

The Navajo Code Talkers: How the Native American Dialect Spearheaded a New Form of
Communication During World War II

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Paper

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Process Paper

My historical paper explores the role Navajo Code Talkers played as communicators during World War II. In particular, I explored the significance of their role as radio operators encoding tactical messages for the US military during the war along with how their legacy was communicated to the general public once they returned home. The central historical argument that guided my research was that the Navajo Code Talkers' contributions during World War II were crucial to American victory and left behind a lasting legacy for future generations of Native Americans.

My topic's connection to the National History Day theme "Communication in History" is two-fold: (1) the Navajos were communicators during World War II who encoded military messages, and (2) the legacy they left behind as veterans was passed down and communicated to the American public in various ways since the conclusion of the war.

I conducted research using a wide range of sources available both online and offline. I first began my research by viewing websites that gave a general synopsis of the Navajo Code Talkers and their participation in the war. Then, I narrowed my search to specific aspects of the Code Talkers—such as the development of their code or the tonal intricacies of their language—using online databases such as JSTOR along with academic journal archives. In addition, I made use of books on the Navajo available at my local libraries. During my research process, I found interviews of World War II veterans and journal articles published by credible historians to be most useful, as they allowed me to come to a more nuanced understanding of the Navajo Code Talkers that encompassed a wide scope of perspectives.

I began my paper by first creating an outline of the topics I wanted to cover: the historical context behind the creation of the Navajo Code, its successful use during World War II, how it was perceived immediately after the war, and how its legacy has been preserved up to the present day. I then divided up the primary and secondary sources I had found in my research into those categories, referencing them as I began the writing process. I faced some challenges in my first draft in weaving these different sections of the paper together, but through multiple cycles of editing and revising, I was ultimately able to create a polished final product.

The Navajo Code Talkers are significant in history for their service and sacrifice. Within the context of World War II, the US Marines primarily relied upon the Navajos to serve as secure and efficient communicators during their operations in the Pacific. Taking a broader historical perspective, the Navajo Code Talkers proved the value of their tribal language, which has served as a great source of pride and inspiration for subsequent generations of Native Americans. Also, they demonstrated how America's cultural diversity helped it secure victory in World War II.

Historical Paper

Introduction

During World War II, US armed forces were scattered across the globe, fighting in both the Pacific and European Theaters. A two-front military effort of such magnitude was largely made possible through radio communication, which allowed for command and control at great distances. However, the speed and convenience of long-distance radio signals came at the price of security, as anyone, friend or foe, could intercept what was being broadcasted. As a result, all combatants during the war encoded their radio messages to prevent enemies from discerning their contents.

The secrecy of tactical communication was crucial during World War II, and an enciphered message speedily broken by the opposing side could spell disaster. The US military learned this the hard way early on in the war, as the Imperial Japanese Navy deciphered the first forms of American code with devastating success.¹ However, the tide began to turn in the autumn of 1942 when Japanese cryptanalysts began to pick up on a series of “strange sounds” that were likened to “a hot water bottle being emptied” and the “prayer call of a Tibetan monk.”² These sounds were from none other than the Navajo Code Talkers of the US Marine Corps, whose code based on their native language would stymie Axis forces and stand as the only unbroken code by the end of the war. The Navajo Code Talkers played an essential role as communicators during World War II, contributing to American victory and leaving behind a lasting legacy for future generations of Native Americans.

¹ M. Gyi, “The Unbreakable Language Code in the Pacific Theatre of World War II,” *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 39, no. 1 (1982): 9. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42575905>.

² Sisley Barnes, “The Navajo’s Secret Weapon,” *The American Legion* 104, no. 2 (February 1978): 32. <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12203/4292>.

