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## **HOW THE WEST WAS REALLY WON: The Navajo Code Talkers' Contribution to American Victory in the Pacific During the 2nd World War**

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One extremely important ingredient in America's Victory over Japan was the work of the Navajo Code Talkers, a small contingent of specially trained Marines whose brilliant code and cool nerves under fire ensured that the U.S. war communications in the Marianas and elsewhere remained indecipherable to the enemy.

In his well known book, *On to Westward*, war correspondent Robert Sherrod presents a gripping eyewitness account of combat operations in the bloody Pacific Theater during World War II, where battle-hardened U.S. Marines and soldiers island-hopped their way to ultimate victory against determined Japanese defenders (Sherrod 1945). One extremely important ingredient in America's victory over Japan not mentioned by Sherrod, or by any other military historian for the next half century, was the work of the Navajo Code Talkers, a small contingent of specially-trained Marines whose ingenious code and cool nerves under fire ensured that U.S. battlefield communications remained indecipherable to the enemy.

It was an ironic twist of circumstances that had Navajos providing critical assistance to the country which, only 80 years earlier, had subjected their people to a brutal military campaign, forced resettlement, and slow starvation (Banks 1985:1-2). Even at the outbreak of the World War II, Navajos, along with other Native Americans, were afforded only second-

class citizenship, segregated on reservations, and subjected to discriminatory treatment at the hands of the dominant Euro-American society.

### **THE PEOPLE OF THE EARTH**

It hadn't always been so. The ancient ancestors of the Navajo had been among the earliest colonizers of the North American continent, probably crossing the land bridge from Asia during the last Ice Age. Between 800 and 1100 A.D., the Navajo left their relatives, the Inuit in Alaska, and settled in the "Four Corners" area of Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona and Utah (Schwartz 1999:1).

In their language, the Navajo refer to themselves as Dineh, meaning "The People" or "The People of the Earth" (Schwartz 1999:1). Navajo derived from a Tewa Indian term meaning "the large area of cultivated lands" (Anonymous a. nd:1). It later became permanently associated with the Dineh in Spanish writings of the early seventeenth century (Anonymous. a. nd: 1).

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The Navajo were originally hunters and gatherers but from their progressive neighbors the Pueblo, and their traditional enemies, the Hopi and Zuni, they learned to grow corn and were a farming society at the time of the first Spanish contact in the 1600s (Schwartz 1999:1). Although the Navajo undertook the honored tradition of raiding neighboring groups for supplies, animals and slaves, the Spanish considered them "significantly more peaceful and less aggressive" than other groups in the southwest such as the Apache, Ute, Hopi and Zuni (Schwartz 1999:1).

### **THE LONG WALK**

A watershed event in Navajo history was the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo signed by the United States and Mexico on 2 February 1849 (Anonymous b.n.d: 1). This treaty, which formally ended the Mexican War, called for the Mexican government to cede to the United States roughly half of its territory, including the Four Corners area (Schwartz 1999:1). The Navajo now found themselves under the authority of the United States of America, a young and aggressive country driven by a self-proclaimed "Manifest Destiny" to acquire the western expanse of the North American continent. They and other Native American tribes were viewed as "obstacles" to this destiny and would be dealt with accordingly (May n.d.:3).

Over the next decade numerous skirmishes took place between Navajo warriors and the Euro-American soldiers and settlers who continued to arrive in growing numbers. By 1860, the United States military considered the Navajo a grave threat, one that required immediate military attention.

Resolving the Navajo problem was assigned to General James Carleton, military commander of Arizona and New Mexico (Banks 1985:1). Carleton conceived a plan to resettle the Navajo on a 13,000-acre reservation at Bosque Redondo on the Pecos River in a barren part of eastern New Mexico (Shilstone 1997:1). Here they would be taught western ways and kept well clear of the newly arriving white settlers. To implement his resettlement scheme, Carleton enlisted the services of the

well-known frontiersman Christopher "Kit" Carson.

In 1863, Carson initiated a brutal campaign to force Navajo resettlement at Bosque Redondo by destroying their means of survival. Employing a scorched earth tactic that would be adopted by Civil War General William T. Sherman two years later, Carson killed livestock, poisoned wells, burned houses, and destroyed crops and fruit trees (Schwartz 1999:1). He then passed on to the Navajo General Carleton's ultimatum - "Surrender or Die" (Banks 1985:1).

