WIND TALKERS

NATIVE AMERICAN CODE TALKERS OF THE WORLD WARS

WORDS **MIKE HASKEW**

During times of national emergency, Native Americans provided rapid, secure battlefield communication through codes derived from their complex languages

The history of the United States government and its relations with Native American peoples is one of treaties honoured and broken, lands taken and reserved, and difficult, sometimes sorrowful, conduct. Despite decades of strained interaction, when external threats arose during the world wars, Native Americans answered the call to duty, some of them serving in a unique, vital and war-winning way.

Native American code talkers, specially trained combat communications personnel, served during both World War I and World War II in Europe and the Pacific. Braving enemy fire and shunting away discrimination, racism and lack of opportunity, these men utilised codes derived from their native languages to transmit secure messages to and from the front lines with virtually unbreakable encryption. Frustrated enemy intelligence and codebreaking personnel were baffled, unable to crack the strange sounding intonations.

The code talkers phenomenon is most closely associated with the Navajo tribe and its service with the US Marine Corps during World War II in the Pacific, however, a generation earlier, Cherokee and Choctaw soldiers provided valuable service fighting the forces of Imperial Germany during World War I. After the Great War, the need for such skills lay dormant. However, with the rise of Japanese territorial ambitions in the Pacific during the 1930s and the attack on Pearl Harbor that plunged the United States into war on 7 December 1941, the critical demand for secure transmission of real-time battlefield communications brought the Native Americans to the forefront again.

On the reservation

Forced removal from their lands and relocation to reservations across the western United States rendered the Navajo and other Native American tribes generally isolated from the outside world. When news that the US was at war filtered through the tribal lands encompassing parts of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah and Colorado, the Navajo way of life was simple, ranching, sheepherding and subsistence farming in the shadows of the four sacred mountains that marked their territory.

In an effort to 'mainstream' the Navajo, young Native Americans were often educated in boarding schools where they learned the English language and were forbidden from speaking their own tongue. If any of them were caught speaking Navajo, they were severely punished and their culture was suppressed. Even as the US government sponsored these efforts, the Navajo people had little contact beyond reservation borders.

"We grew up in a world that was nothing but Navajo," remembered Charles MacDonald, a code talker with the 6th Marine Division. "Until I was nine years old, I didn't know anyone other than Navajo lived in this universe. So we did our thing, herd sheep, take care of the animals, raise cattle and farm."

Answering the call of duty, Native Americans volunteered for service and were also drafted into the military. For Frank Chee Willetto, a code talker with the 2nd Marine Division, the journey into the Marines began with a simple question.

"When I was drafted, a sergeant came up to me and asked if I was a Navajo," he remembered. "I said yes, and he told me to

"WERE IT NOT FOR THE NAVAJOS, THE MARINES WOULD NEVER HAVE TAKEN IWO JIMA"

Major Howard Connor, 5th Marine Division

In perhaps the most familiar image of code talkers, these two transmit a message from the jungle of Bougainville

come with him. I was sent to a Navy doctor for a physical, but it wasn't much of a physical because he only asked me a few questions. That's how I got to be in the Marine Corps."

Chee Willetto completed basic training in San Diego, California and then went to Camp Pendleton, where he met other Navajo Marines and learned that he would join a communications unit. "At that time I did not know we were going to use our own language. I later heard that the first 29 Navajo who volunteered had made the code, and I had to be taught it."

Rise to Service

Those original 29 Navajo code talkers were ushered into the realm of coded communication primarily through the efforts of one man, a civilian named Philip Johnston, whose parents were Christian missionaries and whose family had lived for years among the Navajo near the city of Flagstaff, Arizona. A US Army veteran of World War I, Johnston was one of only a few dozen non-Navajo people who were fluent in the Native American language.

During the early days of World War II in the Pacific, it became apparent that the Japanese were often able to decrypt sensitive American messages that were transmitted on the battlefield. After reading a newspaper article in Los Angeles, Johnston was aware that the army had staged large-scale manoeuvres in Louisiana in 1940 and 1941 and employed Comanche code talkers. He quickly became convinced that the Navajo could do the same, providing security and saving precious time during combat zone communications.