Historical Context

Although the Navajo Code Talkers were one of the largest and arguably most successful Native American units to serve during World War II, they did not pioneer the use of indigenous languages as code during warfare. In fact, the earliest use of military code based on a Native American language came during World War I, when 19 Choctaw men were stationed at various US command outposts to serve as communications operators.³ In addition, the Canadian military also attempted to communicate using Native American languages as a means to secure their own tactical messages against German code breakers during World War I. These Native American codes showed great promise as the strength of their encryptions were much stronger than those produced by the cipher systems that the US and Canada previously relied upon, which were based on mathematical letter scrambling and European languages. However, both the Choctaw and Canadian armed forces ultimately faced limited success with their codes due to sparse usage along with the lack of an extensive vocabulary that could clearly communicate military terminology.⁴

The previous use of Native American communication in North America would go on to serve as an important source of inspiration for Philip Johnston, who initiated the development of the Navajo Code during World War II. Johnston was the son of white Christian missionaries raised on a Native American reservation, allowing him to become bilingually fluent in both English and Navajo—an extremely rare occurrence for a non-native speaker. He was also a World War I veteran who understood the military’s need for secure communications during wartime. It was with his unique background and expertise in the Navajo language that enabled

³ Russel Lawrence Barsh, “American Indians in the Great War,” *Ethnohistory* 38, no. 3 (1991): 291. doi:10.2307/482356.

⁴ Adam Adkins, “Secret War: The Navajo Code Talkers in World War II,” *New Mexico Historical Review* 72, no. 4 (October 1997): 322.

him to propose its use as a code to the US military.⁵ In March 1942, Johnston organized a demonstration of the Navajo language that was presented to General Clayton Vogel, the commanding officer of the Marine Corps' Pacific Fleet. This demonstration thoroughly impressed Vogel, and he commissioned Johnston to begin the Navajo Code Talker Project with 29 Navajo recruits known as "Platoon 382."⁶

The Navajo Code Talker Project set itself apart from prior Native American encryptions, such as the use of Choctaw during World War I, with its extensive preparation and planning. Recognizing the flaws of previous Native American code, such as a lack of code words for military terminology, Johnston and his team designed a vocabulary of 413 code words that could be memorized and standardized across all Navajo Code Talkers.⁷ These code words often assigned meanings symbolically and could communicate concepts that did not have a direct translation in Navajo. For example, the Navajo word for "aircraft carrier" was *tsidi-ney-ye-hi* (bird carrier), "fighter plane" was *he-tih-hi* (hummingbird), and "flare" was *wo-chi* (light streak).⁸ Comprehensive training of new Code Talkers began immediately upon completion of the code, and the first Navajo Code Talkers were deployed to the Pacific theater to engage in the Guadalcanal campaign of 1942. By April 1943, just a little over a year since the launch of the Code Talker Project, 190 Navajo Code Talkers were already serving in action, encrypting and

⁵ Philip Johnston, "Indian Jargon Won Our Battles," *The Masterkey for Indian Lore and History* 38, no. 4 (1964): 132.

⁶ Alison R. Bernstein, *American Indians and World War II: Toward a New Era in Indian Affairs* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 24.

⁷ Johnston, "Indian Jargon Won Our Battles," 134.

⁸ Barnes, "The Navajo's Secret Weapon," 32.

communicating messages for the US military.⁹ That number would increase to over 420 by the war's end.¹⁰

An Unbreakable Code

In order to be considered successful, a military code must satisfy two conditions: (1) a strong enough encryption to ensure the security of tactical communication and (2) an efficient encoding/decoding process that minimizes the time spent relaying messages. For any code, the first condition of security is a pre-requisite, as there is no point in encrypting a message if it can be easily broken by an un-intended recipient. However, during combat, the second condition of speed is also crucial given that wartime communication is oftentimes reactionary and must urgently respond to rapid developments on the battlefield. The Navajo Code Talkers were ultimately able to contribute to American victory during World War II through their simultaneously secure and speedy communication.

Much of the Navajo Code's encryption strength can largely be attributed to the fact that Navajo is both an unwritten and tonal language. Because any written documents of the language did not exist, no material could be leaked and studied by Axis forces. Combined with the fact that there were only an estimated 28 non-Navajos who could speak the language (none of whom were German, Japanese, or otherwise working with the Axis forces), the only way an outsider could analyze the code was through listening to the radio transmissions of a foreign language without any context.¹¹ The difficulty of cracking the Navajo Code was further compounded by its complex phonetic variations. Navajo is a tonal language consisting of vowels that are

⁹ Noah Jed Riseman, "“Regardless of History’?: Re-Assessing the Navajo Codetalkers of World War II,” *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 26, no. 2 (2007): 53. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41054076>.