In March 1864, after suffering through a harsh winter in the hiding, 8,000 Navajo men, women and children, weak from hunger, gave in to Carleton's demand. During their 350-mile trek to Fort Sumner, referred to by its survivors as "The Long Walk," the Navajo were subjected to brutal treatment by escorting Army troops. According to Navajo oral traditions, "soldiers shot anyone who moved slowly, including the elderly, and raped women" (Anonymous b. n.d.:6). Lacking adequate food and clothing, many others froze to death in the cold spring weather.

Conditions at Fort Sumner were little better. Here, crop failures and the brackish water of the Pecos River further weakened the people who died by the hundreds over the next several years (Shilstone 1997:1). Conditions were so bad that they finally became an embarrassment to the United States government. In June 1868, after enduring four years of misery, the Navajo accepted a peace treaty that permitted them to return to their homeland in northwestern New Mexico. In all, over 7,000 Navajo and thousands of head of sheep and cattle began the long walk home. Even to the battle hardened soldiers who accompanied them, it was an "impressive and touching sight" (Banks 1985:2).

### **IN DEFENSE OF MOTHER EARTH**

For the next forty years, the Navajo remain a virtually forgotten people, consigned to an impoverished life on the reservation as wards of the United States. In 1924, due largely to the exploits of Native American volunteers who fought for the country in World War I, the U.S.

Congress passed the Snyder Act that extended U.S. citizenship to Native Americans (Morgan 1995:6). The Navajo, like other groups in the southwest, however, would be unable to vote in state and local elections for another quarter century.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of their unpleasant experiences with the United States government and their second-class citizenship, the Navajo remained loyal Americans. And, as storm clouds gathered over the world on the eve of the Second World War, they were quick to come to the defense of the country. In 1940, the Navajo Tribal Council, which ironically had been established at the urging of the U.S. government 17 years earlier to facilitate oil and mineral leases on Navajo lands, unanimously resolved to defend the United States against invasion. In the words of the Tribal Council, "There exists no purer concentration of Americanism than among the First Americans" (Watson and Kawano 1993:2). The Navajo went so far as permanently banning the use of one of their most sacred symbols since it bore a striking resemblance to the Nazi swastika.<sup>2</sup>

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, the superintendent of the Navajo reservation found dozens of "pony tailed men in red bandanas, carrying hunting rifles, ready to fight" (Watson and Kawano 1993:2). When asked why they would volunteer to fight the white man's war, the volunteers explained that the "conflict involved Mother Earth being dominated by foreign countries" (Watson and Kawano 1993:3).<sup>3</sup> It was, therefore, the Navajo's responsibility to defend her. When turned away from the draft because many volunteers did not speak English, the Navajo quickly organized remedial language classes to qualify these men for service in the armed forces (Morgan 1995:3).

This position was not universal among Native Americans, however. The Seminoles, for example, refused to register for the draft on the grounds they were still at war with the U.S., while the Iroquois objected because they did not consider themselves U.S. citizens (Anonymous d: n.d.: 2). By contrast, the Navajo volunteered both for military service and for work in defense plants in record numbers. The sen-

timents of many Navajo were summarized by a veteran after the war "I'm doing this for my people. I believe what we did was right and it was worth it. We protected the many American people, also the unborn children, which would be the generation to come. Now I see young men and women, and I am glad for what I did for them" (Escue 1991:3). Although eager to defend Mother Earth from outside invaders, the Navajo had no idea of the unique contribution to the war effort that they would soon be called on to make.

### **BIRTH OF THE CODE TALKERS**

Using Navajo as the basis for an unbreakable military code was the brainchild of Philip Johnston, "a civil engineer with wire-rimmed glasses, a buttoned-down mind, and a fluency in Navajo" (Watson and Kawano 1993:2). Johnston learned the difficult language as a child growing up on the Navajo reservation where his parents served as Protestant missionaries (Wilson 1997:2).<sup>4</sup> At the outbreak of World War II, he was one of only a handful of non-natives fluent in this language.