Johnston believed that the Navajo, one of the largest Native American populations, were also a better choice than other such peoples because of their relative isolation in the sparsely populated south-west US. Their language, therefore, was essentially pure in form and familiar to only those who were immersed in life on Navajo lands. The day after reading the newspaper article, Johnston visited the Navy offices in Los Angeles. After stating his case, he was directed to the 11th Naval District office and then to the Fleet Marine Training Center at Camp Elliott in San Diego, convincing Major James E Jones that his idea had merit. Johnston then wrote a letter, a comprehensive summary of his rationale, for the Navajo code talkers. He arranged a demonstration for 24 February 1942, less than three months after the Pearl Harbor attack, and recruited four Navajo men who were working in the Los Angeles shipyards to assist him.

Major General Clayton B Vogel, commander of the Amphibious Corps, Pacific Fleet, was a recipient of Johnston's letter. General Vogel read with interest that the Navajo language was largely "unwritten because an alphabet or other symbols of purely native origin had never been compiled before." The civilian added that those people who became fluent in Navajo were only those "individuals who are first highly educated in English and who, in turn, have made a profound study of Navajo, both in spoken and written form."

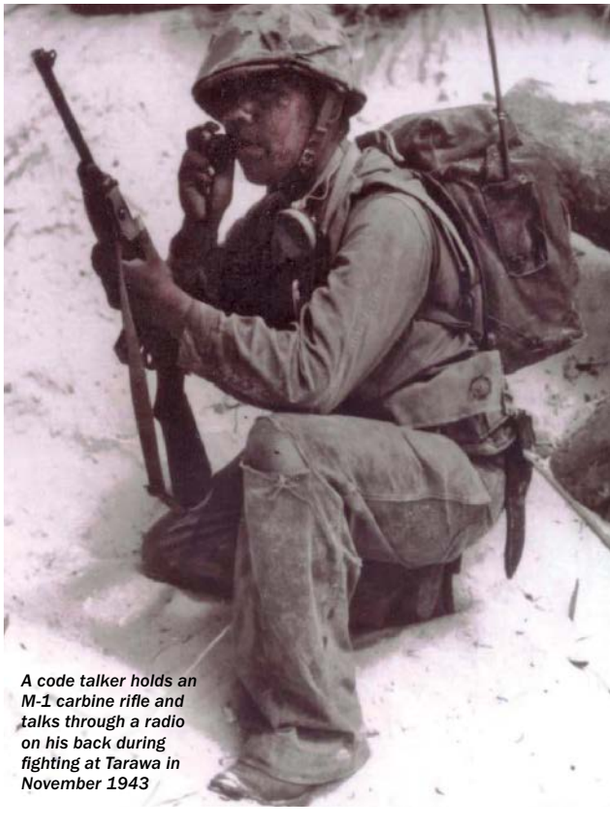
Logically, observers would conclude that the Navajo language would be impregnable to Japanese decryption. Somewhat curiously, while the Marines invested in the capabilities of the Navajo to provide secure communications, the US Army's interest in such endeavours waned. Native Americans of the Chippewa and Oneida had also participated as code talkers in the army's Louisiana manoeuvres, and men of the Sac and Fox, Comanche and Pueblo tribes were also recruited, however, only a relative few men were fully trained and were therefore subsequently deployed to the Philippines and the European Theatre.

***Above:** Code talker Leslie Hemstreet bangs a drum during a moment of leisure on the island of Okinawa in the spring of 1945*

"ROY PRESSED THE TRANSMIT BUTTON ON THE RADIO AND I POSITIONED MY MICROPHONE TO REPEAT THE INFORMATION IN OUR CODE. I TALKED WHILE ROY CRANKED"

Chester Nez, Code Talker, 1st Marine Division

Comanche code talkers of the 4th Signal Company, 4th Infantry Division pose with others in native dress at Fort Gordon, Georgia



A code talker holds an M-1 carbine rifle and talks through a radio on his back during fighting at Tarawa in November 1943

FORGOTTEN WARRIORS

CODE TALKERS OF THE CHOCTAW TRIBE HELPED TO TURN THE TIDE OF BATTLE DURING WORLD WAR I

"The enemy's complete surprise is evidence that he could not decipher the messages," wrote an excited Colonel AW Bloor of the US Army's 142nd Infantry Regiment, 36th Division. Bloor had just witnessed a successful assault against a strong German position called the Forest Ferme. He knew that Native American soldiers of the Choctaw tribe had played a significant role in the victory.