¹⁰ Gyi, “The Unbreakable Language Code in the Pacific Theatre of World War II,” 12.

¹¹ “Indians Were Code Talkers,” *The Athens Messenger*, September 27, 1981.

pronounced in a short, intermediate, or long manner with tones that are low, high, rising, or falling.¹² The slightest variation in pronunciation can drastically change the meaning of a word in Navajo. For example, the Navajo words *anaa* (war) and *anáã* (eye) are pronounced identically except for the fact that the final vowel of the latter is higher pitched (as indicated by the accent mark).¹³ Such minute, yet crucial, differences are nearly imperceptible to the untrained ear, making Navajo an extremely difficult language to understand without years of exposure starting from early childhood. As explained by anthropologists Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea C. Leighton, “There is nothing slouchy about Navajo. Sounds must be reproduced with a pedantic neatness... The talk of those who have learned Navajo as adults always has a flabby quality.”¹⁴ The intricate detail of this language relatively unknown outside the United States lent itself exceptionally well to the formulation of a private and secure code. Equipped with a code that would stand unbroken until the war’s end, the US had the luxury to freely communicate without having their military movements intercepted and compromised by enemy codebreakers.

The Navajo Code Talkers also demonstrated great efficiency in the encoding, transmission, and decoding process. To provide a quantifiable measurement of their speed, a Navajo Code Talker only needed about 20 seconds on average to send a three-line message.¹⁵ When compared to previous enciphering methods, such transmission speeds achieved by the Navajo were extremely quick—the Navajo Code Talkers were able to communicate tactical information two times faster than any other encoding system the US had used in the past.¹⁶ This agility in the Navajo code allowed the US military to not only more quickly respond to urgent

¹² Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton, *The Navajo* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1946), 185.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 186.

¹⁵ Ron McCoy, “Navajo Code Talkers of World War II: Indian Marines Befuddled the Enemy,” *American West: The Land and its People* 18, no. 6 (November/December 1981): 68.

¹⁶ Bernstein, *American Indians and World War II: Toward a New Era in Indian Affairs*, 49.

changes in a warzone, but also communicate a significantly greater amount of information within the same time span. For example, during the first two days of the battle of Iwo Jima—a critical time period in which over 70,000 US Marines needed to strategically coordinate an amphibious invasion of the then Japanese-controlled Iwo Jima island—just six Navajo Code Talkers of the 5th Marine Division were able to send over 800 encoded messages without a single error.¹⁷ Iwo Jima was one of the most logistically complicated missions in World War II, demanding synergy amongst armed forces in the air, on the ground, and at sea. Given such an ambitious operation, having Code Talkers who could swiftly communicate a large volume of tactical commands proved essential for the US. After five weeks of gruesome fighting, on March 26, 1945, the US military successfully gained control over Iwo Jima, and Major Howard Connor, Signal Officer of the 5th Marine Division, famously proclaimed, “Were it not for the Navajos, the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima.”¹⁸

The Navajo Code Talkers made a lasting impression for their efforts during World War II, and Major Howard Connor was certainly not the only military official who recognized their contributions. A report issued by Captain Ralph J. Sturkey stated that the Navajo Code was “the simplest, fastest, and most reliable means we have of transmitting secret orders via radio or over telephone circuits exposed to enemy wiretapping.”¹⁹ Major F.D. Beans, Commanding Officer of the Fourth Marines, also issued his praise: “The Navajo Code Talkers have proved to be

¹⁷ Johnston, “Indian Jargon Won Our Battles,” 135

¹⁸ Major Howard Connor, quoted in Johnston, “Indian Jargon Won Our Battles,” 130

¹⁹ “Annex OBOE (Signal Communications) to 5th Marine Division Action Report of Iwo Jima Operation,” 2 April 1945, p. 26, in National Archives and Records Administration, Records of the U.S. Marine Corps (Record Group 127), Records Relating to United States Marine Corps Operations in World War II (“Geographic Files”), (Iwo Jima), Folder A16-10: 5th Marine Division “M” to “R”, Box 90.

excellent Marines, intelligent, industrious, efficient.”²⁰ Such unsolicited commendation from high ranking military officers ultimately spoke volumes about the success of the Navajos during World War II.

