

Native Americans Vex Germany

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Part 1 of 2 in a series on Native Americans in the World Wars

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“The secret of war lies in the secret of communications.”

- Napoleon Bonaparte, 1806

The Signal Corps played an integral role in modernizing the communications capabilities of the Army. In the First World War, these electronic innovations allowed secret codes to be transmitted securely in the European theater of operations.

Just as the military needed scientists and engineers to develop lighter, faster, and more advanced technology to communicate, there was also a need to secure these transmissions from enemy intelligence.

The Army had an ideal code in Native American languages. Many American Indian tribes spoke indigenous languages that non-tribe members did not know. An added bonus was that many of these languages were never written down.

Colonel A. W. Bloor, the commander of the 142nd Infantry Division, wrote a letter to headquarters in January 1919 that read:

“There was hardly one chance in a million that [the Germans] would be able to translate these dialects and the plan to have these Indians transmit telephone messages was adopted.”

The 142nd Infantry Regiment, 36th Division, was stationed in France during WWI. They had a company of Native Americans who spoke 26 tribal languages and dialects.

In the article “Choctaw Indian Code Talkers of World War I” by Phillip Allen, he wrote that tribal documents attested there were eight original Code Talkers. Two Native American officers led the unit, and ran a communications system so successful that they increased to more than double their original amount.

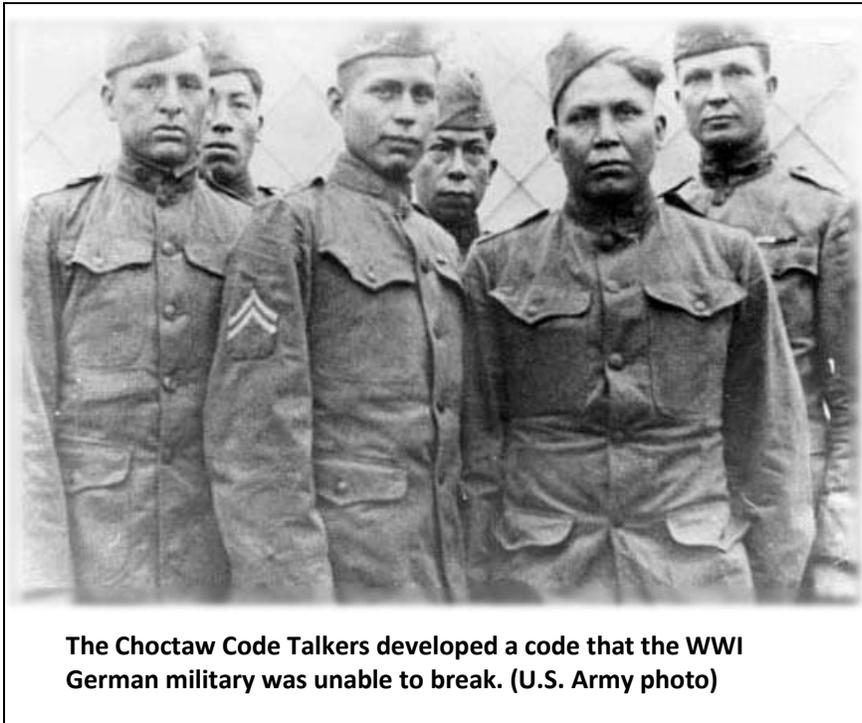
The German army broke every code the United States used during the First World War, except the code employed by the Native Americans. According to John Shepler’s article,



World War I Soldier CPL George Miner of the Winnebago tribe was part of the 12th Infantry in Niederahran, Germany, 1919. (Dept of Defense photo)

“Navajo Code Talkers, America’s Secret Weapon,” because their code remained unbroken by Germans, “these Soldiers became affectionately known as Code Talkers.”

The Choctaw Code Talkers were heroes: their unbreakable codes went through, important messages were relayed, and their battalion was saved. The Armistice was signed, the Choctaw Code Talkers returned to life on their Native American reservations, and the code was considered classified for many more decades.



Many men and women are heroic in war; they fight to defend their nation, their ideals, and their way of life. The actions of the WWI Native American soldiers, however, are even more profound.

The federal Selective Service Act of 1917 did not apply to Native Americans. They were not yet legally recognized as full-fledged citizens, and thus were exempt from the draft. The Code Talkers joined the Armed Services on their own accord.

Lack of citizenship did not stifle the Native Americans home front patriotism, either. In Albuquerque, New Mexico, in April 1918, the Spanish-language newspaper *La Bandera Americana* printed, “The enthusiasm was boundless... The Pueblo of Laguna had contributed \$23,000” to the Liberty Bond rally.

David B. Hotby wrote in his 2008 article, “World War I and the Federal Presence,” that “the total amount of Liberty Bonds purchased by all Native Americans exceeded twenty-five million dollars. The amount purchased in New Mexico by Pueblo, Apache, and Navajo is unknown, but conservatively estimated at \$200,000.”

This caused a 1927 Bureau of Indian Affairs report to speculate: “Perhaps those who scoffed in 1917 when it was suggested to raise troops among these [Native Americans] realized later than hundreds of them might have responded if they had been invited to enlist.”



The Choctaw Code Talkers enlisted in the U.S. Army even though their lack of citizenship exempted them from the draft. (U.S. Army photo)

Congress passed the Code Talkers Recognition Act on June 18, 2002, to commemorate the work that these Soldiers performed that “greatly assisted in saving countless lives and in hastening the end of World War I and World War II. ... [At] a time when Indians were discouraged from practicing their native culture, a few brave men used their cultural heritage, their language, to help change the course of history.”