During the early days of the war, American military communications were routinely intercepted by English-speaking Japanese intelligence personnel. Many spoke English fluently and even understood slang and profanity. As a consequence, "military communications were made available to the enemy like sand sifting through a sieve" (Wilson 1997:2). These unsecured lines of communication, in turn, led to an appalling loss of American lives.

Johnston was too old to serve in a regular unit of the armed forces but he was determined to make a contribution to the war effort. He was aware that Native Americans had been used during the First World War to send messages in their native languages, but that their usefulness was limited due to a lack of specialized words for such things as machine guns, tanks and grenades (Watson and Kawano 1993:2). Johnston believed that Navajo code words could be devised for these military terms, and that due to the language's complexity and obscurity, the resulting code would be impossible to break (Anonymous c. 1982:1).

In February 1942, Johnston visited Camp Elliot, near San Diego, where he tried to convince a Marine Corps Signal Officer that a code based on the Navajo language would be unbreakable (Wilson 1997:2). Although the officer was skeptical, believing that all codes required constant changing, Johnston's "graphic presentation" convinced him to put the idea to the test (Wilson 1997:2).

Encouraged by this turn of events, Johnston made a quick trip to Los Angeles where he found four bi-lingual Navajo who were willing to give the code a try (Wilson 1997: 2). Once back at Camp Elliot, the men were split into two teams and instructed to send messages back and forth in Navajo. The Marine Officers in attendance "were amazed at the speed and accuracy of the interpretation, and the presentation was considered a complete success" (Wilson 1997: 2). Soon after, Camp Elliot's commanding officer, General Clayton Vogel, sent an urgent letter to Washington requesting the recruitment of 200 well-educated Navajos to serve as Marine communications specialists.

In spite of the promising test results, and General Vogel's urgent request, Washington authorized only thirty Navajo for an initial trial project. Shortly thereafter, Marine recruiters began visiting the Navajo reservation, and, by mid-April 1942, they had enlisted the authorized thirty volunteers (Wilson 1997:3). The first group went through the normal grueling Marine Corps training and were officially designated the 382nd Platoon, USMC (Watson and Kawano 1993:3). Informally, however, they were referred to as "The Navajo School" (Wilson 1997:3).

While in basic training, the Navajos proved to be tough troops usually able to out perform their non-Indian comrades. Overall, they proved to be "model marines" (Watson and Kawano 1993:3). To their white comrades, who had grown up watching westerns, however, they were "chief" or "Geronimo."

In addition to their normal duties, the men of the 382nd Platoon were also instructed to devise a new Marine Corps military code. The code was to be "short, easy to learn, and quick to recall" (Wilson 1997:3). Further, it was to be

exclusively oral. There would be no code-books (Watson and Kawano 1993:3).

Following weeks of hard work, the men finalized a two-part code that they hoped would totally baffle the Japanese. The first part consisted of a 26-letter phonetic alphabet that used Navajo names for 18 animals, plus other words to represent the letters "I," "N," "Q," "U," "V," "X," and "Y" (Wilson 1997:3). The alphabet could be used to spell out words. For example, the Marines' "Able, Baker and Charlie," became *Collate*, Shush, Moasi or Ant, Bear, Cat (Watson and Kawano 1993:4).

The second part of the code "consisted of a 211-word English vocabulary and the Navajo equivalents" (Wilson 1997:3). Unlike European codes, the Navajo code did not "turn to math and machines but to nature" (Watson and Kawano 1993:4). Planes were named after birds. For example, *gini* or chicken hawk became the code for dive bomber and *gnash* or owl, denoted an observation plane. Ships were named after fish. Military equipment also was given designations from the world of nature: Grenade was *nimasi* or potato, tank was *chaydagabi*, or tortoise, and bulldozer, *dolaalthwash* or bull sheep (Bandrapalli 1997:2).

Samples of the coded messages were then turned over to Naval Intelligence officers who spent three weeks in an unsuccessful effort to decipher even a single one. Even untrained Navajo recruits were unable to make any sense of the coded messages (Watson and Kawano 1993:4). In spite of this, however, there was a general consensus on the part of Marine Corps brass that the code was just too simple to be relied upon (Watson and Kawano 1993:4).