Remembering the Navajo’s Legacy

Celebrating victory, the Navajo Code Talkers returned home from World War II with a newfound sense of pride in themselves and their language. For example, a veteran testimony by Code Talker Kee Etsicitty stated, “Our language helped the white men, our country, and our people. The radio work that I did I am proud of.”²¹ Code Talker Sam Billison also echoed these sentiments when he said, “The more I studied the more I realized the importance of this [code], the value of it, that it came from Navajo and that this was our weapon, so to speak.”²² However, such sentiments of fulfillment and satisfaction would fade quickly after the war. Unfortunately for the Navajo Code Talkers, their glory would prove to be short-lived: post-war recognition was fleeting and official acknowledgement came long overdue.

After serving as some of the most prolific communicators during World War II, the Navajo were ironically ordered to keep mute on their wartime experiences. This was because up until 1968, more than two decades after the conclusion of World War II, the Navajo Code was kept classified by the US government. This forbid the Navajo Code Talkers from talking about the code back home and resulted in many misconceptions among the general public regarding their role in the war. By the time they were allowed to explain the significance of their job, many

²⁰ F.D. Beans, Commanding Officer, Fourth Marines, to Commanding General, Sixth Marine Division, 16 November 1944, file on “Code Talkers,” Marine Corps Archives, in Bernstein, *American Indians and World War II: Toward a New Era in Indian Affairs*, 49.

²¹ Kee Etsicitty, interview with Sally McClain, October 1991, available from the Sally McClain Collection, Navajo Nation Tribal Museum (Window Rock, Arizona)

²² Sam Billison, interview with Sally McClain, 31 May 1993, available from the Sally McClain Collection, Navajo Nation Tribal Museum (Window Rock, Arizona)

Navajo veterans were met with skeptical audiences who failed to comprehend their stories, or worse, refused to believe them. As Code Talkers attempted to recall events more than 20 years removed from the war, they struggled to fully communicate and convey their accomplishments. In addition, sharing such stories all of a sudden also raised doubts regarding their veracity even among other Navajos who did not participate in World War II. Code Talker Bill Toledo expressed his disappointment and frustration regarding the situation in an interview with historian Sally McClain: “Some of our own people don’t understand what we did in the war. They thought we should have been on the front lines of fighting... We try to explain what we did but they still think we should have been on the front lines fighting. We try to tell them that we used our language to fight the Japanese, but they still don’t understand.”²³ While the US military’s classification of the Navajo Code was necessary for security reasons, keeping it a secret for 20 years inevitably led to the gradual erosion of memories and credibility.²⁴

With the exception of a few select politicians, the US government also largely stayed silent on the topic of the Navajo Code Talkers and did not begin the process of formal recognition until many years after the war. As observed by Arizona Senator Dennis DeConcini, “[The Navajo Code Talkers] never enjoyed the national acclaim they so much deserved. These men returned to the southwest as quietly as they had left.”²⁵ Unlike other World War II veterans, who returned home to honorary ceremonies and military awards, the Navajo Code Talkers went largely ignored. The disparity was so apparent that Code Talker Carl Gorman exclaimed, “You know, sometimes I can’t help thinking these guys in Washington are waiting for us to give them

²³ Bill Toledo, interview with Sally McClain, August 1992, available from the Sally McClain Collection, Navajo Nation Tribal Museum (Window Rock, Arizona)

²⁴ Riseman, “‘Regardless of History’?: Re-Assessing the Navajo Codetalkers of World War II,” 59.