This action actually took place during World War I, and the first use of code talkers by the US Army occurred in the autumn of 1918 during the Meuse-Argonne Campaign. The Germans had been reading transmitted American communications with impunity, easily breaking existing codes. Other communication methods, including runners and carrier pigeons, encountered battlefield hazards and were often unsuccessful. By chance, an officer of the 36th Division began listening to two of his Choctaw soldiers converse in their native language, and an idea came to him.

Choctaw infantrymen were also serving in other regiments of the 36th Division, and within hours, eight of them were relaying orders in their native language, baffling any German who listened. 19 Choctaws were eventually identified and completed a training course that involved the development of certain word combinations to describe the weapons of modern war, such as the machine gun – "little gun shoot fast." The group was dubbed the Choctaw Telephone Squad. Native Americans of other tribes, particularly the Comanche, also participated in the war effort.

World War I ended before the Choctaw could fully implement their new system in combat, but Colonel Bloor noted that he was confident of its success. "It is believed, had the regiment gone back into the line, fine results would have been obtained," he wrote.

The code talker concept was destined to emerge once again, however, those who pioneered it were relegated to obscurity for many years.

"THE GERMANS HAD BEEN READING TRANSMITTED AMERICAN COMMUNICATIONS WITH IMPUNITY, EASILY BREAKING EXISTING CODES"

Below: A group of Choctaws training to transmit messages coded in their language pose with an American flag during World War I

Somewhat sceptical, General Vogel decided to test the code talker concept a few days prior to Johnston's demonstration. He ordered telephone links set up and personally wrote six messages that would be considered typical combat communications. Each of the messages was transferred swiftly and with great accuracy. One of them read: "Enemy expected to make tank and dive bomber attack at dawn." The Navajo translation read, "Enemy tank dive bomber expected to attack this morning."

Left: Dan Akee, a code talker from the Navajo Nation

During the Camp Elliott demonstration, the Navajo volunteers successfully translated messages from English to Navajo and back to English. However, they discovered that some of the military terms included in the messages were not part of the pure Navajo vocabulary. They would require the substitution of common words for previously unknown military terms. For example, "dive bomber" was eventually translated as "chicken hawk." The introduction of conversational Navajo had been only one part of the solution. A code would still need to be developed.

The demonstration was good enough for General Vogel and on 6 March 1942, he wrote to General Thomas Holcomb, the commandant of the Marine Corps, with the recommendation that 200 Navajo be recruited for the Fleet Amphibious Force to provide communications services. His recommendation read in part, "The demonstration was interesting and successful. Messages were transmitted and received almost verbatim… Mr Johnston stated that the Navaho [sic] is the only tribe in the United States that has not been infested with German students during the past 20 years. These Germans, studying the various tribal dialects under the guise of art students, anthropologists, etc, have undoubtedly attained a good working knowledge of all tribal dialects except Navaho [sic]."

Perhaps an awareness of Johnston's observation had something to do with the army's reluctance to expand its own code talker program, particularly since the war against Nazi Germany was primarily an army affair.

From code to combat

Despite General Vogel's recommendation, only 30 Navajo recruits were authorised. On 4 May 1942, the first contingent of future code talkers reported to Fort Defiance, Arizona. From there, they travelled by bus to the Marine Corps recruit depot in San Diego, arriving the following day for the seven-week basic training course. On 27 June, Platoon 382, comprised exclusively of Navajo Marines, was activated. In the coming weeks, they moved to Camp Elliott and developed the earliest form of the Navajo code under the watchful eye of Jones, now promoted to lieutenant colonel.

