

Navajo Code Talkers

Before Reading the Summary

What do you know about Native American involvement in WWII?

Native Americans only gained U.S. citizenship in 1924. During the war, their land was being seized so the United States could drill for natural resources. Yet, 99% of eligible Native American men enrolled for the draft.

The First 29

In World War I, the Native American Choctaw language had been used as a code for military radio messages. Following the war, many German students came to the United States and learned Native American languages. Luckily, the Navajo language - Diné - was extremely complex and only 30 non-Navajos spoke it at the time of the war. One of these fluent speakers, Philip Johnston, brought the idea to the Marine Corps and they decided to try and use it as a military code.

Stories of the Code Talkers

Thomas H. Begay was only 17 when he enlisted in the army. Coming from rural New Mexico, he had to hitchhike to sign up for the Marine Corps. He proudly enlisted to become an aerial gunner, wanting to prove he was old enough to fight. After a short stint in boot camp where he excelled at physical training, he was transferred to another unit. To his surprise, it was not gunner school. He was dismayed to find out he was in the Code Talkers barracks and was confused as to why he would be there. He questioned his commanding officer who told him he was supposed to be there because he was Navajo. Begay did not want to disobey the military, so he agreed. Despite not becoming a gunner shooting down Japanese ships, he still proved his worth and showed incredible bravery and intelligence.

Along with 28 other Navajos, he developed an unbreakable code. Only Navajo speakers could understand what the words meant, and even native speakers would not know what the code words meant. There was no way to discover the code because unlike previous codes, there was nothing written down - the code talkers memorized 411 code



words. Their code also was record-breaking fast, taking a mere 2.5 minutes when it used to take a soldier hours to decode a message.

In this video, a Navajo code talker describes how the code worked during Iwo Jima, one of the most important marine victories.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=860&v=yv0_FZHkKBg&feature=emb_logo

Type in Peter MacDonald - Navajo Code Talker - Living History

During the War

The Navajo Code talkers were used in every Marine operation on the Pacific front. In total, 420 were trained and 2 sent with each battalion to transmit messages. Not all of them were from the Navajo tribe, but all were Native Americans. One commanding officer believes that the United States would have lost at the Battle of Iwo Jima (a pivotal battle that helped the U.S. gain ground on the Japanese) if it had not been for the quick communication of the code talkers. They were all young soldiers, between the ages of 18 and 25. Their contribution to the war effort helped the U.S. immeasurably.



Recognition

Their work was not declassified until 1968 because it was used in other, small military operations. Even after declassification, it was not until 2000 when the original 29 were each given a Congressional Gold Medal by President Bush.

Sources

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<https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/2008-featured-story-archive/navajo-code-talkers/>