²⁵ Shirley W. Belleranti, “Code Talkers,” *Westways* 75, no. 5 (1983): 76.

a medal for helping us protect our own country.”²⁶ It would take until 2000, after nearly 55 years of lobbying by the Navajo Code Talkers Association, for Congress to officially credit the Navajos by finally passing the Honoring Code Talkers Act. The act bestowed the Congressional Gold Medal to the original 29 Navajos who developed the code and the Congressional Silver Medal to all Code Talkers who served during World War II.²⁷ Formal government recognition did come half a century late, but it would set the process of public acknowledgement in motion.

In recent years, strides have been made in preserving and celebrating the history of the Navajo Code Talkers. For example, in 2008, Congress passed the Code Talkers Recognition Act to honor the tribes and families of Code Talkers who served during World War II. In addition, with the increasing number of museums, books, journal articles, and even Hollywood films dedicated to capturing the history of the Navajo Code Talkers, the public has become increasingly aware of the significance of the Navajo Code.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the Navajo Code Talkers have left behind a meaningful legacy for all Native Americans. The Code Talkers not only demonstrated their valor and courage on the battlefield, but showed the world the importance of their tribal language. They proved that their language could contribute to American victory in World War II and should stand as a source of pride to be proudly spoken by their descendants. For that, the Navajo Code Talkers’ efforts demand more than just an officer’s praise or a Congressional medal for their role as **communicators in history**. To truly honor the great sacrifice made by the Navajo Code Talkers, **their history must be communicated**, passed down, and preserved for future generations to come.

²⁶ Carl Gorman, in McCoy, “Navajo Code Talkers of World War II: Indian Marines Befuddled the Enemy,” 68.

²⁷ Riseman, “‘Regardless of History’?: Re-Assessing the Navajo Codetalkers of World War II,” 61-62.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Billison, Sam. Interview with Sally McClain. 31 May 1993. Available from the Sally McClain Collection, Navajo Nation Tribal Museum, Window Rock, AZ.

This interview conducted by historian Sally McClain helped me understand the point of view of Navajo Code Talker veterans such as Sam Billison. It gave me insights into how Navajo Code Talkers perceived themselves after World War II along with what they thought of their work during the war. I used a quotation from this interview in order to provide an example of a Navajo Code Talker's fulfillment in having served in the US military.

Etsicitty, Kee. Interview with Sally McClain. October 1991. Available from the Sally McClain Collection, Navajo Nation Tribal Museum, Window Rock, AZ.

I used this interview of Code Talker veteran Kee Etsicitty in order to deepen my understanding of Navajo perspectives following World War II. This source provided me with an additional veteran's opinion on how the Navajo Code changed the way Code Talkers viewed their tribal language and saw it with increased pride.

"Indians Were Code Talkers." *The Athens Messenger*, September 27, 1981.

This newspaper article featured in *The Athens Messenger* reported on the effectiveness and success of the Navajo Code Talkers. I used information from this source in order to explain why the Navajo Code was so secure and difficult to decrypt. In particular, the article contained a statistic regarding the obscurity and unfamiliarity of the Navajo language among non-native speakers.

Johnston, Phillip. "Indian Jargon Won Our Battles." *The Masterkey for Indian Lore and History* 38, no. 4 (1964): 130-137.

Phillip Johnston was the originator of the Navajo Code and he, along with 29 other Navajos, led the creation of the code. This source provided insider information on the inspiration behind the code, its development, and early use. Such details were mainly used to establish the historical context behind the Navajo Code and explain its early roots.

Records of the U.S. Marine Corps (Record Group 127). Records Relating to United States Marine Corps Operations in World War II ("Geographic Files"). (Iwo Jima). Folder A16-

10: 5th Marine Division “M” to “R.” Annex OBOE to 5th Marine Division Action Report of Iwo Jima.” Box 90.

This document was a report issued by Marine Captain Ralph J. Sturkey about the Battle of Iwo Jima. In the report, Captain Sturkey detailed the role that Navajo Code Talkers played as communicators during the battle with great praise. I used this source to provide a military officer’s viewpoint of the Navajo Code.