Of the original group of Code Talkers, as they came to be called, several remained in California to serve as instructors for new units of Code Talkers, and two became recruiters (Wilson 1997:4). The rest of the unit was shipped off to the Pacific in August 1942 to the island of Guadalcanal. It would be on this jungle-covered island in the distant reaches of the South Pacific, that the Code Talkers, through skill, courage and determination, would soon earn the respect and admiration of their comrades in arms.

**HAVE YOU GOT A NAVAJO?**

Although the Navajo had no hell in their cosmology, they soon found themselves entering one at Guadalcanal, a hot and humid island infested with leaches and crocodiles, and drenched by torrential rains. Here the new Code Talkers had to overcome more than a deadly enemy and inhospitable terrain. Despite their undeniable speed and accuracy, Marine Corps officers were reluctant to trust the lives of their men to an unconventional code untested in combat (Watson and Kawano 1993:3). As a result, Code Talkers initially were utilized as common infantry.

Slowly, however, the benefits of the code became evident even to the most skeptical officers. According to one Code Talker, "When you started sending messages and everything was correct, they started treating you like a king" (Watson and Kawano 1993:4). On Saipan, for example, an advancing American battalion came under heavy attack from "friendly fire." Desperate messages were sent to stop the attack, but wary officers suspected they were being sent by Japanese troops who had repeatedly imitated Marine broadcasts. Finally, headquarters sent the message "Do you have a Navajo?" Fortunately, they did, and his resulting coded message back to headquarters quickly ended the deadly barrage (Watson and Kawano 1993:4).

The Japanese became aware of the Navajo code fairly early on but were unable to decipher even a single message. In the fighting on Saipan and Okinawa, Japanese would routinely break into the Navajo frequency asking in English, "Who's this?" In an effort to break the code, they attempted to obtain information by torturing non-code talking Navajo POWs, including Joe Lee Kieyoomia, a survivor of the Bataan death march. Kieyoomia not only withstood the frequent torture sessions, but also a personal appeal from Tokyo Rose, an American of Japanese ancestry who broadcast pro-Japanese radio shows to allied forces in the Pacific (Escue 1991:5).

In spite of their growing fame, the Code Talkers were constantly at risk from attack by their own comrades due to their physical resemblance to the enemy. On Saipan, a Code

Talker made the mistake of being the last man out of a rain-filled shell hole where he had been bathing with his buddies. He turned around and found himself face to face with an American bayonet. (Watson and Kawano 1993:5) It became so dangerous that Code Talkers were routinely assigned a white body-guard whose mission it was to ensure that their valuable charges were not mistaken for the enemy and shot (Wilson 1997:4).

To maintain secrecy, the Marine Corps held back all letters written by the Code Talkers. Concerned family members soon began contacting the Navajo Indian Affairs Superintendent, James Stewart, to find out what had become of their loved ones. Stewart turned to Philip Johnston who, in an effort to keep an eye on the code-talking program, had enlisted in the Marine Corps for a special six-month tour of duty. Johnston advised Stewart that the Navajo were involved in "a top secret code project," and asked that he keep it confidential. Ignoring the warning, Stewart unwisely published this information in an Arizona magazine a few months later, an action that earned him a rebuke from the Department of the Interior, and a court-martial for Johnston (Escue 1991:5).<sup>5</sup>

Although the Code Talkers were an important ingredient in Pacific battles from Guadalcanal to Okinawa, nowhere was their work more critical than on the bloodiest island of them all - Iwo Jima. In February 1945, in an effort to secure an emergency landing strip for Marianas-based B-29 bombers engaged in the air war against Japan, the Marines launched an amphibious assault against rugged Iwo Jima. Here, the deep volcanic sands and heavy Japanese fire from invisible underground positions wreaked havoc on the invading Marines.

Providing order to chaos was the main task of the Code Talkers particularly during the initial phase of the assault. According to a Marine Signal Officer, "the entire operation was directed by Navajo code. During the two days that followed the initial landings, I had six Navajo radio nets working around the clock . . . They sent and received over 800 messages without an error." (Escue 1991:5) And, four days into the battle, it was the code talkers who

passed on news of Mt. Suribachi's capture to anxious Marine Corps commanders. In the words of one observer "were it not for the Navajo Code Talkers, the Marines never would have taken Iwo Jima" (Escue 1991:5).

