

THE NAVAJO CODE TALKERS



The Navajo Code Talkers, as they became known, were the key to America's success in World War II. They were Navajo Marines who created a secret code that made it possible for the United States to defeat the Japanese in World War II and end the war. Before World War II, every code that the United States had created for warfare had been broken. Known as experts at code deciphering, the Japanese were never able to decipher the Navajo's secret code.

The success of the code was due, in a large part, to the complexity of the Navajo language. At the outbreak of World War II, there were only thirty non-Navajos who could speak the language, and not all of them could speak it fluently. Philip Johnston, had grown up on the Navajo Reservation, and could speak Navajo very well. He was a veteran of World War I, and had heard about a battle in that war, in which several Choctaw Indians were talking to each other by radio in their native

language. It completely fooled the Germans, who were listening. The tide of the battle turned around, and the Americans won. With his knowledge of the Navajo people and their language, Mr. Johnston thought that the Navajos could easily devise a way of talking that no one would be able to understand.

With the somewhat skeptical approval by the U.S. Marines of Mr. Johnston's idea, recruitment for Code Talkers began in the spring of 1942. Two recruiters from the U.S. Marine Corps went to the Navajo Reservation and met with Chee Dodge, Chairman of the Tribal Council. He liked the idea and sent out word by shortwave radio to the

Reservation. There was an immediate, excited response. The candidates had to be fluent in both English and Navajo. Many of them were just school boys and lied about their age, just to have the opportunity to go and fight for their country and protect it from the Japanese. Twenty-nine Navajos were inducted into the Marines.



These twenty-nine men were sent by train to boot camp at Fort Elliot in California where they became the 382nd

Platoon, USMC. There, they had to learn to survive the harsh environment they would encounter in the Pacific. Due to their ancestral background and way of life, the Navajos proved to have outstanding physical endurance and qualities. The challenge in their training came when staff officers who were worried that there might be someone who could understand Navajo, asked them to encode the Navajo language. Hence, the creation of the unbreakable code. After this code was created, it was tested on some Navajos who weren't Code Talkers and they were unable to understand it. The Marines then decided to start training 200 more Code Talkers.

The 382nd Platoon, USMC, was sent to Guadalcanal to begin fighting. When they

first arrived in the Pacific, some Marine field commanders were confused about the role the Code Talkers were to play. But as they paired with the Communication Specialists in the Pacific, their true value became apparent. They handled all major battlefield communications while the Americans were fighting the Japanese in the Pacific. Not one of their messages was deciphered. In the last battle of the war, the fight for Iwo Jima, they sent more than 800 critical messages. By the end of the war there were 540 Navajo Marines and about 420 of these were trained as Code Talkers. When the Code Talkers returned home after the war, most of them participated in the Enemy Way Ceremony, a native ritual, performed for getting rid of evil spirits.

It is almost certain that America would not have been able to win the war without the Navajo Code Talkers, and it is hard to estimate the number of American lives that they saved. It is believed that their code is the only truly unbreakable code in the history of warfare.

THE CODE



When World War II started in the Pacific, it relied heavily on secret communications. The military needed speedy communication among the islands of the Pacific Ocean, which were spread out over thousands of miles. Deploying troops without tipping off the enemy was a challenge and Japan had the advantage in the beginning. They were learning the time, place and direction the American attack forces were deployed. But as the Navajo Marines started transmitting

messages by telephone and radio using their secret code, the United States soon gained ground.

When the first Navajos started to develop a code, they never realized the task that lay ahead of them. First they had to learn military and field terms in English. Then they had to create a Navajo equivalent for each of these terms. In order to maintain secrecy, no written version of any code was ever allowed in the battle zones. They had to commit every word to memory. While creating the code, the Code Talkers used four basic rules to make memorization easier.

- 1.) The code words had to have some kind of logical connection to the term to which they referred
- 2.) Code words had to be unusually descriptive
- 3.) Code words had to be short
- 4.) They had to avoid words that could be confused with similar words

Many of the code words were straightforward. For example, different aircraft were given the name of different birds that acted similar to the planes. For instance a dive bomber was much like a sparrow hawk to the Navajos, so it was called a gini; their word for sparrow hawk. Other code

words reflected the Navajo sense of humor. Below is a list of some of the terms the Navajos created for military words.

