

JESSICA NASSIF
RECLAIMING VOICES

COLONISATION OF THE NAUJO LANGUAGE

DURING WORLD WAR II / 2020

INTRODUCTION

The blockbuster Hollywood movie *Windtalkers*¹ takes place during WWII in the Pacific Islands. A U.S Marine, played by Nicolas Cage, is painted as the tormented American hero assigned as the bodyguard of a Navajo Code Talker, the Marine secret “human” cryptologic weapon. His only mission is to protect the code at all costs, even if it requires killing a Code Talker.

Inspired by true events, the story directed by John Woo was released in 2002, a year after the Code Talkers program was declassified and became public knowledge. They were publicly acknowledged and were awarded a medal by President G.W. Bush in an expression of gratitude.² The Code Talkers were a group of Navajo Marines during WWII. They designed a code based on their mother tongue and used it as a cryptologic tool during WWII against U.S enemies. The movie was supposed to portray the Code Talkers, but focuses instead on two white male leads, contrary to the historical facts. Even if it is a fiction for the film industry, Woo misrepresents the Navajo Code Talkers’ merits as well as many details depicting the Navajo lifestyle and facts, especially the story plot of a code talker being assigned a bodyguard. According to Code Talkers Roy Begay and Chester Nez, they never had bodyguards, and no one ever died trying to protect the code.³

How does a language, such as the Navajo language, rendered almost extinct

1. John Woo, *WindTalkers*, (MGM Home Entertainment, 2002).

2. The Code Talkers exploits were only recognised for the first time in 1968.

3. Suzanne Broderick, *Real War vs. Reel War: Veterans, Hollywood, and WWII*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), p. 88.

by the colonialist policies of the U.S. government later become the treasured weapon on the U.S. military? And why was there such an interest in languages, and in humans beings as code makers and breakers during WWII, while cryptology machines were at their peak?

Reclaiming Voices is an attempt to recover and uncover the code designed by the Navajo Code Talkers. The Code Talkers’ story is still not widely known, and the information linked to the Code Talkers is specific to national archives in Utah, College Park, St Louis, Arizona, and the Marine Corps archives. Very few primary sources are available, and most of the resources come from US libraries. Recently, the Code Talkers’ have become more widely known with the 2018 release of the biography of one Navajo Code Talker, Chester Nez. *The Code Talker* is the first and only memoir of a Code Talker.⁴

He recalls the story from a personal point of view and mentions rapidly the relationship between the U.S and the Navajo Nation. The books *Crossing the pond* by Jere Bishop Franco⁵ and *American Indians and World War II: Toward a New Era in Indian Affairs*⁶ by Alison R. Bernstein gave me a better understanding of the consequences of John Collier’s “New Deal”, a reform installed by the Bureau of Indian Administration on Native Americans that is usually depicted as a welfare project with no conditions.

The history of the Code Talkers’ is also told by Doris A. Paul in *The Navajo Code Talkers*⁷ and by Sally McClain in *Navajo*

Weapon.⁸ In their books, both defend a historical standpoint and focus on each intervention by the Code Talkers in the Pacific Islands. Both had the opportunity to interview first hand many of Code Talkers. However, they didn’t write much about the creation of the code. It’s only in 2019, in the dissertation of the granddaughter of Carl Gorman, one of the original Code Talkers,⁹ that the first part of the mission (the creation of the code) was extensively covered. She made it her mission to understand what happened, from the first discussions about the code through the end of the conflict.

To understand why and how the code worked, I needed to understand the inner logic of the Navajo language. Gary Witherspoon’s writings *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe*¹⁰ explains the cultural and ideological ramifications of the Navajo language with regards to beauty, nature, and art. In order to understand the complex Navajo semantics, I consulted the Navajo Dictionary written by Robert W. Young and William Morgan, *The Phonology and Morphology of the Navaho language*¹¹ by Edward Sapir and Harry Hoijer and *Phrase Structure in Natural Language*¹² by Margaret Speas. However, none of those examples broach the subject of Code Talkers.

In all the research I have done for this Master thesis, from books to articles, the only comparisons discussed were the different vulnerabilities of various cryptologic devices. There was no comparison between a device

4. Chester Nez, and Judith Schiess Avila, *Code Talker*, (Toronto: Dutton Caliber, 2018), unpagued.

5. Jere Bishop Franco, *Crossing the Pond: the Native American Effort in World War II*, (University of North Texas Press, 1999).

6. Alison R. Bernstein, *American Indians and World War II: Toward a New Era in Indian Affairs*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

7. Doris A. Paul, *The Navajo Code Talkers*, (Pittsburgh: Dorrance Publishing, 1973).

8. Sally McClain, *Navajo Weapon: the Navajo Code Talkers*, (Tucson: Rio Nuevo Publishers, 2002).

9. Zonnie Gorman, *The Navajo Code Talkers of World War II, The First Twenty-Nine*, (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico, 2014).

10. Gary Witherspoon, *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe*, (University of Michigan Press, 1977).

11. Edward Sapir, and Harry Hoijer, *The Phonology and Morphology of the Navaho Language*, (University of California Press, 1967).

12. Margaret Speas, *Phrase Structure in Natural Language*, (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990).

and the cryptology of the Code Talkers. Nevertheless, it is interesting to observe that in the turmoil of WWII, when engineering was at its peak, that a human being was more effective and relevant than machines. In his book *Mecanization Takes Command* (1948), Siegfried Geldon highlights all the achievements of mecanization, however questions it's expansion.¹³ This reflection can be applied in the military sector, regarding the amount of means put in innovation and development of mechanized forces as a key element of modern warfare. The man-machine becomes a challenged relation.

This thesis talks about the story of the Code Talkers, with the language being the main topic, as well as a comparison of the Code Talkers to other cryptologic devices.

I also raise the hypothesis, that the 29 first Code Talkers were designers. If we understand design in it's broader sens or as Victor Margolin, Professor Emeritus of Design History at the University of Illinois, Chicago, puts it "the point I want to make here is that design does not signify a class of objects that can be pinned down like butterflies. Design is an activity that is constantly changing. How then, can we establish a body of knowledge about something that does not has a fix identity."¹⁴ Design is not limited to a form or function, but it's a medium to produce. The concept the Code Talkers designed allows them to construct a new vocabulary out of an existing, oppressed language. Along with the strong identity of the Navajo language, they molded into a disruptive tool.

Tempted by Western Culture, the Navajos still used their beliefs and identity to create a system that transformed what they considered as negatively connotated words such as bombs, into positive ones. They coined the concepts of the military vocabulary, which didn't exist in their language, into concepts relating to nature. A design system that revealed itself stronger, potent and more accurate than any cryptologic devices at the time.

Indeed, when researching cryptology, the Code Talkers invention is still considered to be one of the most unbreakable codes of WWII. They outstripped the cryptologic device ENIGMA (used by the Germans), PURPLE (used by Japan), and SIGABA (used by the Americans). Created to code and decode messages mechanically, all these devices collected during WWII are exhibited in the National Cryptologic Museum. And yet, there is nothing about the Code Talkers.

WWII instigated a variety of information collection techniques from technological devices and wiretapping to human spies. Since most communication was oral, the U.S government, like most governments, had to secure the communication of delicate information through the use of these coding devices. The government encouraged people to stay silent by using propaganda posters and cartoons to advise against the different possible forms of spies. Language and speech were considered a precious source of information and disinformation. The Code Talkers however used language as a military

13. Alexandra Midal, *Design by Accident*, (Stenberg Press, 2019), p. 70.

14. Margolin, "Design History and Design Studies in Essays," 220, in Alexandra Midal, *op. cit.*

tool. The capture of the meaning and sound was not only instrumental during the war, it resonates even now in our contemporary world.

