

# The Navajo Code Talkers

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America has faced many challenges throughout the years, and World War II was one of the most formidable. America's involvement in the war began on December 7, 1941, when Japanese planes bombed Pearl Harbor. American soldiers rushed immediately to the Pacific to begin the long war against Japan.

Throughout the war, communications security was of paramount importance to both sides. However, in 1942, neither side's communications were secure. The Americans had broken the Japanese military's main code, the Purple Code, before the war even started. In fact, they had intercepted messages that warned of the attack on Pearl Harbor, but U.S. authorities failed to act on them. Throughout the war, intercepted Purple Code messages warned the Americans about Japanese attacks, including the attack on Midway. However, the Americans' messages were also frequently intercepted and decoded by the Japanese. Many Japanese spoke English and could easily read American messages, even if they were coded. Because of this, the Japanese were prepared for nearly every attack the Americans made throughout the first few months of the war.

American commanders were desperate for an unbreakable code. They found it in the Navajo Code Talkers. The code talkers used the Navajo language to create a code that the Japanese never broke.

The Navajo Code Talker program began in early 1942, when Phillip Johnston contacted Lieutenant Colonel James Jones, a signal officer for the Marines, about the idea of using Navajos to send and receive messages. Johnston's parents had been missionaries on the Navajo reservation, so Johnston spoke fluent Navajo. In fact, he was one of approximately 30 people, outside the Navajo reservation, who knew the language. Navajo is very difficult to master because subtle differences in tone can completely change the meaning of a sentence (Aaseng 18).

In addition, there are often many words for the same idea – up to thirty different words for some concepts! Johnston reasoned that if a code were developed using the already difficult Navajo language, it would be almost impossible to break. Although Native Americans had been used for wartime communications before – most notably the Choctaws in World War I – Johnston’s proposal was unique because the language would be used to create a complex, comprehensive code.

Jones listened to Johnston’s proposal, and Johnston was granted an audience with Major General Clayton Vogel in Washington, DC. Johnston recruited four Navajos and gave Vogel a demonstration of his proposed code. According to Vogel, “[t]he demonstration was interesting and successful.” The speed and accuracy of the code impressed Vogel, and he asked his superior, Commandant Thomas Holcomb, for permission to begin training Navajos. After discussing the proposal with Marine Corps officers and experts from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Holcomb gave permission for Johnston to train 29 Navajos in a classified pilot program. In April 1942, First Sergeant Frank Shinn began recruiting Navajos for the program.

Shinn announced over the reservation radio system that the Marine Corps needed volunteers, and the Navajos poured in. However, because the program was classified, the Navajos were not told the kind of duty for which they were signing up. Many later admitted that if they had known the kind of work they would be doing, they would have been much less eager to sign up (McClain 50).

Although many Navajos volunteered, few qualified for the program. The Navajo Nation was the largest Native American tribe in the United States, with a population of 55,000, but only one out of ten Navajos spoke English – an essential on the battlefield. In addition, some of the Navajos who volunteered were too young for duty. Many lied about their age in order to enlist.

One was too old to qualify, so he told Marine recruiters that he was eight years younger than he really was. Another Navajo was so determined to enlist that when he was told he was three pounds under the weight limit, he drank four pounds of water to make himself heavy enough to qualify (Kawano 91).

On Sunday, May 10, 1942, the Navajo recruits arrived at the Marine Recruit Depot near San Diego, California. They began boot camp the next day.

Boot camp was not difficult for the new Marines. They were accustomed to tough conditions and thought nothing of standing out in the sun for hours on end or of walking miles with a full pack. Things that were often difficult for other recruits, such as long hikes or endless drilling, came easily to the Navajos. Not one Navajo failed boot camp. After graduation, the recruits were transferred to Camp Elliott, where they began working on the code.

The Navajos decided that their code would include special Navajo words for each letter of the alphabet, as well as words for common battlefield terms. They first chose words for each letter of the alphabet – for example, the word for A was *wol-la-chee*, which meant ant. B was *shush* (bear), C was *moasi* (cat), D was *be* (deer) and so on. Next they chose words for military terms. The names of birds were used for airplanes and the names of fish for ships. Words were also selected for other commonly used terms, such as “attack,” “reinforcements,” and “emergency.” If a word that had no code word needed to be transmitted, the Navajo would simply spell it out using the code alphabet. There were 211 words in the original code (Durrett 50).