Military Term	Navajo Word	Meaning
OFFICERS:		
Major General	So-na-kih	Two Stars
Brigadier General	So-ala-ih	One Star
Colonel	Astah-besh-legai	Silver Eagle
Lieutenant Colonel	Che-chil-getah-besh-legai	Silver Oak Leaf
Major	Che-chil-betah-ola	Gold Oak Leaf
Captain	Besh-legai-na-kih	Two Silver Bars
1st Lieutenant	Besh-legai-a-lah-ih	One Silver Bar
2nd Lieutenant	Ola-alh-ih-ni-hi	One Gold Bar
AIRPLANES:		
Wo-tah-dineh-ih (Air Corps)		
Dive Bomber	Gini	Sparrow Hawk
Torpedo Plane	Tas-chizzie	Swallow
Observation Plane	ine-ahs-jah	Owl
Fighter Plane	Da-he-tih-hi	Hummingbird
Bomber Plane	Jav-sho	Buzzard
Patrol Plane	Ga-gih	Crow
Transport Plane	Astah	Eagle
SHIPS: Toh-dineh-ih (Water Clan Fleet)		
Battleship	Lo-tso	Whale
Aircraft Carrier	Tsidi-ney-ye-hi	Bird carrier
Submarine	Besh-lo	Iron fish
Mine Sweeper	Cha	Beaver
Destroyer	Ca-lo	Shark
Troop Transport	Dinch-nev-ye-hi	Man carrier
Cruiser	Lo-tso-yazzie	Small whale

In order to be able to include other words in their code, besides the assigned terms, the Code Talkers added an alphabet code. They took the English letter and thought of something that started with the letter, and then used the Navajo word for that object. Thus, the Navajo words "wol-la-chee" (ant), "be-la-sana" (apple) and "tse-nill" (axe) all stood for the letter "a." They then used a group of Navajo words to spell out an English word. In order to say "Navy" in Navajo Code they could say for instance, "tsah (needle) wol-la-chee (ant) ah-keh-di-glini (victor) tsah-ah-dzoh (yucca)." When they received a message, it either had terms they knew, or alphabet

words which they could translate using the first letters of English words. In this way, the Code Talkers could encode anything!

CodeTalker Alphabet

- | | |
|--|--|
| A. (Wol-La Chee) - Ant
(Be-La-Sana) - Apple
(Tse-Nill) - Axe | L. (Dibeh-Yazzie) - Lamb
(Ah-Jad) - Leg
(Nash-Doie-Tso) - Lion |
| B. (Na-Hash-Chid) - Badger
(Shush) - Bear
(Toish-Jeh) - Barrel | M. (Tsin-Tliti) - Match
(Be-Tas-Tni) - Mirror
(Na-As-Tso-Si) - Mouse |
| C. (Moasi) - Cat
(Tla-Gin) - Coal
(Ba-Goshi) - Cow | N. (Tsah) - Needle
(A-Chin) - Nose
(Nesh-Chee) - Nut |
| D. (Be) - Deer
(Chindi) - Devil
(Lha-Cha-Eh) - Dog | O. (A-Kha) - Oil
(Tlo-Chin) - Onion
(Ne-Ahs-Jah) - Owl |
| E. (Ah-jah) - Ear
(Dzeh) - Elk
(Ah-Nah) - Eye | P. (Cla-Gi-Aih) - Pant
(Bi-So-Dih) - Pig
(Ne-Zhoni) - Pretty |
| F. (Chuo) - Fir
(Tsa-E-Donin-Ee) - Fly
(Ma-E) - Fox | Q. (Ca-Yeith) - Quiver |
| G. (Ah-Tad) - Girl
(Klizzie) - Goat
(Jeha) - Gum | R. (Gah) - Rabbit
(Dah-Nes-Tsa) - Ram
(Ah-Loz) - Rice |
| H. (Tse-Gah) - Hair
(Cha) - Hat
(Lin) - Horse | S. (Dibeh) - Sheep
(Klesh) - Snake |
| I. (Tkin) - Ice
(Yeh-Hes) - Itch
(A-Chi) - Intestine | T. (D-Ah) - Tea
(A-Woh) - Tooth
(Than-Zie) - Turkey |
| J. (Tkele-Cho-Gi) - Jackass
(Yil-Doi) - Jerk
(Ah-Ya-Tsinne) - Jaw | U. (Shi-Da) - Uncle
(No-Da-ih) - Ute |
| K. (Jad-Ho-Loni) - Kettle
(Ba-Ha-Ne-Di-Tinin) - Key
(Klizzie-Yazzie) - Kid | V. (A-Keh-Di-Glini) - Victor |
| | W. (Gloe-Ih) - Weasel |
| | X. (Al-Na-As-Dzoh) - Cross |
| | Y. (Tsah-Ah-Dzoh) - Yucca |
| | Z. (Besh-Do-Tliz) - Zin |

The success of the code was due to the fact that Navajo families lived by themselves, on remote Reservations, and not together as a tribe for many of their earlier years. This kept their language from being known to almost anyone other than themselves. When the former chief of intelligence for the Japanese forces, General Seizo Arisue, found out many years after the war, that the code used by the the Americans was an American Indian Code, he replied, "Thank you. That was a puzzle I thought would never have been solved."

http://library.thinkquest.org/J002073F/thinkquest/Code_talkers.htm