There is no doubt that we currently live in a panoptic society. However, sound is often ignored compared to visual and data surveillance, but it is very different. The majority of human beings surround themselves – consciously or not – with technological tools acting as mundane spies. Phones, computers, and smart objects contain microphones and are equipped with artificial intelligence constantly present in the intimate space – Alexa, Google Home, and Siri, to cite just a few. Without notice, the speech is recorded and is converted to text based on deep learning from speaking habits.¹⁵

Nowadays, there are 24 main languages in the world, all of which are spoken and understood by artificial intelligence. While writing my thesis, I took an MOOC-Englishes¹⁶ course proposed by the artist Nicoline van Harskamp. In her course, she discloses the different englishes found around the world, those that were modified by colonised countries, those that were invented, such as the Creole language, and so on. In the early 1940s, Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt aimed to make the English language globally dominant,¹⁵ which is the case today. We can count over 1.5 billion people from all over the world who speak english, which is also the most used language in the digital space. Instead of promoting diversity, through American-English, the U.S has imposed their

culture and codes, making it a compelling universal language and lifestyle.

It is not new and it is easy to explore how due to past colonisations and today's globalisation, most native languages have slowly and continue to disappear. Robert Phillipson, Professor Emeritus at the Copenhagen Business School, argues that if English is learned in addition to other languages, it's un-problematic. Nevertheless, due to hierarchisation processes in education schools systems, especially in colonised countries, native languages are neglected in opposition to English like it happen with the Navajo language. The outcomes are and expand the values of an ideology of global economy. Phillipson warns his readers that it would be important not to detach the use of the English language from the invisible forces of power such as politics, economics, and commercialisation.¹⁷

Implemented in WWII, the Code Talkers case study highlights and connects the contemporary salient problematics and issues posed by globalisation and surveillance through language. Speaking the same languages creates an international homogeneity and therefore the exclusive power for the surveilling entities.

In addition to eavesdropping on the enemy, the U.S government eavesdrops on its own citizens. Beginning in 1985, the FBI could find the identity of someone only based on this/her voice. The Edward Snowden whistleblower files reveal (according to a 2008 agency document)¹⁸ that it was not through data or fingerprints collection but rather through

15. Nicoline Van Harskamp, "Englishes MOOC," www.english-es-mooc.org/.

16. Nicoline Van Harskamp, "Robert Phillipson on Linguistic Imperialism," *Vimeo*, (2019), www.vimeo.com/364776000.

17. *Ibidem*.

voiceprints identification that the National Security Agency (NSA) conducted much of its surveillance. The contents of a conversation are not the only elements that were recorded, analysed and retained; these programs are able to record the inflection, accent and tone of voice. More explicit, the way the phonemes are pronounced, and the time it takes to say a sentence determine the age, nationality, and gender-based on a voice sample. The human voice is more difficult to hide or change compared to DNA or facial features. It can be collected passively and remotely without the knowledge of the person being recorded.¹⁹

Today speech and voice acts against the speaker. It is what is at the core of artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan's demonstration in his artwork entitled *Conflicted Phonemes* (2012). Hamdan exposes the process through which immigrants are tested on their voice and language to determine if they come from a country from which they need to be granted asylum, or if they should be rejected. Voices betray, even more so since we lack an audio-culture that is all pervasive, despite our perception of the dominance of the visual.

Therefore, we can wonder: to what extent do voice and language define, reveal, or expose an individual identity?

For all these reasons, even if it dates back to WWII, the Code Talkers study case highlights issues of political power posed by globalisation regarding language and voice as well as the fight versus man and the machine.

Note:

Whenever I use the term "Native American" in the text, I refer to hundreds of different nations, such as the Navajo, Hopi, Wampanoag, Cherokee, Seminole, Navajo, Hopi, and so on.

The use of the term "Native American" is still debated with regards to its political and cultural sensitivity. It's an attribution given from an outsider's perspective. However, "Native" can have both positive or negative attribution; either "native" as in the place of origin or it is connoted as primitive. I use it as the former.

I don't proclaim to understand the complexity and the psychology of a decimated or colonised Nation. "Reclaiming Voices" tries to shed light on the singularity of the disappearing Navajo language and its cultural ramifications.

18. "NSA Speaker Recognition," *DocumentCloud*, www.documentcloud.org/public/search/.

19. Ava Kofman, "Forget About Siri and Alexa - When It Comes to Voice Identification, the 'NSA Reigns Supreme,'" *The Intercept*, (2018), unpaginated, www.theintercept.com/2018/01/19/voice-recognition-technology-nsa/.

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JESSICA-MARIA NASSIF

**WARMEST
THANK YOU**

*to Alexandra, for our long
talks, her advice and her
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I.

SPOTLIGHT ON
THE OPPRESSED
NAVAJO LANGUAGE

1. "War of Secrets: Cryptology in WWII," *National Museum of the United States Air Force*, 1 May 2015, <https://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/History/Museum-Exhibits/T-Shirts/Display/Article/196193/war-of-secrets-cryptology-in-wwii>.

Cipher Machines, <https://ciphermachines.com/purple>.

3. *Ibidem*.

4. "Protecting the Army Communication." *Army Code Talkers - Native Americans in the United States Army*, https://www.army.mil/americanindians/code_talkers.html.

LANGUAGE, AN
ENCRYPTING TOOL?

During WWI, many of the Comanche Indian languages, such as Choctaw, Cheyenne, Osage, and Yankton Sioux, were used as coded messages.⁴ Since these languages were unheard of in Europe, communication between Native Americans was an easy and effective secret communication that adversaries couldn't, which prevented assaults and the disclosure of troop movement without the need for encryption. The instability of Europe during the interwar period set the stage for WWII which cause a large influx of Japanese and German scholars to the United States to learn and familiarize themselves with Comanche Indians languages.

I. SPOTLIGHT ON THE OPPRESSED NAVAJO LANGUAGE — *The Navajo Language oppressed by the U.S*

The Navajo language oppressed by the U.S

MAGIC CRYPTOLOGY

In December 1941, the United States military knew of a possible imminent attack by the Japanese army, but didn't know the target. They had developed "Magic,"¹ a cryptanalysis project which was mainly used to decode "PURPLE,"² the code name assigned by the Americans to the Japanese cipher machine used to encrypt its diplomatic messages. "PURPLE" was based on the Enigma machine, a gift from the Germans, whose code was broken in secret in 1930 by Polish and German mathematicians who were able, with the help of cryptanalysts, to replicate the Enigma device.

However, the Japanese army was at that time using different methods for sending encrypted messages such as "JN-25", the cryptological device used for military communication³, therefore the U.S couldn't decode all their military communications. During WWII, wireless radio was the best means of transmitting information for military forces around the world. One of the most critical issues of this mission, and of WWII more generally, was to avoid message interceptions and eavesdropping by using an encrypted communication tool to discuss military intelligence and strategies during combat, as well as finding ways to break the

enemy's cryptologic system and decode every message.

Apart from arming themselves with cypher machines, both sides also had English-Japanese speaking soldiers and spies to intercept radio communications, since not all communications were encrypted.

Covert listening was one of the main ways that enemies learned government secrets and so even speech was regarded as a potentially dangerous activity if one was not careful. Propaganda posters were designed to advise caution when talking, or even keeping silent, and cartoons were designed with creative eavesdropping tools to advise everyone, even children, against all-pervasive spies.

