since I've been out of Vietnam," he said. "Three weeks after I left, I applied for services. I haven't heard from them since."

Tailfeathers said the major impetus of the Veterans Summit is to help veterans obtain benefits they deserve. "We can do more for our soldiers ... our children."

In addition to Veterans Affairs representatives, this year's Veterans Summit featured tables from the Yamhill County Veterans Services Office, WorkSource Oregon and the federal Bureau of Prisons. Tribal Health and Wellness Department staff members were on hand once again to provide blood pressure checks and dental exams.

"I served in Vietnam," said Tribal



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Navajo code talker Peter MacDonald Sr., right, speaks after he was presented a donation of \$5,000 from the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde to help build a Navajo Code Talker Museum. The check was presented during a dinner in his honor by the West Valley Veterans Memorial on Thursday, July 10. The check was presented by Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno, second from right, and Tribal Council members June Sherer, next to Leno, and Jon A. George, behind Sherer, and Tribal Council Secretary Jack Giffen Jr., left. MacDonald spoke earlier in the day at the second annual "Veterans Summit: Gathering of Warriors" that was held at Uyxat Powwow Grounds.

Tribe awards \$5,000 to code talker museum effort

The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde donated \$5,000 to help build a Navajo Code Talker Museum on Thursday, July 10.

During a dinner in honor of Navajo code talker Peter MacDonald Sr. held under a tent near the West Valley Veterans Memorial, Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno presented the check.

"You have done our Native people proud," Leno said.

"This is a really great honor given to the Navajo Code Talker Association," MacDonald said. "This is the first donation received from another Tribal unit. I hope others will follow you."

MacDonald said the proposed museum will preserve the legacy of the code talkers, who used their language to speak a code during World War II that was never broken by the Japanese. He said the name of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde will be in a place of honor in the museum once it is built.

MacDonald, 86, said he is the youngest of the 30 surviving code talkers because he was only 15 when he enlisted in 1944.

The dinner, prepared by Spirit Mountain Casino Executive Chef Richard Burr and coordinated by the Tribal Public Affairs Director Siobhan Taylor

and Administrative Assistant Chelsea Clark, included entrees of chicken, salmon and prime rib.

Tribal Council members June Sherer, Jack Giffen Jr., Leno and Jon A. George attended. George gave the invocation.

Marine Corps veteran and Veterans Special Event Board Chairman Steve Bobb Sr. provided the invocation and introduced board members in attendance – Wink Soderberg, Wayne Chulik, Raymond Petite and Annette Ingram.

The dinner opened with cultural drumming and singing performed by Jan Looking Wolf Reibach, Mike Karnosh, George, Kathy Cole, Travis Stewart and Veterans Royalty Queen Savannah Ingram and Junior Veterans Queen Amelia Mooney.

Leno said the Grand Ronde Tribe will place MacDonald's name on the West Valley Veterans Memorial, which is usually reserved for veterans who live in Grand Ronde, Willamina and Sheridan.

MacDonald then presented Leno with a necklace that had been blessed by the Navajo in appreciation for the Grand Ronde Tribe's hospitality and generous donation.

"This is the nicest reservation I have ever visited," he said, praising the leadership of the Tribe as evidenced in the development of the Tribal campus. ■

Council Chairman and Marine Corps veteran Reyn Leno during his opening remarks. "It was always about taking care of the guy in front of you and the guy behind you ... the guy out in the foxhole in the dark. I see this Veterans Summit as an extension of veterans trying to take care of other veterans."

The Veterans Summit opened Thursday morning with a blessing given by Tribal Elder and longtime Tribal Council member Kathryn Harrison. The colors were brought in by an honor guard that included Tribal Veterans Special Event Board members Wayne Chulik, Steve Bobb Sr. and Raymond Petite. Other Honor Guard members included Tribal member Brenda Tuomi, Veterans Royalty Queen Savannah Ingram and Ma-

rine Corps veteran Percy "Gunny" Brandon.

Land and Culture Manager Jan Looking Wolf Reibach, an award-winning Native flutist, performed taps to open the ceremony.

In addition to Leno, Tribal Council members Toby McClary, Ed Pearsall, Jack Giffen Jr., June Sherer and Jon A. George attended all or part of the summit.

Navajo code talker Peter MacDonald Sr., 86, returned to the Veterans Summit for the second consecutive year to recount how members of his Tribe were recruited by the U.S. military to speak Navajo code to secure American communications during World War II from Japanese code breakers. The code was never broken.

"When our way of life is threat-

ened, we all come together to defend this great country of ours," MacDonald said about his service in the Marine Corps. He is one of 30 surviving code talkers.

MacDonald was greeted by a song from the Tribe's Chinuk Wawa Immersion preschool children.

Other dignitaries who attended this year's Veterans Summit included Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs Director Cameron Smith, a Marine Corps veteran, and Terry Bentley (Karuk), the Veterans Affairs Department's Tribal Government Relations specialist for the western region.

"I want to thank our hosts," Smith said. "This is a powerful statement

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