After the code had been created and memorized, the code talkers went through two weeks of battle simulation. During this time, intelligence officers tried everything they could think of to break the code, but to no avail. One experienced cryptologist said, “It sounded like gibberish. We

couldn't even transcribe it, much less crack it" (Aaseng 33). Then Navajo soldiers who were not code talkers listened to the code. They couldn't understand it either. In fact, later in the war, a Navajo who was not a code talker was captured by the Japanese. He was tortured, but couldn't reveal anything because he couldn't understand it any better than the interrogators. The Navajo code was the best and quickest that the military had found in months of searching.

The Marine Corps was convinced. Two code talkers were sent back to the reservation to recruit 200 more Navajos for the program. Several others became instructors at the training



*Code talkers Henry Bake and George Kirk send a message over a portable radio set on Bougainville.*

camp. The rest were sent overseas. By the end of the war there were about 420 code talkers (Aaseng 35).

The first code talkers to see action were with the 7<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment, which arrived on Guadalcanal on September 18, 1942. They set up their equipment and began translating messages the next day. However, when they began using the

code, Marines across the island began calling to ask if the Japanese had broken into the American radio frequency. Navajo and Japanese sound so similar that the Marines had mistaken the code for Japanese (McClain 68). This problem was solved by having the code talkers say "Arizona" or "New Mexico" before they began the transmission, alerting the Marines that a message was about to be sent in Navajo code.

Another problem that the code talkers faced was that they were often mistaken for Japanese soldiers. Code talkers were sometimes captured by their own men. Because of this, the Marine Corps began assigning bodyguards to the code talkers.

The code was so quick, accurate, and effective that these problems did not keep commanders from using it. For example, one Marine, Richard Bonham, recalls, “[W]e received orders from Regimental Headquarters concerning what we were to do the next day. It was a long message sent in the old Marine Corps code ... It had been poorly relayed, poorly transmitted, and I could not get the full content of the message. I... asked Bill [Toledo, a code talker] if he could get on the radio and try to help me figure out just exactly what we were supposed to do the next morning. Bill got on the radio, requested and received our orders, and transcribed, by himself with one flashlight, in less than five minutes!” (qtd. in McClain 105).

In early 1943, as the second class of code talkers was being assembled, a cryptographer discovered a flaw in the Navajo code. He realized that common sounds – such as the words for A, E, or N - could be used to decipher the Navajo code. Accordingly, the code was updated to include alternate words for frequently used letters. As these and other updates were made to the code, Navajos in the Pacific were notified of the changes. They quickly memorized the new terms and put them into use. By 1945, the code contained over 600 words.

The code talkers continued to excel in other battles – Bougainville, Cape Gloucester, Tarawa, Saipan, Tinian, and Guam. By this time the code talkers had proven themselves. Most Marine Corps officers (although there were a few exceptions) trusted them with their most important, urgent, and confidential communications.

The next battle that the code talkers participated in was the battle of Peleliu. The commanders decided to use the Navajo code exclusively during the landing on the island. The code talkers performed excellently, earning glowing praise from their commanders, but casualties were horrendous. Hundreds of Marines were killed during the bloody battle. It took

nearly a month for the Americans to take Peleliu. Ironically, the island was never used as a base as had been planned.

The United States' next target was Iwo Jima. This island was a Japanese anti-aircraft base, which was hindering American bombing runs on mainland Japan. If Japan were to be defeated, Iwo Jima would have to be conquered first. Both the Americans and the Japanese knew it would be a fight to the death. General Holland Smith, commander of the Marines who would take the island, warned his men, "This will be the bloodiest fight in Marine Corps history. We'll catch seven kinds of hell on the beaches, and that will be just the beginning. The fighting will be fierce, and the casualties will be awful, but my Marines will take the damned island" (qtd. in McClain 161).

The tiny island of Iwo Jima, only eight square miles in size, was defended by over 20,000 Japanese troops. The commanding general of the Japanese forces, Tadamichi Kuribayashi, told his men, "[E]ach man will make it his duty to kill ten of the enemy before dying; until we are destroyed to the last men we shall harass the enemy with guerrilla tactics" (qtd. in McClain 159).