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1. "War of Secrets: Cryptology in WWII." *National Museum of the United States Air Force*™, 1 May 2015, unpaginated, <https://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/Visit/Museum-Exhibits/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/196193/war-of-secrets-cryptology-in-wwii>.

2. *Cipher Machines*, unpaginated, <https://cipher-machines.com/purple>.

3. *Ibidem*.

4. "Protecting the Army Communication," *Army Code Talkers - Native Americans in the United States Army*, https://www.army.mil/americaindi-ans/code_talkers.html.

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Comanche Indians languages.

In September 1940, Robert Young⁵ wrote a letter to the Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson, in which he proposed the development of a secure communication network with Native Americans, using 20 or more Native American languages as part of their communication to confuse eavesdroppers. Young's was thanked and acknowledged by Major General E.S Adams, Adjutant General, U.S Army, but no further action was taken.⁶ However, two years later, in 1942, Philip Johnston⁷ approached the Marine Corps about the particularity of the Navajo language and its potential use for coded communication. As well as not having been used during WWI, it was also the only Native American reservation that hadn't been "infected"⁸ by Japanese and Germans scholars. As a child, Philip Johnston grew up learning Navajo languages, rituals, culture and songs.⁹ He was the son of a protestant missionary, William Riley Johnston, and was stationed with his family in the Navajo reservation since the age of four.

NAVAJO, A COMPLEX LANGUAGE

Telling stories was a pivotal part of transmitting Navajo heritage since their languages did not have alphabets and were officially non-written languages until 1940. In 1937 however, after studying the Navajo language in the vicinity

of the reservation in Fort Wingate,¹⁰ Robert Young and William Morgan,¹¹ two Americans linguists, developed bilingual texts and a bilingual dictionary, creating the first common phonological alphabet. Since the treaty of Fort Laramie with the United States Federal Government in 1868, different attempts were made to create a Navajo vocabulary list. Some missionaries tried to design an alphabet over the years, but none were consistent and most were too different from one another because the Navajo language was not built on a Latin alphabet¹² and had a tonal quality and complex phonetics that were very different from the English language or API phonetics. Since the Navajo dialect didn't have a direct translation to the Latin alphabet or phonetics, every proposed translation differed from the others.

Katarina Zdjelar,¹³ an artist researching processes of learning new languages claims "There are no sounds that are unfamiliar to the human ear, but it's trained in such a way that it cannot recognise to be able pronounce them"¹⁴ If Katarina Zdjelar doesn't deny that a human being might have heard sounds not found in the phonological lexicon of his known languages, however, she emphasis on the fact that their analysis might not be enough to imitate them. In the Navajo language, the phonetics and sounds are very unique, and therefore very hard to learn for non-natives. The Navajo language is categorised as a tonal language with

5. Robert Young (1912 – 2007), professor of linguistics at the University of New Mexico was an American linguist known for his study on the Navajo language.

6. Zonnie Gorman, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-16.

7. Philip Johnson (1892 – 1978) was a 50-year-old engineer in L.A. who had served in the war at the 319th Engineers District in France. He proposed the idea of using the Navajo language as a Navajo code in the Pacific during World War II.

8. Clayton B. Vogel, Commanding General to The Commandant, U.S. Marine Corps, Memorandum, 6 March 1942, unpagued.

9. Sally McClain, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-25.

10. Fort Wingate, New Mexico.

11. William Morgan was a Navajo Scholar. In the 1930s, John Collier, the head of Indian Affairs and Willard Beatty, the head of Indian Education, decided that a standard Navajo alphabet was needed and they commissioned John Harrington, Robert Young, William Morgan and Oliver LaFarge to create the alphabet, and to publish Navajo language materials. By 1939, the new alphabet was finished and during the 1940s the first bilingual primers, Navajo language children's books, a modern dictionary, and a monthly newsletter were published.

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four tones, high, low, low-rising and falling as well as using glottal¹⁵ and aspirated stops.¹⁶ Children are socially trained to express themselves in the language of their community, they listen, imitate and reproduce the sounds they hear, appropriating it as their own. However, being confronted with the imperative to express sounds they have not mastered or are unfamiliar with requires a different use of the muscles to reinvent the way to shape air into sounds.¹⁷ Navajo is not a language that can be learned easily if it's not learned while growing up.

In 1942, only a few Americans had studied Navajo, and the ones who were able to speak it were unable to speak with native proficiency.¹⁸ Philip Johnson stated that the Navajo language is “completely unintelligible to all other tribes and all other people, with the possible exception of as many as 28 Americans who have made a study of the dialect” in his encounter with General James E. Jones, Area Signal officer at Camp Elliot.¹⁹

Comparing the three languages English, Navajo and in the context of the war, Japanese; there are more similarities between Navajo and Japanese than Navajo and English, considering that both are tonal languages and both have an open honorific tone compared to English, which is deprived of honorific tone.²⁰ For example, American English uses tone of voice to imply the power/status relationship, however the Japanese use a

structural lexical system. Regarding the Navajo language, if the person designated in the sentence, is part of the family circle, he is described by kinship terms as “my oldest maternal nephew.”

The syntax of a mundane sentence in English is constructed as followed: first the subject, then verb and usually it ends with the object. In the Japanese language, the object comes before the verb and in the Navajo language, it depends on the context. The verb stem depends on the object acted upon, and the subject is sometimes inverted with the object.²¹ Having a random order makes it harder to decode for Japanese and English since they are used to a more consistent word order.

The semantic intentions are also different between the three languages. In English, the personal pronouns which are most used are “I”, “me”, “you” “them.” However, the Japanese communicate depending on the social dynamics and the structure of the society. For example, seniority requests a young person talking with respect to his elder. Yet, in Navajo language, those semantics intention are in regards to nature and ancestral practice.

CONTAMINATIONS, EXCHANGE

The statement made by Philip Johnson “that the Navajo language is completely unintelligible to all other tribes and all other

12. Unfortunately, this alphabet was not popular among the Navajo. (See Diné Bizaad), <https://www.omniglot.com/writing/navajo.htm>.

13. Katarina Zdjelar (Belgrade, 1979) is an artist based in Rotterdam. Her practice consists of working with moving image and sound, performances, book projects and creating different platforms for speculation and exchange.

14. Deidre M. Donoghue et al., *Resonant Bodies, Voices, Memories* in Anke Bangma (ed.), (Rotterdam: Piet Zwart Institute, 2009), pp. 147-156.

15. Glottal stop, in phonetics, is a momentary check on the airstream caused by closing the glottis (the space between the vocal cords) and thereby stopping the vibration of the vocal cords. Upon release, there is a slight choke, or cough-like explosive sound. The glottal stop is not a separate phoneme (or distinctive sound) in English. See The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Glottal Stop,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.*, 20 July 1998, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/glottal-stop>.

16. For example, consonant sounds such as the English voiceless stops p, t, and k at the beginning of words (e.g., “pat,” “top,” “keel”) are aspirated because they are pronounced with an accompanying forceful expulsion of air.

