Fleming Begaye Sr. dies at 97

Written by Staff Reports
Friday, 24 May 2019 05:31

One of the last remaining Navajo Code Talkers

One of three Navajo Code Talkers honored at the White House in 2017 for his service in

World War II, Fleming Begaye Sr. has died.

Begaye was Tódích'íi'nii (Bitter Water Clan) and born for Kinłichii'nii (Red House People Clan). He was born on Aug. 26, 1921 in the community of Red Valley, about a mile west of the New Mexico border.

Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez said, "The Navajo Nation is saddened by the passing of another brave and selfless Diné warrior. The Nation is truly grateful for Code Talker Begaye's sacrifices and those of his family, to defend the freedom and liberty of our country. May the Creator bless his family, friends, and community with strength and comfort."

Begaye dropped out of high school to join the Marine Corps. He attended classes to develop the unbreakable code that communicated about ships using the Navajo language between 1943 and 1945 in the Battle of Tarawa and the Battle of Tinian, for which he was awarded the Congressional Silver Medal of Honor.

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Upon his return, and after being wounded by a landmine, Begaye married his high-school girlfriend, Helen, and became a father of three. He lived with her until she died in 2008. Begaye suffered from PTSD.

He performed a variety of odd jobs until he started a gas station in Chinle in 1960. It grew into a group of shops and businesses, known collectively as Begaye's Corner, until it closed in 1988. After that, he focused on his farm, where he grew corn, squash and fruit trees and herded cows and sheep.

Begaye died on May 10, at the age of 97. He was one of more than 400 Navajo Code Talkers. His funeral is scheduled for May 17, at Potter's House Church in Chinle.

Navajo Nation Vice President Myron Lizer said, "We ask all of our people throughout the Navajo Nation and beyond, to join us on May 17 in saying a prayer for our beloved Code Talker and to honor his life by lowering all flags across Navajo land."