SECNAV Del Toro Names Ship in Honor of Force Master Chief Petty Officer of the Seabees James D. Fairbanks



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Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro announced that the future Navajo-class Towing, Salvage, and Rescue (T-ATS) ship will be named in honor of James D. Fairbanks, member of the Chippewa Tribe and the 13th Force Master Chief Petty Officer of the Seabees.

Secretary Del Toro made the announcement during a ship naming ceremony at the National Museum of the American Indian, Feb. 21.

The naming selection of the future USNS James. D. Fairbanks

(T-ATS 13) follows the tradition of naming towing, salvage and rescue ships after prominent Native Americans or Native American tribes.

“The names of thousands of indigenous heroes who have served with distinction in our military – and especially our Navy and Marine Corps – echo and inspire us still,” said Secretary Del Toro. “This Navajo-class ship bearing the name James D. Fairbanks will carry his legacy of service forward and symbolize his dedication to the Seabees and our Nation.”

Minnesota Governor Tim Walz and Chairman of the White Earth Indian Reservation Michael Fairbanks joined Secretary Del Toro for the ceremony honoring James D. Fairbanks, who was born and raised on the White Earth Indian Reservation in Northern Minnesota. Both spoke about the honor and meaning behind the naming of the Navy’s newest T-ATS.

“What the Navy knows, and what White Earth [Nation] knows, is that stories matter. That history matters. That traditions matter. Honoring warriors like FORCM Fairbanks matters,” said Governor Walz.

“Force Master Chief James Fairbanks was in our language an Ogiichidaa, a Warrior for our People – the Anishinaabeg, and the citizens of the United States. He served with distinction and valor with great honor,” said Michael Fairbanks, Chairman of the White Earth Indian Reservation. “A Warrior in Native American culture holds a great deal of respect by tribal members. James Fairbanks was a true Warrior that represented the White Earth Nation and the U.S. Navy with honor. He unknowingly became a great role model for not only White Earth youth, but for all Native youth. Due to his exemplary leadership, he has earned the right to have a ship named in his honor.”

Born Jan. 9, 1952, James D. Fairbanks served in both the U. S. Navy and Marine Corps. He enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1970

and served as an ordnanceman with 2nd Battalion, 11th Marines, until he was honorably discharged in 1972. He then worked as a civilian welder until 1977 before enlisting in the Navy. Fairbanks served with an amphibious construction battalion (ACB) until his honorable discharge in 1979. In 1986, he resumed Naval service as a Seabee. While deployed to Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom, Fairbanks received the Bronze Star for meritorious leadership under proximate enemy fire and threat of enemy attack. From 2005 to 2008, Fairbanks served as the 13th Force Master Chief for the Seabees, the highest-ranking enlisted Seabee and first Native American to hold this position.

Along with the ship's name, Secretary Del Toro also announced the sponsors for the future USNS James D. Fairbanks as Paulette Fairbanks Molin, the late Fairbanks' sister, and Mrs. Susan Sharpe, the spouse of the 19th Force Master Chief Petty Officer of the Seabees. They, in their role as sponsors, will represent a lifelong relationship with the ship and crew.

"The USNS James D. Fairbanks is the namesake of a great leader, one who worked selflessly and tirelessly to serve our great country throughout his extraordinary career," said Fairbanks Molin. "He was a builder, but not just any builder, he was a Seabee."

Navajo-class ships will provide ocean-going tug, salvage, and rescue capabilities to support Fleet operations. The current capabilities are provided by Powhatan-class T-ATF Fleet Tugs and Safeguard-class T-ARS Rescue and Salvage vessels, which began reaching the end of their expected service lives in 2020. Navajo-class ships will be capable of towing U.S. Navy ships and will have 6,000 square feet of deck space for embarked systems.