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people” was recently described as inaccurate by Zonnie Gorman, the granddaughter of one of the Code Talkers, in her master thesis entitled “The Navajo Code Talkers of World War II, the First Twenty-Nine.” She contradicts Johnston statement because it ignores the generations of commercial, cultural and language exchange between Navajo and Spanish, Mexicans and other Euro-Americans for trading purposes when they were not at war with them.²² Gorman refers to the first, second and third Navajo Wars. Before being declared as a Nation on August 12th, 1868 in a treaty with the United States Federal Government, there were many tensions between the Navajo and the Apaches; first, from the late 16th century through 1821 against the Spanish; again from 1821 through 1848 against the Mexican government; and lastly in 1847 with the Americans.²³

Gorman’s second argument concerns the belonging of the Navajo language to the Apaches who are culturally related to the Navajos and are scattered between Arizona and New Mexico.²⁴ During the last war, known as the “Indian War” in 1863, Colonel Kit Carson was instructed to destroy and attack “Indian Settlements” as revenge against the Native Americans attacks on white settlers. After destroying their settlements and taking the Navajos captive, the U.S Government decided to dislocate the 10,000 remaining Navajos and Mescalero Apaches to Fort Sumner, a desolate reservation in eastern New Mexico called Bosque Redondo. This event is known as the

“Long Walk”, the first Navajo tragedy. Nearly one third of those who interned there died of disease, exposure and hunger.²⁵ Moreover, Gorman mentions Catholic and Protestant missionaries living in the Navajo reservations to document and research Navajo living conditions,²⁶ thus appropriating and learning their language, as Philip Johnson and his family did.

Gorman’s final point is the shared experience of different Native American tribes at the federal Indian boarding schools.²⁷ Since the treaty, Navajo children were forced, like all Native Indians, to attend a boarding school to ultimately “turn red Indian into noble savage”²⁸ since their culture didn’t match European criteria. This sentence used by Capt. Richard Pratt with regards to the education of Native Americans is racist. It reflects the sentiment of superiority of white Americans over the Native Americans, and even the use of the name of “Native Americans” displays an explicit hierarchy, indicating that the natives will always remain savages compared to white Americans, no matter what system of assimilation is implemented. The colonisation was imperative: matrons would assign English names to Navajo pupils; they would cut their hair and fingernails. These measures went against the Navajo traditions of self-presentation and identity. Speaking in their mother-tongue was also grounds for punishment.²⁹ To a certain extent, these efforts failed because children from different tribes were mixed together and shared their languages with each other.

“Aspirate.” *Ibidem*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/aspirate>.

17. Deidre M. Donoghue et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 147-156.

18. Vogel. B. Clayton, *op. cit.*

19. *Ibidem*.

20. Richard L. Lanigan, “Familiar Frustration: The Japanese Encounter with Navajo (Diné) ‘Code Talkers’ in World War II,” in *Languages in Contact 2011*, (Philologica Wratislaviensia: Acta et Studia. Vol 9): 58.

21. Chester Nez, and Judith Schiess Avila, *op. cit.*

22. Zonnie Gorman, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-27.

23. Richard L. Lanigan, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-69.

24. Zonnie Gorman, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-27.

25. Chester Nez, and Judith Schiess Avila, *op. cit.*

26. Zonnie Gorman, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-27.

27. *Ibidem*.

28. History Matters (2017), ““Kill the Indian, and Save the Man”: Capt. Richard H. Pratt on the Education of Native Americans,” *Official Report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction* (1892), 46-59.

29. Chester Nez and Judith Schiess Avila, *op. cit.*

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It's difficult to repress or forget a mother tongue as it's deeply imprinted in a person's manner of speech. It's nearly impossible to eradicate a native language; even as we learn a new one, the mother-tongue will influence the person's understanding of their acquired language.³⁰ Gorman hypothesizes that even though the various groups that participated in trade, and therefore linguistic exchange with the Navajo, may not have acquired a native knowledge of the language, they could have understood it sufficiently well enough to present a tactical vulnerability in military communication.³¹ However, Johnston also suggested that the Navajo language was not to be used as a covert language for military communication but rather the basis for the creation of a code to completely secure the meaning of messages in case an enemy combatant familiar with the language intercepted the message.³²

The reason for Johnson's lie that the Navajo language was not intact from language contamination is not clear. Perhaps he was looking for more arguments to plead his case to the Marines and get his project accepted. Nevertheless, thanks to the Code Talkers, Johnston not only joined the Marines, but he was also portrayed in the papers as the "father" and "responsible" for the Navajos recruits success.³³

Nevertheless, all of Johnson's arguments about the specificity of the Navajo language convinced General James E. Jones enough to ask him to recruit bilingual speakers to present a demonstration.

Appropriation of the Navajo language

A DEMONSTRATION: THE NAVAJO LANGUAGE IN MILITARY COMMUNICATIONS

In the presence of Major General Clayton B. Vogel, commanding general of the Amphibious Corps, Pacific Fleet at Camp Elliott and his staff, Johnson first tested the idea of using Navajo language in military communications using four bilingual Navajo speakers. The demonstration was a reproduction of an exchange via radio using the Navajo language to communicate. The four Navajo speakers, each fluent in English, were set in different rooms while messages were brought to them in English.

They were asked to translate them in Navajo through the radio so that the receiver could translate and write them back in English. Vogel described the process, mentioning that before the demonstration "it was necessary to give them a few minutes", to improvise words for dive-bombing, anti-tank gun, etc."³⁴ The demonstrators had to invent codes for the non-existent military vocabulary

30. Deidre M. Donoghue et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 147-156.

31. Zonnie Gorman, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-27.

32. Doris A. Paul, *op. cit.*, pp. 9.

33. Amanda Dahl, "The Navajo Code Talkers of World War II: The Long Journey Towards Recognition in *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II*, vol. 21, no. Article 11, 2016): 70-81., <http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives>.

34. Clayton B. Vogel, *op. cit.*

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of the Navajo language on the spot. Indeed, most of the Navajo vocabulary was related to ritual and prayers and was based on their relationship with mother-earth. Since they were never exposed to the American military service, hierarchical systems or technological weapons, they never developed the words that would convey these concepts. Nevertheless, the 4 bilingual Navajo speakers succeeded in translation most of the military messages.

Unfortunately, the demonstration was not recorded and research shows that the translations that were invented that day were not archived. Thus it's impossible to know if the military translations were any different from what the Code Talkers developed.

PLANNING NAVAJO RECRUITMENT

With the success of Philip Johnson's demonstration, the Marine corps saw the potential of using Navajo language for military communications in the U.S Marines. However, Colonel Allen H. Turnage, the director of the Division of Plans & Policies, who was reviewing the case, had his doubts. Technical and cryptic machines were considered more secure, and he was sceptical about using the Navajo language as a tool because of the potential human error in translation, the variable speed of

translations, the technical training required for each Navajo recruit, the potential loss, capture or death of recruits, and the risk of losing the code. He suggested reducing the number of Navajo recruits from 200³⁵ to 30: "an effort be made to enlist a group of approximately 30 Navajo Indians having the qualifications normally required for enlistment in the Marine Corps and that the linguistics qualifications in English and their tribal dialect which would make them suitable for the use in the transmission of messages by voice." If approved, the Navajo recruits would "be ordered to the Amphibious Corps, Pacific Fleet, for duty upon completion of recruit training."³⁶

Using the Navajo language as a communication tool required the Marine Corps to find Native Navajo with a high level of bilingual proficiency. They were required to rapidly decode and translate English to Navajo and vice-versa. However, Philip Johnson over-estimated the number of eligible Navajo men, bilingual speakers, of eligible age and physically fit for the mission: "1,000 if that many were needed could be found with the necessary qualifications."³⁷ Johnson's overestimation of Navajo literacy is surprising considering his childhood on a Navajo reservation and his own knowledge of the language and customs of the Navajo nation. In fact, this statement was demonstrated inaccurate by Zonnie Gorman and by Noah Jed Riseman in his article "Regardless of history?": Re-assessing the Navajo Codetalkers of World War II"³⁸ who stated that within the

35. *Ibidem*.