Toledo, Bill. Interview with Sally McClain. August 1992. Available from the Sally McClain Collection, Navajo Nation Tribal Museum, Window Rock, AZ.

This interview of Bill Toledo provided me with an additional perspective of a Navajo Code Talker. In this interview, historian Sally McClain and Code Talker veteran Bill Toledo discussed the recognition and compensation provided to the Navajo following World War II. I used a quotation from Bill Toledo in order to convey the Navajos’ dissatisfaction and disappointment regarding the lack of any official acknowledgement by the US government after the war.

Secondary Sources

Adkins, Adam. “Secret War: The Navajo Code Talkers in World War II.” *New Mexico Historical Review* 72, no. 4 (October 1997): 319-347.

This was a journal article published in the *New Mexico Historical Review* from 1997. Written by historian Adam Adkins, this source included information on the early use of Native American codes during World War I by both the American and Canadian militaries. I used this source to help set up the historical context behind the creation of the Navajo Code.

Barnes, Sisley. “The Navajo’s Secret Weapon.” *The American Legion* 104, no. 2 (February 1978): 32. <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12203/4292>.

This article featured in *The American Legion*, a veteran’s magazine, reported on the use of Navajo Code Talkers during World War II and provided a general synopsis of their role. I used this source to gain background knowledge on the topic and also collect examples of code words used by the Navajo during the war.

Barsh, Russel Lawrence. “American Indians in the Great War.” *Ethnohistory* 38, no. 3 (1991): 276-303. doi:10.2307/482356.

This journal article by historian Russel Lawrence Barsh provided a broad overview of the use of Native Americans during World War I. In particular, it explained the role the Choctaw Indians played as the first Native American radio communicators in the US military. I used this information to write about the historical origins of the Navajo Code, which were inspired by the previous use of the Choctaw language.

Belleranti, Shirley W. "Code Talkers." *Westways* 75, no. 5 (1983): 40-42, 76.

In my research, I used this journal article written by Shirley W. Belleranti in order to gather more diverse perspectives on the Navajo Code Talkers. For example, I used a quote from Arizona Senator Dennis DeConcini featured in this source.

Bernstein, Alison R. *American Indians and World War II: Toward a New Era in Indian Affairs*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

Alison R. Bernstein's book explored Native American contributions during World War II and how such efforts changed the relationship between the US government and the indigenous people of North America. I used this source to gather information on the early work done by Philip Johnston and the original 29 Code Talkers in creating the Navajo Code.

Gyi, M. "The Unbreakable Language Code in the Pacific Theatre of World War II." *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 39, no. 1 (1982): 8-15. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42575905>.

This journal article provided important insights into the deployment of Navajo Code Talkers as radio operators encoding messages during World War II. I learned about the number of Code Talkers deployed at different stages of the war, where they were stationed, and their effectiveness compared to previous enciphering methods by reading this article.

Kluckhohn, Clyde, and Dorothea Leighton. *The Navajo*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1946.

Written by anthropologists Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton, this book examined various aspects of the Navajo culture, including their customs, traditions, and language. I mainly used the chapter on language in order to better understand the Navajo's complex tonal variations and how their unique speech patterns were used to create a secure military code.

McCoy, Ron. "Navajo Code Talkers of World War II: Indian Marines Befuddled the Enemy." *American West: The Land and its People* 18, no. 6 (November/December 1981): 67-75.

Ron McCoy's journal article delved into the success of the Navajo Code during World War II as a means to both securely and quickly communicate tactical information. This article provided statistics on the speed of the Navajo Code Talkers' encoding, transmission, and decoding process. I used such factual information in my paper in order to convey the code's efficiency during armed combat.

Riseman, Noah Jed. “‘Regardless of History’?: Re-Assessing the Navajo Codetalkers of World War II.” *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 26, no. 2 (2007): 48-73.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41054076>.

This journal article by historian Noah Jed Riseman outlined the general chronology of the Navajo Code, but mainly focused on the recognition and compensation Code Talkers received after the war. The information provided in this article helped me understand the legacy left behind by the Code Talkers and how they have been perceived by both the US government and the general public over time.