On the morning of the invasion, many of the code talkers participated in a traditional Navajo prayer that was believed to give them clear speech, clear thought, and a safe path to walk ("Navajo Code Talkers: The Epic Story"). After the ceremony, they went to the galley for the traditional landing day breakfast – steak, eggs, biscuits and gravy, and coffee. For many of the 60,000 Marines who comprised the invasion force, it was the last meal they would ever eat.

The Marines crashed ashore on Iwo Jima in ten waves, starting at 8:30 AM. The Japanese allowed the Americans to land, then opened fire. The Marines were trapped on the beach with no place to hide. The sand was impossible to dig into and there was no shelter. As the Marines were trying feverishly to find safety, the code talkers were working just as feverishly. The

commanders of the invasion force had entrusted the Navajos with all the communications for the landing on Iwo Jima. In the first 48 hours alone, six code talkers sent and received more than 800 messages without error (Durrett 86-87).

The Japanese were determined to hold Iwo Jima. The Marines fought for nearly a month before the tiny island was declared secure. Unlike Peleliu, Iwo Jima was used for the purpose the United States had intended – an emergency landing base for planes. By the end of the war, 2,251 B-29 bombers made landings on Iwo Jima, saving thousands of lives (Aaseng 98).

After Iwo Jima, many code talkers fought on the Japanese island of Okinawa. Later, some joined the occupation forces in Japan. A few decided to make a career of the military, but most returned home by 1947. They continued to keep the code secret, and this secrecy paid off. The code was later used, though not on a large scale, in both Korea and Vietnam.

The next chapter in the history of the code talkers began in 1968. The program was declassified that year at the request of Lee Cannon, a veteran who was aware of the role the Navajos had played in World War II. At the reunion of the 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Division on June 28, 1969, twenty code talkers were presented with medallions honoring their service. The medallions showed the flag-raising at Iwo Jima alongside an image of an Indian on horseback.



*One of the medallions presented to the Code Talkers in 1969*

Two years later, on July 9-10, 1971, the code talkers had their own reunion, attended by 69 code talkers. During the reunion the Navajo Code Talkers Association was formed. The Association designated a logo, flag, and official uniform for code talkers. The code talkers began appearing in parades throughout the Southwest. They even marched in President Carter's

inaugural parade in 1977. Five years later, President Ronald Reagan proclaimed August 14, 1982 as National Navajo Code Talker Day. In his official proclamation, Reagan stated, “The Navaho [sic] Nation, when called upon to serve the United States, contributed a precious commodity never before used in this way. In the midst of the fighting in the Pacific during World War II, a gallant group of men from the Navaho [sic] Nation utilized their language in coded form to help speed the Allied victory.”

The Navajos have continued to be honored. On July 26, 2001, in a ceremony at the Capitol, President George W. Bush presented gold medals to the five living members of the original class of 29 code talkers. That fall, all the other code talkers were presented with silver medals to commemorate their service. The front of the medal features two Marine Navajo Code Talkers communicating a radio message. The reverse reads, “Dine Bizaad Yee Atah Naayee' Yik'eh Deesdlii” - “The Navajo Language Was Used to Defeat the Enemy.”

From Guadalcanal to Okinawa, the Code Talkers were a fixture in America’s island-hopping campaign. Marine commanders could always depend on the code talkers to get messages through quickly and accurately. Marine Captain Ralph Stuckey said that the code talkers were “the simplest, fastest and most reliable means available” to get a confidential message through (qtd. in Santella 35). And when President Reagan proclaimed National Navajo Code Talker Day, he stated, “The dedication and unswerving devotion to duty shown by the men of the Navaho [sic] Nation in serving as radio code talkers in the Marine Corps during World War II should serve as a fine example for all Americans.”

# Annotated Bibliography

## Primary Sources:

Photograph of Navajo Indian Code Talkers Henry Bake and George Kirk, 12/1943. Photograph.

Archival Research Catalog. National Archives and Records Administration. 10 February 2005. <[http://www.archives.gov/research\\_room/arc/index.html](http://www.archives.gov/research_room/arc/index.html)>. Path: ARC Search; Keyword: Navajo Code Talkers.