36. Zonnie Gorman, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

37. Clayton B. Vogel, *op. cit.*

38. Noah Jed Riseman, "Regardless of History?": Re-Assessing the Navajo Codetalkers of World War II," in *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, (vol. 26, no. 2, Dec. 2007): 48-73., <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41054076?seq=1>.

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population of 50,000 Navajos in 1940, 4000 were men from the ages of eighteen to thirty-five, of which 88% were illiterate despite the mandatory Federal Boarding Indian Schools put in place to eradicate the Indian cultural heritage.³⁹ It was not an easy task to hire the proper individuals for this serious matter.

In order for the U.S Military plan recommendations made by Colonel Allen H. Turnage to be approved, Lieutenant Colonel Wethered Woodworth from the Commandant's office had to meet with members of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C: Fred H. Daiker, acting chief of Welfare; Lucy W. Adams, Chief of Community Service Bureau and Education; Dr. L. W. White, assistant director of Health; and J. C. McCaskill, chief of the Planning Division. They provided the U.S Military with the statistics they needed on the Navajo Nation, such as the name of two or three older Navajo interpreters to help recruits develop the proper vocabulary and provide the list of volunteers that signed up for the war.⁴⁰

REPERCUSSIONS OF PAST COLONISATION

Since the beginning of the process of using the Navajo language, none of the people involved in decision making were Native Americans. Initially set up for trading

purposes in 1824, the Bureau of Indians Affairs (BIA), part of the federal government of the United States, was directed by Americans and was tasked with the administration and management of Native Americans lands, education and health care after their colonisation. The Bureau of Indians Affairs was responsible for initiating the boarding school-system and the poor living conditions of the Navajos. The agency was also behind the livestock reduction which was known as the second Navajo tragedy⁴¹ after the great Depression in 1920. The BIA reduced the number of farm animals owned by Navajo Nation, per family, because their lands were being eroded by drought and severely overgrazed lands. The U.S Government believed it was a threat to the Navajo life, thus they killed their livestock over-night. However, from the perspective of a Navajo, owning livestock was their only reference of wealth.⁴²

This reform was part of the "New Deal"⁴³ advocated by John Collier, commissioner of Indians Affairs in 1934 and drew controversy amongst Navajos regarding the BIA as "beneficial and detrimental to indigenous communities."⁴⁴ The position of John Collier was similar to that of Johnston. From his position as a white American, he tried to be part of and help Native Americans, however it resulted in more damage than good. Nevertheless, contrary to his predecessors, John Collier had a progressive view to preserve Indian heritage and culture. He supported a pluralistic education and was installing reforms to give the Navajo more

39. Zonnie Gorman, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

41. Chester Nez, and Judith Schiess Avila, *op. cit.*

42. *Ibidem.*

43. Alison R. Bernstein, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-21.

44. Noah Jed Riseman, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

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rights and ownership of their lands. Despite broadening education with the “New Deal”, a quarter of the Indian males had no access to education, compared to 8% of black population and 1% of total male population.⁴⁵ Even the Navajos who had gained higher levels of education couldn’t find suitable work in the reservation which resulted in them working in the fields.⁴⁶

By 1930, the lack of seeds, fertilisers and equipment rendered the land an insufficient source of income and the Navajos already poor living conditions worsened. They were left without access to electricity, infrastructure, work opportunities and in poor health.⁴⁷ In 1939, the Navajos yearly household income was a fifth of the 2500 USD for Americans. Native Americans were technically citizens of the United States however they were not able to vote and exercise the full rights of citizenship.

Ultimately, Collier’s reforms were unsuccessful and they resulted in increased inequality between Americans and Navajos, widening the gap initially caused by American colonization. It was with Collier’s agreement, and without consultation from the Navajo, that Philip Johnston and Major General Clayton B. Vogel were planning to use bilingual Navajo, without informing them of the exact nature of their mission. The directive was to train them as Marines, and then order them to modify and codify their complex and unique language, in order

to use it on the frontlines as a cryptological communication tool in order to fight a war that wasn’t theirs.

45. *Ibidem.*

46. *Ibidem.*

47. *Ibidem.*

II.

COLONISATION OF THE NAVAJO LANGUAGE FOR THE INTERNATIONAL CRYPTOLOGIC WAR

Navajos were considered as "half-citizens" of the United States, however they were not able to vote and exercise the full rights of citizenship.

Ultimately, Collier's reforms were unsuccessful and they resulted in increased inequality between Americans and Navajos, widening the gap initially caused by American colonization. It was with Collier's agreement, and without consultation from the Navajo, that Philip Johnston and Major General Clayton B. Vogel were planning to use bilingual Navajo, without informing them of the exact nature of their mission. The directive was to train them as marines, and then order them to modify and codify their complex and unique language, in order

to be able to communicate with the Americans. "We Navajos should not be surprised. We have always been loyal to our motherland, the Navajo Nation, and our families. To this allegiance is linked a sincere desire to protect all three."⁸ His position is not with or against Americans but reflects Navajos relationship to nature and their dedication to protecting that land prevailing over years of suffering and colonisation. At that time, Navajos did not see or understand the propriety of a land as a Western person might: a land that can be owned and passed to the next generation. In the Navajo culture, "males have no property rights and instead rely to a cosmological view of Nature in which anything that is "found" is "community property" and may be taken and used until no longer needed where upon the item is simply discarded."⁹ Their land was not labelled as American nor Native American but considered in a more broad view.

The cultural difference led Collier to ask

The Code Talkers

THE PEACE-TIME DRAFT: A MAYHEM

In 1940, before the beginning of the second World War, America enacted its first peace-time conscription, which required that men between 21 and 45 years old register with local draft board. Considering that Native Americans were not U.S. Citizens in WWI, they never had to be drafted, and were considered volunteers.¹ However since John Collier's "New Deal,"² Native Americans were U.S. Citizens and were required before WWII, like all Americans, to sign up for the draft, which caused a lot of mayhem.

Because of the isolation, some Indians didn't understand the complexity of the draft, and were even unaware of their new status as American citizens, feeling duped once again.³ For example, the chief of the Choctaw Reservation, asked the BIA how they could even be citizens if "they don't pay tax or vote," Fred Daiker, one of Collier's commissioners, answered that "the matter of voting is governed by the laws of each state."⁴ This was a vague answer from Daiker who knew and was one of the members responsible of the blurred and advantageous relationship of the American government with regards to Native Americans, since they couldn't vote but had to go to war.

Others, such as the Tribes of the

Iroquois Confederacy, felt it was not their war, since they refused the Citizen Act of 1924 and decided to test the legitimacy of the draft and citizenship in court, asking exemption.⁵ However the head of the tribal council "J.C. Morgan" reached out to Collier requesting the creation of an "all-Navajo" division stating that "The Navajo will cheerfully accept any assignment of selective service."⁶ Morgan's voluntarism was a surprising decision regarding the Navajo situation that Chester Nez, one of the original Code Talkers, explained as such: "It might surprise non-Navajos to read this declaration of allegiance."⁷ No Navajo, however, would be surprised. We have always felt a deep allegiance to our motherland, our Navajo Nation, and our families. To this allegiance is linked a sincere desire to protect all three."⁸ His position is not with or against Americans but reflects Navajos' relationship to nature and their dedication to protecting that land prevailing over years of suffering and colonisation. At that time, Navajos did not see or understand the propriety of a land as a Western person might: a land that can be owned and passed to the next generation. In the Navajo culture, "males have no property rights and instead rely to a cosmological view of Nature in which anything that is "found" is "community property" and may be taken and used until no longer needed where upon the item is simply discarded."⁹ Their land was not labelled as American nor Native American but considered in a more broad view.

