

Navajo Code Talkers of WWII
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Part 2 of 2 in a series on Native Americans in the World Wars
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“The art of war... consists properly in seizing the communications, and then marching to battle.”
- Antoine-Henri Jomini, French General under Nalopeon Bonaparte and Military Strategist

Professor Jess Le Vine of Brookdale Community College’s History Department, gave a presentation at the Lincroft Campus on 23 March 2010 about the Navajo Code Talkers and their history.

The Navajo Code Talkers created an unbreakable code from the ancient language of their people and transmitted secret communications on the battlefields of World War II.

These men were shepherders and farmers before the war, but were trained United States Marines and were held to the same rigorous standards as all other Marines.

The Navajo were peaceful, but their unique cultural traditions and warrior heritage prepared them for battle. Mixing Native American warrior practices with United States Armed Forces practices worked successfully.

There are many rites and rituals in Navajo culture that deal with warriors preparing for, engaging in, and returning from battle. Killing was not something to be taken lightly, and they had respect for how difficult it can be for some Soldiers to re-assimilate into society.

The Navajo code was one of the most ingenious and successful codes in military history. While it was based on the Navajo language, a cipher was built on top of it. Even native Navajo speakers could not understand the code.

The Navajo language was selected because it was never written down, there were very few non-Navajo native speakers, and it is a tonal language where inflection alters the meaning of words.



Navajos dance on a beach in the Solomons.
(Photo U.S. Army Signal Corps)

In a test under simulated combat conditions, the Navajo Code Talkers could encode, transmit, and decode a message in 20 seconds. Machines used during this time took 30 seconds to send the same message!

In his presentation, Le Vine criticized the 2002 movie *Windtalkers*, which implied that the Navajo Code Talkers needed bodyguards because they were lesser soldiers. In fact, each of the Code Talkers not only had to be fluent in the Navajo code, but they were also trained Marines.

Le Vine stated that the movie served some good “that it got people interested.” The project was not declassified until 1968, and many people were unaware of the Code Talkers and their role.



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. (Photo U.S. Marine Corps)

The Code Talkers served with distinction in every major engagement of the Pacific theater from 1942-1945. According to Le Vine, many of the Navajo “joined the Army after Pearl Harbor to get back at” the Japanese.

Native Americans were not considered American citizens until the 1924 Snyder Act. However, the draft was not enough to account for the enormous percentage of Native Americans who enlisted.

They were defending their home – as seen as a geographic place – and searching for a sense of belonging within the wider American culture that surrounded them. However, many Native American tribes viewed the Pearl Harbor attack as not just an attack on the United States. Some tribes wanted to have their own declarations of war against Japan and Germany.

Lt. Col. (Ret.) Thomas D. Morgan wrote in his 1995 *Army History* article “Native Americans During World War II,” about the large numbers of Native Americans who participated as Soldiers in World War II. There were 7,500 Native Americans enlisted in the summer of 1942; this jumped to 22,000 by the beginning of 1945. Over 99 percent of all eligible males registered for the draft.

Some tribes actually had male military participation reach as high as 70 percent. But it was not just men who served: several hundred Native American women were in the Women’s

Army Corps (WACS), Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services (WAVES,) and in the Army Nurse Corps.

Native Americans were also active on the home front during the war. Some 43,000 Native Americans worked in industries that supported the American cause. Additionally, Native Americans had the highest ratio of war bond purchases for any ethnic group.

The Code Talkers felt immense pressure to not make any mistakes. They practiced, even in their down time. Their constant practice and reinforcement saved countless lives.

At the exposed beachheads of Iwo Jima, six Navajo Code Talkers worked nonstop to send over 800 messages without any errors.

President George Bush awarded Congressional Gold Medals to the 29 original Code Talkers (some posthumously) in a ceremony in 2001. Silver medals were awarded to the hundreds of other Code Talkers who learned from this original group.

The National Cryptologic Museum at the National Security Agency has an exhibit dedicated to the Code Talkers because of their role in the war.

This event at Brookdale Community College was part of their Spring 2010 Center for World War II Studies and Conflict Resolution program. More about this program can be found at their website:

<http://www.brookdale.cc.nj.us/pages/730.asp>.



Cpl. Henry Bake, Jr., and Pfc. George H. Kirk, Navajo code talkers, operate a portable radio set on Bougainville in December 1943. (Photo U.S. Marine Corps)