

How Navajo Code Talker Marines Used Their Indigenous Language to Help Win World War II



By Sandi Gohn

400-plus men. 411 words. One unbreakable code.

The [Navajo Code Talkers](#) – U.S. Marines of Navajo descent who developed and utilized a special code using their indigenous language to transmit sensitive information during World War II – are legendary figures in military and cryptography history.

Their encrypted code, which was never cracked by the enemy, helped the United States win its way across the Pacific front from 1942 to 1945. Historians argue that the Navajo Code Talkers helped expedite the end of the war and, undoubtedly, saved thousands of lives.

“Were it not for the Navajos, the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima,” said [Maj. Howard Connor, the signal officer of the Navajos at Iwo Jima in 1945.](#)



Corp. Henry Bake, Jr. and Pvt. 1st Class George H. Kirk, Navajo Code Talkers, operate a portable radio set in a clearing they’ve just hacked in the dense jungle close behind the front lines.

The Navajo People's Indigenous Language Was Perfect for a Code

In 1942, Philip Johnston – a son of missionaries who grew up on the Navajo Nation – came up with the idea for the Navajo Code Talker program after [reading a news article about Native American soldiers delivering messages during Army training exercises](#) in their mother tongues.

Johnston, a World War I veteran, also knew that the U.S. military had been experiencing difficulties developing an unbreakable code for secure communication in the Pacific.

“In the early part of World War II, the enemy was breaking every military code that was being used in the Pacific. This created a huge problem for strategizing against the enemies,” said [Navajo Code Talker Peter MacDonald](#) during an [appearance at the White House in 2017](#).



Pvt. 1st Class Peter Nahaidinae, Pvt. 1st Class Joseph P. Gatewood and Corp. Lloyd Oliver, Navajo Code Talkers, study a night problem at the Amphibious Scout School conducted by the Intelligence Section.

So, Johnston approached the military with his idea.

[In his proposal, Johnston argued](#) that the Navajo people's [extremely unique and largely unwritten language](#), isolated geographic location and relatively large population made them a perfect fit for his proposed program. Additionally, there was a growing number of young Navajo men who could speak both Navajo and English fluently, thanks to the [U.S. government's assimilation program, which forced Native American children to leave their families, live in English-language boarding schools and abandon their indigenous culture](#).

29 Original Code Talkers Developed the Navajo Code

After catching the attention of the Marine Corps, Johnston launched a pilot Code Talker program with 29 Marine recruits of Navajo descent.

After completing basic training, the 29 young, Navajo Marines worked with Marine communication teams to develop a complex, two-type code of more than 211 words. Over the course of the war, the code would expand to include a total of 411 words.



Three of the Navajo Code Talker Marines: Pvt. 1st Class Edmond John, Pvt. 1st Class Wilsie H. Bitsie and Pvt. 1st Class Eugene R. Crawford.

During the initial testing phase of the Navajo Code Talker's system, Marine officials were stunned at how fast the Navajo Marines could transmit, receive and decode messages from other Code Talkers. [No other form of military code, at the time, was as fast](#) or accurate.

With a successful pilot program under their belt, **the Marines decided to expand the Code Talkers program** and began recruiting another 200 Navajo men. By the end of WWII, **roughly 400 Navajo men would serve as Code Talkers.**

Navajo Code Talkers Were the Best of the Best

All Navajo Code Talkers were highly trained in military and coded communication techniques and were known for their efficiency and accuracy under pressure, even while serving on the front lines.



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For example, [during Iwo Jima, six Navajo Code talkers sent over 800 encrypted messages across front lines.](#) **All of the messages were transmitted and received without error.**

As if that wasn't impressive enough, it's important to note that all Navajo Code Talkers, who sent and received messages via radio, completed their mission without writing down any of their code. The messages were all coded and transmitted orally – Navajo Code Talkers had to decipher each line of code, in real-time, in their head.



A group of Navajo Code Talkers poses for a photograph.

“We acted as coding machines, transmitting messages that would have taken a couple of hours in just a couple of minutes,” said the late Navajo Code Talker Chester Nez in a 2012 interview with the website [ArmchairGeneral.com](#). “We could never make a mistake, because many communications involved bombing coordinates.”

(Fun fact, Nez was one of the original 29 Navajo Code Talkers).

The Navajo Code Was Never Broken

Although other Native American languages were used to create codes in World War I, WWII and other conflicts, [the Navajo's code was one of the most successful.](#)



Corp. Lloyd Oliver, a Navajo Code Talker, operates a field radio while attached to a Marine artillery regiment in the South Pacific in 1943.

Despite the thousands of messages that Code Talkers sent during WWII, their code was never broken by the Japanese or the Germans, who were *very good* at decryption. Additionally, their code was so good that Navajos who were not part of the Code Talker Program, but served in the U.S. military, could not understand the code. This was because the code worked [by using word association](#), in which Code Talkers assigned a Navajo word to specific, key phrases and military tactics.

The Navajo Code Talker Program was Classified

The Navajo Code Talkers and their work were classified by the government for several decades in case the code needed to be used in future national conflicts. As such, the Navajo men who risked their lives to be part of this program lived for decades without recognition for the unique role they played in helping the U.S. win the war.

“When we got out, discharged, they told us this thing that you guys did is going to be a secret. When you get home you don’t talk about what you did ... and that was our secret for about 25, 26 years,” Nez said [in a 2004 interview for the National Museum of the American Indian](#).

Photo credit K. W. Altfather/U.S. Marines



Pvt. 1st Class George H. Kirk and Pvt. 1st Class John V. Goodluck, Navajo Code Talkers, on a hillside in Guam many miles from their Arizona homes.

“We were never told that our code was never decoded,” [said the late Navajo Code Talker Keith Little in a 2009 AP interview.](#)

Even in 1968, when the project was declassified, few outside of the Navajo community heard about the Code Talkers role in the war. As the years went on, the group slowly received more national recognition:

- In 1982, President Ronald Reagan gave the Code Talkers a Certificate of Recognition and declared August 14 “Navajo Code Talkers Day”
- In 2000, President Bill Clinton signed a law awarding the Congressional Gold Medal to the original 29 Navajo Code Talkers
- In 2001, President George W. Bush presented the medals to the four surviving original Code Talkers and posthumously to the other 25
- In 2017, President Donald Trump [honored surviving Code Talkers at an event at the White House.](#)

Navajo Code Talkers’ Legacy Lives On

Although the Navajo Code Talker’s WWII contributions aren’t as publicly known as they should be, the group holds a special place in modern culture and history.

In 2002, the Navajo Code Talkers were featured in the film

“Windtalkers,” starring Nicolas Cage and Christian Slater. Several books have been released about the Code Talkers, including the only firsthand account written by Nez.

There is even a [Navajo Code Talker G.I. Joe](#) and [a Code Talker beer, which was brewed by Code Talker John V. Goodluck’s grandson, LT Goodluck of Hellbender Brewery](#) in Washington, D.C.

Today, [less than 12 Code Talkers are likely alive](#). The exact number, according to the Navajo Nation, is unknown, as no formal tally was taken during or after the war.

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