The cultural difference led Collier to ask

1. Alison R. Bernstein, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-39.

2. *Ibidem.*

3. *Ibidem.*

4. *Ibidem.*

5. *Ibidem.*

6. *Ibidem.*

7. Chester Nez, and Judith Schiess Avila, *op. cit.*

8. *Ibidem.*

9. Richard L. Lanigan, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

for a special division and training for the Navajo, to preserve Indian Heritage.¹⁰ He was supported by the head of the tribal council J.C. Morgan, for different reasons. Morgan did not wish to mix their culture with white Americans and wanted to have their identity “specifically and specially recognised” as Alison R. Bernstein explains in American Indians and World War II.¹¹ Because of the trauma of colonization, Morgan was afraid of the rejection of the Navajo due to the language barrier.¹²

Regarding the unit of Code Talkers, they were selected for fluency in both English and Navajo. Yet, this recommendation was accepted by Colonel Thomas Holcomb, for the secrecy of the mission, with the exception of treating Navajos training as rigorously US Marines Training.¹³

Holcomb hired two interpreters and sent Marine recruits to look for the perfect 30 Navajo men, without disclosing the purpose of the special mission.¹⁴ Perfection meant fluency in both English and Navajo, age between seventeen and thirty two, and good health.

PROPAGANDA TECHNIQUES FOR RECRUITMENT

In April 1943, two groups of recruiters were sent to Arizona and New Mexico. John Shannon, a Marine recruiter, first headed towards Window Rock on the

Navajo reservation and focused mainly on recruiting from three federal boarding schools: in Arizona, in New Mexico, and North of Flagstaff.¹⁵

Sergeant Frank Shinn directed his search for recruits directly on the Navajo reservation at Fort Defiance, on a fifty-foot trailer equipped with a sound system. They first stationed themselves in front of the Navajo Medical Center and used music to draw the crowd. However, since the BIA didn’t give notice to Chee Dodge, the chairman of the tribal council, Shinn’s first campaign failed. Once approval had been sought and granted, Chee Dodge even allowed a broadcast over radio that the Marines were seeking volunteers.¹⁶

It took 3 weeks after Holcomb’s decision for recruiters to find the thirty Navajo men that fit the profile.¹⁷

The Navajo Nation supported the United States in WWII and declared War against Germany and Japan. On June 3rd 1940, the Navajo Tribal Council declaration stated

“Now therefore, we resolve that the Navajo Indians stand ready as they did in 1918, to aid and defend our government and institutions against all subversive and armed conflict and pledge our loyalty to the system which recognises minority rights and a way of life that has placed us among the greatest of our Race.”¹⁸

Apart from patriotism and financial gain

10. Alison R. Bernstein, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33.

11. *Ibidem.*

12. *Ibidem.*

13. Zonnie Gorman, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33.

14. *Ibid.* p. 34.

15. Sally McClain, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

16. Zonnie Gorman, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-46.

17. Sally McClain, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

18. *Ibidem.*

(since the livestock reduction, many Navajo had lost their jobs and joined the war) they believed military service would grant them a steady income,¹⁹ and joining the Marines offered excitement for many young Navajo men. The heroic images and propagandistic presentation of the Marines were broadly appealing, which was mentioned by a few Code Talkers in several interviews. “What did it for me was the dress uniform on the poster. Crisp white hat and gloves, brass buttons against the deep blue material, boy he looked sharp! I wanted a uniform just like that” says Eugene Crawford, one of the original Code Talkers.²⁰ Crawford’s statement shows that the colonisation of the boarding system, forcing the young Navajo to dress up like Americans stuck and became something the Navajo strove for.

Lynne Escue argues that a parallel motivation was the wish to travel and find adventure overseas. The way in which recruiters framed the possibilities of military service was also very influential according to John Brown Jr. Recruiters would promise “that they would see the world and ride on a ship, see foreign countries, and especially get to meet girls.”²¹ In this statement, Brown exposes the propaganda techniques used by the recruiters to attract recruits, under false pretences, by presenting enlistment as a great experience. Enlistment obviously includes much more than a great uniform and meeting girls, it involves killing people, risking your life, poor living conditions, handling the exigencies of combat that can last for years, and more.

A few of the requirements set by the recruiters such as age and education helped filter the volunteers. The mission was still a secret, and no other specifications were given.

Since most Navajos were born at home, it was not common to have birth certificate. Both Shannon and Shinn had to assess approximatively the age of potential recruits and they had to believe them. Many lied on their age anyway, like Carl Gorman, the father of Zonnie Gorman, who was thirty-three when he enrolled, though he claimed he was only thirty-two²² and William Yazzie who was only fifteen at the time of his recruitment. He threw out the file with the negative parent consent form when the recruiters were not looking.²³

To ensure that the recruits had the necessary language skills for the mission, interviews were held to evaluate English proficiency. In his biography, Chester Nez mentions being interviewed in English about his family and education, however he mentions that no interviews were made in Navajo. The Marines assumed he spoke the language.²⁴

All the successful Navajo recruits were then sent to the Navajo Medical Center in Fort Defiance to pass a physical test and on the 4th of May, 1942. The first 29 met up at the Federal Indian Boarding School at Fort Wingate, New Mexico where they duly swore into the United States Marines Corps. Early on May 29th, Code Talkers were selected and on May 4th, 1942, 30 of them met up at the Federal Indian Boarding school at Fort Wingate, New Mexico where they duly swore into the United States Marines

19. Alison R. Bernstein, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

20. Doris A. Paul, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

21.Noah Jed Riseman, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

22. Sally McClain, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

23. *Ibidem.*

24. Zonnie Gorman, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-25.

Corps. They were driven to Camp Pendleton where they integrated the Platoon 382 at the Marine Recruit Depot near San Diego.¹¹ Present on that day were Charlie Begay, Roy Begay, Samuel Beguay, John Benally, Wilsie Bitsie, Cosey Brown, John Chee, Benjamin Cleveland, Eugene Crawford, David Curley, Lowell Damon, George Dennison, James Dixon, Carl Gorman, Oscar Ithma, Dale June, Alfred Leonard, Johnny Manuelito, William McCabe, Chester Nez, Jack Nez, Lloyd Oliver, Frank Pete, Balmer Slowtalker, Nelson Thompson, Harry Tsosie, John Willie, and William Yazzie.²⁵

PLATOON 382, THE FIRST NAVAJO PLATOON

Marine platoons were numbered by 50 or 70 men. Platoon 382, comprised of only 29 men, was considered very odd. It was the first time that a specific platoon was created for a specific purpose.²⁶ Before WWII, the Marine’s was an exclusively male white corps, however during WWII black Americans and women joined the army.²⁷ Heather Pace Marshall, a Marine Corps historian, confers that “the Southern upbringing of 40 percent of all Marine officers in the 1920s exacerbated the feelings of racial superiority that permeated the Corps throughout the first half of the twentieth century.”²⁸ During WWI and WWII, the recruitments of the marines were a big

issue, based on Racism due to colonisation, physical attributes and race were a big issue in the Marines during WWI and WWII. Nevertheless, Native Americans could always to enlist in the Marines, however not in the dignified positions. Platoon 382 was the first instance in which they joined a high-ranked platoon, and the first time that they earned the rank of Private Class. It all happened on June 27th, 1942.²⁹

Dismantling Collier’s expectation that they would be unable to adapt to American training, Platoon 382 was highly praised.³⁰ George T. Hall Commanding officer of the recruits Depot mentions in his report to Holcomb,

“This group has done exceptionally well at this Depot. They are very tractable, attentive and loyal ... none has dropped back due to sickness, disciplinary action or lack of ability to keep up with the rest of the group. This is unusual, there is usual attrition from five to ten percent in ordinary platoons.”³¹

The adjectives used by Hall in his report, “tractable”, “attentive”, “loyal” reflects first that the Navajo are not the “savages” they were depicted to be, and also demonstrate the obedient relationship of the Navajo to American superiors.