The initial code consisted of 211 words. In time, it was expanded to more than 400, and eventually at least 600 words made up the top-secret cipher. The new Navajo alphabet expanded from 26 characters to 44 within months. As the first group of Navajo demonstrated their proficiency in memorising the code and transmitting messages quickly under simulated combat conditions, the elapsed time of most communications from start to finish was only 20 seconds,

AMERICAN TRIBES

BRAVE MEN FROM NUMEROUS NATIVE AMERICAN TRIBES PARTICIPATED IN TOP-SECRET CODE TALKER ACTIVITIES DURING THE WORLD WARS

NAVAJO

The most famous of the Native American code talkers, more than 400 Navajo served in the role during World War II. Their language was so pure and little known outside the culture that it was deemed an ideal basis for an unbreakable code, according to Philip Johnston, who conceived and supported the concept. Few veteran Navajo code talkers survive today.

CHOCTAW

Choctaw soldiers of the US Army's 36th Infantry Division served as code talkers on the Western Front during World War I. By 1918, the Choctaw were already known for their efforts to assimilate into American culture. In 1989, the French government honoured the Choctaw code talkers of World War I posthumously with the Knight of the Order of National Merit.

CHEROKEE

During World War I at the Second Battle of the Somme in 1918, Cherokee soldiers of the US 30th Division were under British command. These Native Americans were asked to send and receive messages in their own language to avoid interception and decryption by the Germans and became the first actual code talkers as documented by the division's signal officer.

COMANCHE

14 Comanche code talkers participated in the Normandy invasion on 6 June 1944. Assigned to the 4th Infantry Division, two in each regiment and the others with division headquarters, these soldiers landed at Utah Beach on D-Day and utilised a code of more than 100 terms. The French government honoured these Comanche with the Knight of the Order of National Merit in 1989.

SIOUX

Members of the three major divisions of the Sioux tribe, including Lakota, Oglala, Standing Rock and others, served as code talkers in both world wars. Clarence Wolf Guts, the last surviving Lakota code talker, testified during a US Senate hearing in 2004, commenting, "I am full-blood Indian and we do whatever we can to protect the United States because we love America."

MESKWAKI

In January 1941, a group of 27 men of the Meskwaki tribe enlisted in the Iowa National Guard. Prior to American entry into World War II, eight received specialised training in communications using walkie-talkies and their native language. Among the first American troops to fight in the European Theatre, Meskwaki soldiers of the 34th Division landed in North Africa in November 1942.

a substantial improvement over encryption machines that required approximately half an hour for complete processing.

By July, the early days of the code talker program had been so successful that an additional 200 Navajo Marines were authorised for induction into the secret protocol. Although estimates projected that 1,000 Navajo could eventually be brought into the program, such a number proved ambitious. Some Navajo recruits or draftees were not qualified. Others were inducted into different branches of the military.

In the spring of 1943, after the additional 200 recruits had completed their training, another 303 Navajos were approved for the program at an absorption rate of 50 per month. That quota was reduced later to 25 per month. At its peak, an estimated 425 Navajo Marines participated in the program.

Philip Johnston, the catalyst for the development of the code talkers, offered his services to the Marine Corps with a request to participate directly in the program. On 2 October 1942, he joined the Marines with the rank of staff sergeant and initiated an intensive eight-week course, conducted after recruits completed basic training. The first of these began a month after Johnston's enlistment and the Navajo Communication School was formally established at Camp Elliott in December. Johnston supervised the school and continued to provide the training, which he termed "extremely intensive," for the duration of the war.

The addition of three more Navajo Marines to the code talker program after the initial 29 had begun their training allowed three men to remain in the United States as instructors, while the initial contingent of trained code talkers was detailed to combat units. In the first major US ground offensive of World War II in the Pacific, the 1st Marine Division landed on the island of Guadalcanal in the Solomons on 7 August 1942. 13 code talkers were assigned to the division, arriving on Guadalcanal within weeks of the landing. Other members of the original group of 29 were assigned to the 6th Marine Regiment and the 2nd Signal Company, 2nd Marine Division, reaching Guadalcanal in January 1943.

Action at Guadalcanal

The baptism of fire for the Navajo code talkers – and the code itself – was not long in coming during the seven-month fight for control of Guadalcanal. The Marines held positions defending Henderson Field, the island's vital airstrip and the Japanese tried repeatedly to overrun the American defences.

