

Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation



PRESS RELEASE

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Huesties Helps Commemorate 80th Anniversary of Umatilla Ordnance Depot Explosion

HERMISTON, Ore. – On March 21, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) Treasurer Raymond Huesties helped commemorate the 80th anniversary of the Umatilla Army Ordnance Depot explosion that killed six people.

Held at the Rees Training Center near Hermiston, Huesties led a tribal invocation to honor the five men and one woman who died in the explosion of munitions igloo B-1014, one of 1,002 igloos on the depot in 1944.

“I feel it is an honor for me to represent my tribe to give this blessing,” Huesties said. “This place is in our ceded territory. Our people utilized it for a millennium prior to European settlements. It is important to let people know we, the tribe, are still here and we still practice our way of life the best we can in this modern time. All these places are important to our way of life, and we’re glad to be acknowledged as a part of the process for the future to preserve and protect places like this one.”

Along with Huesties, officials from the Columbia Development Authority (CDA), Oregon Military Department (OMD) and other dignitaries paid tribute to junior laborer Alice M. Wolgamott, truck driver Hiram Cook and lift truck operator Lance A. Stultz, all of Hermiston; munitions handler Harry D. Sever of Ordnance; munitions handler William A. Sanders of Stanfield; and foreman Kenneth L. Fraser of Irrigon – the six employees who died in the accidental explosion.

After being led to the explosion site, CDA Executive Director Greg Smith welcomed attendees before the Oregon National Guard (ONG) Color Guard posted the colors. Huesties then gave the tribal blessing before ONG Chaplain (Col.) Jacob Scott gave the OMD blessing.

Robert Daniel of the Hermiston American Legion Post 37 then placed a wreath on a cross at the former site of igloo B-1014 before the national anthem. This was followed by a playing of “Taps” before the ONG Color Guard retired the colors.

Attendees then proceeded to the memorial plaque park where Scott held a moment of silence. They then made their way to Rees Training Building for comments by State Sen. Bill Hansell, CDA Board Member John Shafer, OMD Cultural Resource Manager Matt Diederich, CDA Board Chairman Kim Puzey and Rees Training Site Manager Nick Kote.

“As a legislator, I have supported time and again any bill that provides for our veterans and their families,” Hansell said. “But especially during World War II there were tens of thousands of Americans who served on the home front and not in active duty. The sacrifices made were not all on the battlefields. The civilians who we are remembering today gave their all, and their families lost loved ones. I think it is altogether fitting and proper that we pause to remember their sacrifices as well. May we never forget.”

As the United States prepared for World War II, the U.S. Army in 1940 began building a military munitions and supply depot on 20,000 acres in Umatilla and Morrow counties near Hermiston. The site was selected because it was safe from attacks by sea, as well as the proximity to railroad lines and a port location on the Columbia River. The explosion occurred inside igloo B-1014 where 264 bombs were stored, leaving a deep crater and killing the six workers.

According to the Hermiston Herald, there were no casualties outside the igloo and no other major property damage. However, windows were shattered as far away as Hermiston, 6 miles from the depot, and Pendleton, 30 miles southeast, was jarred.

The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation is comprised of the Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla Tribes, and formed under the Treaty of 1855 at the Walla Walla Valley, 12 Stat. 945. In 1949, the Tribes adopted a constitutional form of government to protect, preserve and enhance the reserved treaty rights guaranteed under federal law.

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Caption1: Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation Treasurer Raymond Huesties, center, prepares to give a tribal blessing on March 21 during the commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the Umatilla Army Ordnance Depot explosion that killed six people near Hermiston, Oregon. On the left is Columbia Development Authority Executive Director Greg Smith. On the right is Robert Daniel of the Hermiston American Legion Post. CTUIR

Caption2: Robert Daniel of the Hermiston American Legion Post 37 salutes after putting a wreath on a cross at the former site of ordnance igloo B-1014 on March 21 at the Rees Training Center near Hermiston, Oregon. Six people died in an accidental explosion inside the igloo on March 21, 1944. CTUIR

Caption3: A worker inside an igloo at the Umatilla Ordnance Depot stacks 500-pound bombs similar to the ones that exploded on March 21, 1944. Courtesy of U.S. Army

Caption4: Oregon National Guard Chaplain (Col.) Jacob Scott prepares the crowd for a moment of silence at a memorial plaque honoring six people who died in an explosion on March 21, 1944, at the Umatilla Army Ordnance Depot near Hermiston, Oregon. A special commemoration was held Thursday, March 21 in honor of the five men and one woman who died in the accidental explosion in one of the ordnance igloos on the depot. CTUIR

Caption5: State Sen. Bill Hansell addresses the crowd on March 21 during the commemoration of the 80th anniversary of an explosion that killed six people at the Umatilla Army Ordnance Depot in Hermiston, Oregon. CTUIR