25. *Ibidem*.

26. Zonnie Gorman, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

28. David J. Ulbrich, *Preparing For Victory: Thomas Holcomb and the Making of the Modern Marine Corps, 1936-1943*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2011), p. 121.

29. Zonnie Gorman, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

30. Sally McClain, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-46.

31. *Ibidem*.

INTRODUCING THE ORIGINAL CODE TALKERS

During their seven weeks of training, the Navajo recruits underwent various trainings, both mental and physical,³² without knowing why they were really on the site, or what they were training for.³³ Their training was largely the same as the rest of the Marines. They first started with basic military instruction, then field training, recreating possible scenarios they might witness on site. The drills that were taught to the Navajos were as much about physical endurance as obedience and discipline: drills, eating and sleeping at specific schedules, weapon training, dismantling a radio and putting it back together, marching, etc.³⁴

Though the Navajo recruits were pleased by the respect and affection the Marines felt towards their Platoon, it wasn't an easy few weeks and some of the Navajo soldiers second-guessed their enlistment during training. Chester Nez mentions the hard wake ups "Five o'clock in the morning, everybody's out front, you know. Calisthenic. Run around the... run around the beach. They used to give us a bucket... aluminium bucket... fill it with wet sand... carry it around. And some of the guys they use to poop out, you know."³⁵ Some of them used to cry at night because they couldn't stand the pressure anymore, the training requirements were as mental as physical. Some of the daily demands

conflicted the culture of the Navajo recruits, such as not looking someone directly in the eyes or the constant shouting to reflect power and command.³⁶ Other exercises, such as standing in the sun for a few hours and marching were more comfortable for the recruits. As mentioned earlier, the Navajo reservations lacked good transportation systems and thus, most of the Navajos were used to walking long distances and standing in the sun while herding sheep.³⁷ Since most of them had also studied in boarding schools, they were familiar with the marching drills, wearing a uniform, the canteen food that was given, and had already been exposed to the western view of discipline and punishment. One "punishment" or extra work of the military training, as they called it, was that if anyone made a mistake, they were forced to bathe the Sergeant Duffy, a bulldog and the Marine Corps mascot. Wilsie Bitsie recalls scrubbing the dog's nose, ears, cleaning his doghouse and the yard; all as retribution for a minor offence.

Even if they achieved remarkable training, Platoon 382 didn't have furlough³⁸. From the moment of their recruitment until the end of the war, or rather until one of them got injured,³⁹ none of the 29 Navajo men had the opportunity to go home. Chester Nez mentions in his biography that he couldn't even notify his family of his enlistment because of the complicated transportation in the reservation.⁴⁰ Some roads went around the reservation, such as the US Highway 66. However, there was no road that passed

32. *Ibidem.*

33. *Ibidem.*

34. Chester Nez, and Judith Schiess Avila, *op.cit.*

35. *Ibidem.*

36. *Ibidem.*

37. *Ibidem.*

38. *Ibidem.*

39. If a Marine got injured during the war, he was flown out to the U.S to heal and brought back home for rest before going back to war.

40. Chester Nez, and Judith Schiess Avila, *op. cit.*

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through the reservation, which consisted of over 24 000 square meters of sandy desert or mountains, making it very difficult to go from one point to another.

In June 27, 1942, they moved on to the second part of their training, where their secret mission would be delivered.

Controversy: A Sacred language used as a weapon

SECRET MISSION REVEALED: THE NAVAJO LANGUAGE AS AN ENCRYPTED TOOL

Sally McClain⁴¹ writes in *Navajo Weapon* that on their way to Camp Elliot, home of the Amphibious Corps Pacific Fleet, the Navajo recruits were all excited and happy about the bootcamp session and to have the opportunity to be part of the Marines and, at last, be equal with white Americans.⁴² However this feeling changed as they became anxious when they were greeted by a U.S Marine in a classroom, with security bars across the windows, who wasted no time in revealing their secret mission: they were commanded to invent a code based on the Navajo language which would be used for encoded communication during wartime.⁴³

When hearing this, Chester Nez recalls how shocked he felt. The army was asking them to create a code based on a language the United States fought hard to eliminate through the very strict boarding school system.⁴⁴ Chester Nez wasn't the only one to be surprised. Indeed, some might have never

41. Sally McClain is the author of "Navajo Weapon" in which she conducted interviews with many of the original Code Talkers and she was the first to bring light on the mission of the Code Talkers.

42. Sally McClain, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

43. Chester Nez, and Judith Schiess Avila, *op. cit.*

44. *Ibidem.*

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enlisted if they knew beforehand what was to be expected of them.⁴⁵ In an interview held by Zonnie Gorman, Chester Nez stutters his disturbance:

“That’s got something to do with our religion, you know. So they... some of the guys they didn’t think that was right. But uh... when we started to name all these animals, you know. And all these creatures and stuff like that, you know. Uh... we gradually, you know, forgot, you know, what uh... some of these things that were related to our religion, you know. We...we... we gradually forgot, you know, and said, “Well... we might as well go ahead and use it,” ... you know. If that’s what a... what our commander, the general wants... and uh...we’re just going to have to do it.”⁴⁶

This statement shows once again the position of weakness and duty felt by the Navajos in relation to the American Marines. This statement also demonstrates how none of them declined doing the task, even if this mission was contradictory to their culture and religion. Every word pronounced by a Navajo has a conceptual and an emotional charge that doesn’t only concern them but affects the world they live in for which they will bear the responsibility.

NAVAJO, A SACRED LANGUAGE

The Navajo language illustrates the Navajo

relationship with nature and the belief that everything that happens within a Navajo’s life happens in relationship to the world surrounding them. In his book *Language and Art in the Navajo Language*, Gary Witherspoon⁴⁷ noted that “it is through language that the world of Navajo was created, and it is through language that the Navajo control, classify, and beautify their world.”⁴⁸ Instead of stating facts, the Navajo language evokes an emotional and strong visual image. Chester Nez gives the following example: in English one would say “I am hungry” however in Navajo the sentence would become “Hunger is hurting me.”⁴⁹ For the Navajos, how one speaks is a representation of a thought, of a palette of emotion, and thus, every word pronounced has a direct consequence in the universe.

As Witherspoon describes it, a word starts from the thought before becoming speech. He argues that “their interpretation of the constitution of reality and causation of events are all based on the connection between mind and matter, speech and event.”⁵⁰ He emphasizes that those four pillars are linked and are interdependent from each other. In fact, in the Navajo Universe, the spoken word is sacred and powerful, and one bears personally the responsibility for maintaining harmony.

If someone thinks, thus speaks, about good fortune, good fortune will come, and vice-versa; if one thinks, thus speaks, about bad fortune, it will come as well. If not treated and cleansed through a specific

45. Sally McClain, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

46. Zonnie Gorman, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

47. Gary Witherspoon is professor of Native American studies at the University of Washington.

48. Chester Nez, and Judith Schiess Avila, *op. cit.*

49. Gary Witherspoon, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

50. *Ibid.*, pp. 13-27.

ritual, these prophecies would happen.

