

Mohawk "Code Talkers" honoured in New York

By Jim Windle

ST. REGIS N.Y. – During the Second World War a special unit of the U.S. Marines was secretly mustered from Indian reserves across the country to carry out a mission that was genius in its simplicity. How can you decode a language you have never heard spoken before?

To prevent top-secret messages and classified communications from being decoded by German intelligence, these special recruits were trained in military jargon, identifying specific weapons, tanks and aircraft, Morris code, map making, map reading and the use of field communications equipment.

They were imbedded with U.S. troops and were protected like gold but, on the downside, should a Wind Talker look like they were going to be captured, orders were to kill them to protect the secret.

The thought was, even if the Germans were listening, they could not decode an obscure language they were completely unfamiliar with.

The 2002 movie, *Windtalkers*, starring Nicolas Cage and Adam Beach, deals with members of the Navajo Nation who participated in the secret project, but it has come to light recently that several indigenous languages were also used. A unit of code talkers from the St. Regis Mohawks were also recruited to carry out the



This still from the MGM film "Windtalkers" shows actors Adam Beach and Roger Willie portraying the training of Navajo soldiers who hid top secret messages by speaking their native tongue. Recently the U.S. Congress honoured the Mohawk Code Talkers with a specially minted silver medal for their secret, but invaluable contribution to the American war effort. PHOTO FROM MGM STUDIOS

same plan, in the Mohawk language, under General George Patton in the European theatre.

In all, there were around 500 Native Americans in the U.S. Marine Corps who served as code talkers. To further confuse the code, languages of several other American Indian tribes were also used including Assiniboine, Cherokee, Choctaw, Comanche, Seminole as well as Mohawk and Navajo.

For a number of years the Mohawks of St. Regis have been seeking recognition from the U.S. federal government for their contributions to the war effort, but the secret was not declassified until relatively recently.

At one point in the war, allied intelligence found

that there was a German professor who was called back to active duty in the German Army that may have been able to understand Navajo. Because of the possible breach in security, Mohawk was used instead.

The Saint Regis Mohawk Tribal Council requested of the United States Mint to develop a Code Talkers Congressional Medal for Mohawk Code Talkers.

"Those Mohawk Veterans of World War II who used the Mohawk Language to help the Allied Forces win victory demands Tribal and U.S. Government distinction as true heroes," the letter stated.

It took a long while, but it was announced last week that members of the Mohawk Nation, who served as code talkers during World War II, or their families, would be presented with a special honour on the U.S. Memorial Day weekend.

The specially struck Congressional Silver Medals were awarded May 28, during a ceremony held on the St. Regis Indian Reservation, on the Canadian border in northern New York. Surviving Mohawk Code Talker, Louis Levi Oakes and family members of deceased veterans were honoured.