This photograph of two code talkers, from the National Archives, was used in the text.

Medal Honoring Navajo Code Talkers. Photograph. The United States Mint. 2001. 12 February

2005.<[http://www.usmint.gov/mint\\_programs/medals/navajo/index.cfm?action=Photogallery&picture=8](http://www.usmint.gov/mint_programs/medals/navajo/index.cfm?action=Photogallery&picture=8)>.

This photograph of the one of the medals awarded to the code talkers in 1969 was used in the text. It is taken from the U.S. Mint's site on the medals.

Vogel, Major General Clayton. Memo to the Commandant of the Marine Corps. 6 March 1942.

Records of the United States Marine Corps, Records Group 127; National Archives Building, Washington DC. [Online version available on 15 March 2005 at <[http://www.archives.gov/digital\\_classroom/lessons/code\\_talkers/images/letter\\_01.jpg](http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/code_talkers/images/letter_01.jpg)>.]

This is the original memo from Major General Vogel to Commandant Holcomb recommending enlistment of the Navajos. Vogel sent this memo after Johnston's demonstration of the proposed code, and it is evident from the memo that he was very impressed with the code. I quoted it in my paper, and found it useful for information about Johnston's demonstration.

## Secondary Sources:

Aaseng, Nathan. Navajo Code Talkers. New York: Walker, 1992.

This book was valuable to me for its clear explanations and descriptions of events and procedures. It was also helpful for its many anecdotes and information about the Navajo traditions, ceremonies and rituals. However, it is written for children.

Durrett, Deanne. Unsung Heroes of World War II. New York: Facts on File, 1998.

This book was valuable for its wealth of background information on the Navajo culture. It also contains many photographs and quotes from code talkers that helped me appreciate what life was like for the code talkers – from the Navajo reservation to the front lines.

Iwo Jima Survivors Association. “Facts About the Battle for Iwo Jima.” National Iwo Jima Memorial Monument. Iwo Jima Survivors Association. 12 February 2005. <<http://www.webtravels.com/iwojima/battle.htm>>

I referred to this site to get specific facts and figures for the battle of Iwo Jima - how large the island was, how many Japanese soldiers defended the island, and similar information.

Kawano, Kenji. Warriors: Navajo Code Talkers. Flagstaff: Northland, 1990.

Kawano, a Japanese-born photojournalist, arrived in the United States in 1973. He became intrigued by the code talkers and decided to create a book about them. This book contains photographs of 75 former code talkers, as well as short quotes from them. In addition, the preface contains a wealth of general information about the code talkers. This book helped me gain perspective on how the code talkers’ experiences affected them.

McClain, Sally. Navajo Weapon: The Navajo Code Talkers. Tucson: Rio Nuevo, 2001.

This book was very useful for specific information such as dates, exact numbers, and quotes. It is both readable and informative and provided many details about various aspects of the code talker program, especially its beginning.

Navajo Code Talkers: The Epic Story. Videocassette. Tully Entertainment, 1995.

This video provided an excellent general introduction to the Navajo Code Talkers. I used excerpts from some of the interviews with Code Talkers in this report, as well as some of the interviews with experts.

Reagan, Ronald. "Proclamation 4954 -- National Navaho Code Talkers Day." Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. 7 February 2005 <<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1982/72882c.htm>>.

This is the full text of President Reagan's proclamation of National Navajo Code Talker Day in 1982, which I referred to and quoted. Although it is a primary source for National Navajo Code Talker Day, it is not a primary source for the contributions of the code talkers during the war. For this reason, I have chosen to classify it as a secondary source.

Santella, Andrew. Navajo Code Talkers. Minneapolis: Compass Point, 2004.

I read this book to get background information on the code talkers and to get general information about their contributions. Although it does not go into great detail (it is actually written for children), it is interesting and offers a good overview of the program.

Senator Jeff Bingham's Navajo Code Talkers Page. 2001. Senator Jeff Bingham. 12 February 2005. <[http://bingaman.senate.gov/code\\_talkers/index.html](http://bingaman.senate.gov/code_talkers/index.html)>.

Senator Bingham sponsored the bill that paved the way for the medals to be presented to the Navajos in 2001. I used his site for information about both the medals and the code talkers in general.