

The Unbreakable Code:
Navajo Code Talkers

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Klesh ah-jah a-chin lha-cha-eh tse-gah ah-jah dibeh-yazzie cla-gl-aih. Imagine hearing that over a radio and then having to decipher the message sometimes under high enemy fire. Mid way through World War II, Japan was very successful at decoding U.S. code, then came the idea of using the Navajo language. The Navajo code talkers created an unbreakable code that helped U.S. forces win the Pacific war.

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

World War II was a conflict that involved almost every part of the world during the years of 1939 through 1945. It began on September 1, 1939 when Germany invaded Poland. Two days later Great Britain and France declared war on Germany. The U.S.S.R.¹ was brought into the war on June 22, 1941 when Germany invaded the U.S.S.R. In 1941 the United States of America declared war on Japan following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7th. There were two main powers in World War II. The Axis power, which consisted of Germany, Japan and Italy and the Allied forces that consisted of Great Britain, France, U.S.S.R. and the United States of America. Through the course of the war between 40 million and 50 million people lost their lives, making World War II the bloodiest and biggest conflict in history.

¹ The U.S.S.R is also known as the Soviet Union.

PHILIP JOHNSTON AND THE IDEA

In the early part of World War II, Japanese soldiers were quickly decoding all of the codes that the Allies were using. The ability to move soldiers, send materials and fight effectively was being compromised. The Allies were desperate and needed to find a code that was almost impossible to break to have hope in the war. Then stepped in Philip Johnston.

On September 17, 1892, Philip Johnston was born. Most of Johnston's childhood was spent on a Navajo reservation while his parents served as missionaries on the reservation. Johnston grew up learning the Navajo language and customs. In 1942, he read a newspaper article about how the U.S. Army was trying to make a new code using native languages. Johnston, having grown up on the reservation, knew the all verbal Navajo language. "Its complex structure, difficult pronunciation, and singsong qualities made it nearly impossible to decipher."² Philip suggested using the Navajo language for the code. The U.S. Marines set out to find Navajos willing to join the Marines.

THE ORIGINAL 29

The original 29 enlisted Navajo men first had to go through boot camp, followed by basic combat training, and then Marine communication school. The men did not know what they were being recruited for because it was top secret; only the people that set it

² Jones World Book Advanced

up knew about it. The Navajo men were only asked “Do you want to join the Marines? You want to fight the enemy? Come join the Marines!”³ They arrived at Camp Elliott near San Diego in May 1942. Their task was to create a Navajo code. The talkers used recognizable words that served as U.S. military terms. For example, fighter planes used the Navajo word for *hummingbird*, a tank was a *turtle* and bombs were *eggs*. They created an alphabet based off of the English language to spell out words. They used the Navajo word for ant for the letter a, bear for b, etcetera. “An observation plane carries no armament, doesn't pick a fight, just goes out and observes and usually flies at night. So we took those characteristics and ... those characteristics fit the characteristics of what an owl does, very much the same thing. So the code word for observation plane became *Nash jaw* which is an owl in Navajo.”⁴ With the Marine Corps adding word substitution it made the code almost impossible to decode. The initial code consisted of 211 vocabulary terms, which expanded to 411 over the course of the war. They had to make it so only the 400 code talkers could understand while anybody that could speak the Navajo language could not.

THE TEST

The first time the code was used in World War II was the Battle of Guadalcanal, a series of land and sea battles, occurring between August 7, 1942, and February of 1943.

Japanese troops landed on Guadalcanal island⁵ on July 6, 1942 and built an airfield base there. One month later on August 7 the 6,000 U.S. Marines landed on

³ Peter MacDonald CPL USMC, WWII

⁴ Roy O. Hawthorne SGT USMC, WWII

⁵ The Guadalcanal island is east of New Guinea and northeast of Australia.

Guadalcanal island to take the base over. Both sides started to reinforce themselves by sea. Seven more months of fighting raged on in the islands dense jungle and out in the ocean before it was over.

On August 7, 1942, the First Marine Division struck the beaches of Guadalcanal. There were 15 Navajo code talkers with them. Sending the Navajos was a test to see how well their memory would be under high enemy fire. Three weeks after the landing on the beaches, the Commander of the First Marine Division, General Vandegrift sent word to the United States, "This Navajo code is terrific. The enemy never understood it. We don't understand it either, but it works. Send us some more Navajos!" From that point on the code was used in everything over radio.



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⁶ "Pfc. Preston Toledo and Pfc. Frank Toledo, Navajo cousins in a Marine artillery regiment in the South Pacific, relay orders over a field radio in their native tongue." Picture and description thanks to the Central Intelligence Agency.

LIFE AT WAR

On the reservation the Navajo men were with their fellow Navajos, and they all followed the same customs however, in the Pacific they were with different people than what they were used to and a variety of different customs. For example Navajo people are told to never to kill a snake. What's going to happen when they have to kill for their life? Or another custom was to never eat food that had a point of a knife stuck into it. The Navajo had to get used to the different things that people did because they were raised differently, on top of being in a different country. Even though people around them did things differently, they still stuck to their customs. Sometimes refusing to eat their food because of it.