By early 1945, almost all Marine Corps battalions in the Pacific had a pair of Code Talkers. During the course of operations, it had been learned that "pairs of friends made the best teams because they could perfect their transmissions through regular personal contact" (Escue 1991:7). These teams, along with hundreds of thousands of other U.S. combat troops, were preparing to begin what would undoubtedly be the bloodiest and most savage fighting of the war, the invasion of the Japanese home islands, when the conflict was brought to an abrupt conclusion with the atomic attacks against Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945.

### **RECOGNITION**

The end of the war brought rotation back to the United States for hundreds of Navajo. Like the Treaty of Hildago a century earlier, World War II had a profound impact on Navajo life, providing both opportunities and challenges. While the war disrupted traditional life by taking thousands of men away from the reservations, it exposed Native Americans to ideas and skills that allowed them to successfully compete the white mainstream. As a result, many Navajo elected to settle in cities and to a non-Indian way of life in the immediate post-war years (Morgan 1995:5). Moreover, expanded contacts with other Native Americans allowed for a new pan-Indian identity to emerge to cope with problems they saw between their way of life and that of the dominant white culture. Many Native Americans, including Navajo, eventually returned to their reservations after proving that they could make it in the outside world.

In many ways, the Navajo were fortunate since they were welcomed back to the reservation with open arms, in contrast to Native Americans from other tribes (Escue 1991:7). But in spite of this, some returning veterans undoubtedly were bothered by the lack of formal recognition for their significant contribu-

tions to the war effort. While the exploits of other military units received wide coverage in the media, the exploits of the Code Talkers were completely ignored. In the words of one disgruntled Navajo veteran, "It finally hit home. I realized we had lost our own country to foreigners and they were still getting all the recognition. Native Americans were getting nothing." (Watson and Kawano 1993:6)

In the Code Talkers case, however, it was not the usual slight by the dominant Euro-American culture, but rather a military necessity. The code was still needed - it would be used effectively in the Korean and Vietnam conflicts - and remained classified until 1968 (Escue 1991:7). Code Talkers did their part to keep the secret. When asked what they did in the war they simply responded "I was a radio-man" (Watson and Kawano 1993:7). Others, bothered by the memories of the death and destruction, had no wish to discuss their war-time exploits. As explained by one veteran, "Talking about war contaminates the minds of those who should not hear about the bloodshed" (Watson and Kawano 1993:7).

With the code's declassification came long-overdue recognition for the 400 Navajo who had served in the Code Talking program. In 1969, the Fourth Marine Division recognized its Code Talkers with an attractive medallion during their first reunion since the war. In 1971, President Richard Nixon presented the Code Talkers with a certification of appreciation of the nation which thanked them for "their patriotism, resourcefulness, and courage" (Wilson 1997:6). And, a decade later, in 1982, President Reagan established 14 August as "National Code Talkers Day" (Escue 1991:8). The Code Talkers, who had contributed so significantly to the protection of "mother earth", had finally gotten their due.

### **ENDNOTES**

- 1 In 1957, Utah became the last state to grant voting rights to Native Americans (Morgan 1995:7).
- 2 During the 1930s, Nazi agents, posing as anthropologists, tried to subvert some Indian tribes and to learn their languages. This was based on their experience with the Choctaw lan-

guage during the First World War. The German government feared the likelihood of Indian communications in a future war (Morgan 1995:3). There efforts met with no success. An interesting sidebar to history is the fact that German Minister of Propaganda, Josef Goebels predicted Native Americans would revolt rather than fight Germany because the Swastika was similar to an Indian mystical bird symbol. Later, he declared the Sioux to be "Aryans" but with no effect (Morgan 1995:3).

- 3 This is all the more remarkable since at the time the federal government, as a part of its anti-erosion program, was slaughtering thousands of head of sheep on Navajo lands. Sheep herds were a major economic resource for the Navajo and their destruction by the federal government caused much resentment.
- 4 At age 9, Johnston served as an interpreter between two Navajo leaders and President Theodore Roosevelt when they met in 190 (Anonymous d: n.d.1).
- 5 On his last day in the Marine Corps, Johnston stole all of the documents pertaining to the Code Talkers since he believed they would be destroyed. He later gave these papers to the Code Talkers Association (Escue 1991:5).

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