Chester Nez, a code talker with the 1st Marine Division, remembered vividly an encounter with the Japanese. Working as a two-man team with his partner Roy Begay, Nez

***Below:** Navajo code talkers rest during a lull in fighting on the island of Saipan in the spring of 1944*

General Douglas MacArthur poses with members of the Pima, Pawnee, Chitmatcha and Navajo tribes

"THE DEMONSTRATION WAS INTERESTING AND SUCCESSFUL. MESSAGES WERE TRANSMITTED AND RECEIVED ALMOST VERBATIM"

Major General Clayton B Vogel, Commander, Amphibious Corps, Pacific Fleet, US Marine Corps

***Right:** Chester Nez poses for a photo during his deployment in the Pacific*

was on the front line with a radio while Marines were hotly engaged with the enemy.

"A runner approached, handing me a message written in English," Chester recalled years later. "It was my first battlefield transmission in Navajo code. I'll never forget it. Roy pressed the transmit button on the radio, and I positioned my microphone to repeat the information in our code. I talked while Roy cranked. Later, we would change positions.

"Beb-na-ali-trosie a-knah-as-donih ab-toh nish-na-jih-goh dah-di-kad ah-deel-tahi," Nez continued. "Enemy machine gun nest on your right flank. Destroy."

"Suddenly, just after my message was received," he noted with satisfaction, "the Japanese gun exploded, it had been destroyed by US artillery."

Nez survived the war. The last of the original 29 code talkers, he authored the book *Code Talker: The First And Only Memoir By One Of The Original Navajo Code Talkers Of WWII* and passed away on 4 June 2014 at the age of 93.

The Marines and the US Army troops that followed secured Guadalcanal, but it was only the beginning of the long, bloody trek to the Japanese surrender in Tokyo Bay on 2 September 1945. Problems persisted with the program, particularly with the lack of available recruits, the need to build a 'dictionary' of military terminology for the code talkers to memorise and apply, and the emergence of 'quirks' in the code through dialectic and vocabulary preferences of individual code talkers that leaked into the cipher over time.

Nevertheless, during the course of the war the code talkers participated in virtually every major Marine amphibious landing and ground operation in the Pacific, including Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Bougainville, Peleliu, Saipan, Guam, Iwo Jima and Okinawa. They were never allowed to commit any of their code to paper. It remained alive only in their collective memory. It has also been said that code talker teams were constantly under guard by other Marines, who were to ensure that the Navajo men did not fall into enemy hands alive.

One report tells that a Navajo soldier who was not a code talker was actually captured by the Japanese during fighting in the Philippines. Tortured for information related to the code, the soldier told his captors only that he could not understand the messages himself. It was a true statement. Those few who knew only the Navajo language still could not decipher the code. The prisoner, who survived the war, later told a code talker veteran, "I never figured out what you guys who got me into all that trouble were saying."

Validation at Iwo Jima

The finest hour for the code talkers was during the horrific battle for the volcanic island of Iwo Jima, only 1,200 kilometres from Tokyo. The Marines landed on 19 February 1945, and the fight for Iwo Jima lasted more than a month.

SURVIVORS

***Above:** Dignitaries welcome Native American code talkers and other representatives to the US Capitol on November 20, 2013.*

DECADES AFTER THEIR HEROIC SERVICE DURING THE WORLD WARS, NATIVE AMERICAN CODE TALKERS HAVE RECEIVED RECOGNITION FROM THE US GOVERNMENT

Ironically, the success of the Navajo code talkers during World War II contributed to the long delay in recognition for the Native Americans whose contribution to victory remained classified until 1968.

While the Navajo have been the most recognised Native American code talkers and their exploits, popularised in such media as the 2002 feature film *Windtalkers*, have resulted in greater familiarity among historians and even their own people, other Native American code talkers have – at long last – received some acclaim.

After World War II, most Navajo returned to civilian life, farming and raising cattle. Others attended college on the GI Bill. One code talker remained a Marine for 30 years. Initially sworn to secrecy, the Navajo encountered the old obstacles of racism and economic disadvantage but persevered.