THEIR FINEST HOURS

There were only two possible ways the U.S. could attack and neither looked promising. The first option was to land on the western shore line which provided easier terrain for ground forces, but the pounding surf could destroy the landing crafts and make it hard to reach land. On the eastern side had calmer waters, but the problem there was that the beach sloped sharply up making it hard for tanks or heavy machinery to make the climb. If landing was not hard enough already, the tiny island was protected by 22,000 Japanese soldiers. The island also had mortar pits, machine-gun nests and pillboxes built in the rock. Mine fields were also an issue. It seemed almost impossible to have success. On February 19, 1945, the U.S. Navy sent eight thousand soldiers to the

beaches and hills of Iwo Jima. By 8:30 AM the first wave, consisting of 1,440 marine soldiers, was ready to land. The plan was for those 1,440 to clear the beaches. Once that happened the code talkers would come in the next wave. The Marines were expecting a strong resistance from Japan, but found they were wrong. The first wave of soldiers met almost no resistance. One unit made it across the island in an hour and a half, blowing up as many pillboxes as they could. When the code talkers hit the beaches, something seemed off. The Japanese held back their forces and waited for the beaches until it was filled with people. Once the beaches were full of Marines and Marine equipment the hidden Japanese opened fire. With nearly no places for cover, most ran and dove into the trenches. The so called 'safe havens' became their graves. The Japanese changed their sights on the mortars to toss shells perfectly into the bunkers. With their fallen colleagues and Japanese surrounding the code talkers, they set up their radio and started their job. They directed gun fire from the ships and air forces to the hidden mortar companies. Air observers sent back messages about enemy hazards. This job was the hardest thing the code talkers faced throughout the war, but with all that was going around them, the code talkers had decoded and sent messages like they were in the comfort of their own homes. For the first 48 hours on Iwo Jima, the Marines had six radio units working at all times, receiving and sending more than 800 messages. Thanks to the Navajo code talkers, the U.S. Marines were able to take control of Iwo Jima.

THE END OF THE WAR

At the Potsdam Conference, July and August of 1945, U.S. President Harry S. Truman, Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin discussed the war with Japan and the peace settlement with Germany. On August 15, the Japanese government announced that they would agree to the terms of the Potsdam Declaration. On September 2, the U.S. accepted Japan's surrender. The spring before, the Allies had accepted the surrender of Germany. The Marine Corps had enlisted 540 Navajos for service. There were 375 to 420 trained as Navajo code talkers by the end of the war, some lying about their age and only being 15 years old.

COMING HOME

After the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the code talkers got word that Japan surrendered. The Navajo men went to their reservations back in the U.S. however, being back was not the same. The end of the war did not just bring them back, but also the mental and physical scars of war. A majority of them tried to put the thought of war behind them. On the reservations they held cleansing ceremonies that included the *Enemy Way* song and dance. This was performed for the soldiers to help “put them at ease.”⁷ Some code talkers openly talked about their experiences they had in the Marines. Others could not even handle the thought of war because of the bad things

⁷ Aaseng *Navajo Code Talkers*

they had experienced. In American society nothing had changed. Once they were back, they were back at the bottom of society, just Native Americans.

THE LEGACY THEY LEFT

The Navajo code talker story stayed classified by the military until 1968. "I had three other brothers that served as code talkers and other relatives, and we never spoke not one word about it to each other. For some time after the war some of my brothers and I lived in the same house, but we never talked about it."⁸ This shows the extent of the secrecy the talkers were sworn to. In 1982, President Ronald Reagan made August 14 National Code Talker Day. In 2001, the U.S. Congress held a ceremony to honor the remaining code talkers in Washington D.C. President George W. Bush gave silver and gold congressional medals to honor them and thanked them for their service to their country. "I feel good that recognition did come, the brothers that passed on, up in the Marine Corps heaven. I'm sure they are delighted that we finally got recognition."⁹ In 2017 the President Donald J. Trump invited three of the last 13 Navajo code talkers to Washington D.C. Donald Trump said that Peter MacDonald's speech was "So well delivered and from the heart." that he did not read his own because it can never be as good as Peter's.

⁸ Roy O. Hawthorne SGT USMC, WWII

⁹ Peter Macdonald CPL USMC, WWII

CONCLUSION

Mid way through World War II, Japan was very successful at decoding U.S. code, then came the idea of using the Navajo language. The Navajo code talkers created an unbreakable code that helped U.S. forces win the Pacific war. In World War II Japan was excellent at decoding U.S. code. The U.S. marines recruited 29 Navajo men to make a code that the Japanese could not decipher. Once created, it was put to the test in the Battle of Guadalcanal. It worked so the Marines used it throughout the rest of the war. Their ability to move soldiers, send materials and fight effectively in the war was restored. Without the Navajo Code Talkers the War could have gone a lot different. Thanks to the Code Talkers the U.S. won the War and are free.

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