Although recognition came slowly for the Navajo, Choctaw, Cherokee, Comanche and other Native American code talkers who served during both world wars, it gained momentum through the years. In 1971, President Nixon presented Navajo code talkers with certificates of appreciation. President Reagan declared 14 August 1982 as Navajo Code Talkers Day and also presented them with certificates.

In 2000, President Clinton signed the Honoring The Code Talkers Act, authorising gold medals for the original 29 Navajo code talkers and silver medals to other participants. Five of the 29 were present in the US Capitol rotunda on 26 July 2001 when President George W Bush presented the medals. President Bush further recognised all Native American code talkers on 15 November 2008, signing the Code Talkers Recognition Act. Gold medals were authorised for more than 30 tribes, presented in a ceremony at the capitol on 20 November 2013 and placed in the Smithsonian Institution. Each surviving code talker, aside from those Navajo already honoured, received a long overdue silver medal from a grateful nation whose understanding continues to increase.

"PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN DECLARED 14 AUGUST 1982, AS NAVAJO CODE TALKERS DAY"

A Code Talker watches the city of Garapan from an observation post, June 1944

"THE NAVAJO CODE WAS 'THE SIMPLEST, FASTEST, AND MOST RELIABLE MEANS' OF TRANSMITTING BATTLEFIELD ORDERS AND INFORMATION WHILE MAINTAINING SECRECY"

Captain Ralph J Sturkey of Headquarters Company, 5th Marine Division

During the first two days of combat on the island, Major Howard Connor, the signal officer of the 5th Marine Division, employed six code talkers simultaneously, all of who were working without a break or respite for 48 hours. The six men sent a total of 800 different coded messages, all without a single reported error and all were secure. Major Connor declared, "Were it not for the Navajos, the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima."

When the battle for Iwo Jima was over, Captain Ralph J Sturkey of Headquarters Company, 5th Marine Division, wrote his after-action report, describing the Navajo code as, "…the simplest, fastest and most reliable means" of transmitting battlefield orders and information while maintaining secrecy. Apparently some officers had continued to doubt the real worth of the Navajo code talkers. Sturkey followed up with a candid assessment that the, "…full value of the Navajo code talkers will not be appreciated until the commander and staff they are serving gain confidence in their abilities."

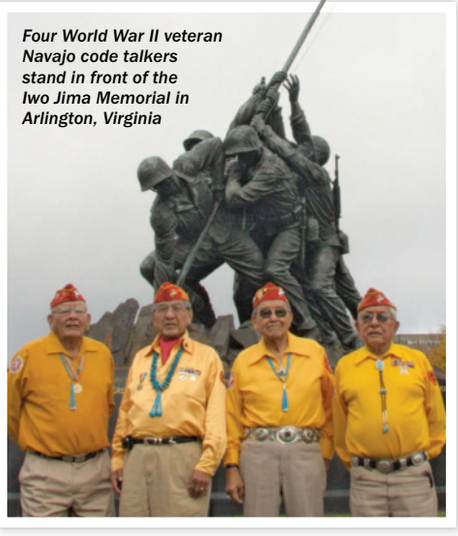
After the war, Lieutenant General Seizo Arisue, chief of the intelligence department and head of the 2nd Bureau of the Japanese Army General Staff, related that his cryptanalysts were routinely able to decipher other American battlefield codes during the Pacific War but could never crack the Navajo code.

Code talker twilight

After World War II, the code talkers were not permitted to discuss their role in the effort to defeat Japan. The code itself remained classified until 1968, a full 23 years after the end of the war. The Marines continued to utilise the Navajo code on a limited basis during the Korean War of 1950-53 and in the early years of the Vietnam War in the 1960s.

The veteran code talkers of World War II returned quietly to civilian life. Recognition from both the US government and the American people came slowly; 50 years after these young Navajo men had risked their lives in service to a country that their code identified as "Ne-he-Mah," or "Our Mother."

The code talkers overcame incredible adversity to display dedication, ingenuity and raw courage in the discharge of their duties. In doing so, they recorded a heroic chapter in the proud heritage of the Navajo Nation.



Four World War II veteran Navajo code talkers stand in front of the Iwo Jima Memorial in Arlington, Virginia

Images: Alamy, Mary Evans