In case one provokes disorder, it is through the use of the prefix “nà”⁵¹ used in restorative rituals and in the repetition of spoken words that Navajos return to a balance. If one repeats something four times, it will occur, because in the Navajo culture if a wish or a request is mentioned four times, it can’t be denied.⁵² However, through the use of various prefixes, one can utter and restore harmony. The war would last for years, and hasn’t had a very positive or harmonious outcome towards human beings, nature and mother-earth. The terms usually used while communicating in a context of war are heavily negative. This was a concern for the Code Talkers since their responsibility of choice of words affects Mother-earth, and it is imperative to maintain a harmonious communication between the earth, nature, and the universe.

In the Navajo language, most words and linguistic expressions label concepts, and therefore sometimes the same word is used to express similar conceptions and act as metaphorical extensions. In Navajo, the word “mother”, applied to a human is also applied to the “earth” mother for the people living on it. It can also be applied to “the sheep” or “the corn field”, set in different categories they all give and sustain life.⁵³ Mother is used in the Code Talkers dictionary to signify “America”. Zonnie Gorman highlights that “Navajos coined new terms in a unique way. It was not a matter of substitution, but rather an invention of new words or phrases to represent a new physical

item or concept permanently.”⁵⁴ Indeed, the idea of a “bomb” was coined as the concept of “eggs” falling and breaking when hitting the ground. The idea of the word “invade” with the word “moved into”, the word “destroyer” with the word “shark” and so on.

As well as transforming the internationally known military vocabulary into a positive new concepts, thus harder to decode, the position of the verb stem in Navajo, is not set by grammatical rules compared to the English or Japanese language. It is determined by the power relation of the elements involved in the sentence. For example, the sentence: “The girl drank the water” cannot be “the water was drunk by the girl”. For the Navajos, the order of the nouns is important and putting the water as a subject means that the water controls the girl willingly. It’s as if the sentence was saying, the water got the girl to drink it.⁵⁵ Indeed, the subject and the noun, not belonging to the same status, are not interchangeable. The subject and the noun can only be inverted if they belong to same hierarchy depending on their common status and their ability to do the controlling or to act upon. Many have tried to class this hierarchal list; however, none are completely true. Humans are listed as the 1st class of the hierarchal list, but babies, since they only cry and eat, are in the same category as animals as well as deaf and blind people. As for objects, they are categorised and defined by the components animate or inanimate, contained or not contained, proportional, flexible, rigid, flat, etc.⁵⁶

51. *Ibidem.*

52. *Ibidem.*

53. *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

54. *Ibidem.*

55. Zonnie Gorman, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

56. Gary Witherspoon, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-73.

The construction of a Navajo sentence can seem random for Japanese and English speakers who are used to a more consistent structure. However, since it's based on particular undisclosed beliefs, the Navajo sentence structure will play a big part in the code's structure. It's not a repeated pattern, since the subject, the noun or the verb are never at the same place in a sentence because of the complex hierarchisation status. Without knowing the core behind its construction, the sentences are even harder to decode.

DESIGNING THE NAVAJO CODE: 4 RULES TO FOLLOW

As a cautionary measure, this project needed to be kept secret from other Marines. The Navajo recruits were not allowed to talk to anyone about their task, and everything that was written and printed during the hours of designing the code had to be locked away securely at night and brought back in the morning.⁵⁷

A code, as defined in a dictionary, is a system of words, letters, or signs used to represent a message in a secret form.⁵⁸ To design the code, every word designating military terms, equipment, weapons as well as picture charts of elements of transportation: planes, ships had to be chosen with precaution as well as taking in consideration the 4 rules assigned by

the U.S Marine in charge.⁵⁹

The first rule was to construct an alphabet. Since the Navajo phonetics are very different from the English one, they couldn't find an official way of representing it. They first started by assigning one word per English letter and then translate this word in Navajo with the requirement that it didn't start with the same morpheme. For example, for the letter "a", the word "ant" was given, translated into Navajo: "wol -la- chee". It was Wilsie Bitsie and Oscar Ilthma, that came up with the idea of inventing a code out of the phonetic alphabet. Since Bitsie's dad had worked on creating a Navajo phonetical alphabet, he had knowledge on the subject.⁶⁰

The second rule was to choose words that were accurate equivalents. The code had to adapt to the specificities of war communications. Since the Navajo vocabulary didn't have the words or vocabulary for such a war, they had to design new codes for every other word they might use during communications, such as military equipment, countries, communication tools, calendar months and days, transportation, and general vocabulary. As mentioned, in the Navajo language, most words and linguistic expressions label concepts, and sometime the same word is used to express similar conceptions and act as metaphorical extensions. One man had the idea of using this thought process to switch military vocabulary into words that were familiar to them, inspired by the reservation, making it easier to remember and carrying a positive connotation.⁶¹ Thus, most of the words used to

57. *Ibidem*.

58. *Ibidem*.

59. "CODE: Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary," Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/code>.

60. Sally McClain, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

translate military terms were metaphors drawn from nature elements and this idea served as the system to translate all the terms needed. A “Submarine” would be conceived as “Iron Fish” in English and then translated in the Navajo as “Besh Lo”, “Dive Bomber” would be coined by “Chicken Hawk”, translated to “Gini”.⁶²

The third rule was to choose short terms for rapid transmission. Navajo took extra care to design a selection of terms that sounded different from one another to avoid confusion and misunderstandings since all communications were transmitted via radio frequency.⁶³ For example in Navajo, some words are pronounced the same way but are different by tone, like the words medicine “Azee” and mouth “Azée’.”⁶⁴ Chester Nez underlines that “every syllable, a slight change in tone, or a glottal stop could totally change a word’s meaning in the complicated Navajo language.”⁶⁵ The Navajo had to make sure there was no difference of dialect between them, and that they pronounced exactly the same code.

The last rule was to memorise all the terms since they wouldn’t be able to write anything down once on the war field. If the code fell into the wrong hands, it could jeopardise the whole mission. Beyond learning the correct allocated words, they had to practice pronunciation based on an invented written phonetical reading of the Navajo words.

Nevertheless, verbal tradition and memorising the words of the Navajo was an asset in this mission. Navajo cultural history and myths were passed down from generations through oral stories. Since they didn’t write anything

down, the stories were told many times for the new generations to learn and remember.⁶⁶

ENCRYPTION DEVICES VS. LANGUAGE

The rules designed to create the code were not truly compatible with the rules of creating encryption devices used during WWII, however there were some similarities.

The most famous encryption machines used during WWII were the American device “SIGABA” and the German machine called “ENIGMA”, both being “rotor” machines. Enigma has between 3 or 4 rotors and “SIGABA” has 15, which makes it more secure. The rotors are activated by an electrical charge which would substitute the letters of the message entered with other letters. The number of modifications was limited by the rotors, each letter would be transformed four times in the case of “ENIGMA” and fifteen times for SIGABA”.⁶⁷ In the Code Talkers system, each word is substituted two times. For example, the letters of the alphabet are substituted with words that start with the same sound in English and then translated to the Navajo language.

In the rotor machines a daily key was inserted and defined the pattern/formula for substituting letters.⁶⁸ In the Code Talker system, the code was changed only once and defined by their cultural context, which made it personal. It’s not something that could be found or decoded through mathematical formulas.

62. *Ibidem*.

63. Doris A. Paul, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

64. “Azee,” Navajo Language (Diné Bizaad), 31 Dec. 2014, <https://navajowotd.com/word/azee/>.

65. Chester Nez, and Judith Schiess Avila, *op. cit.*

66. *Ibidem*.

67. “War of Secrets: Cryptology in WWII,” *op. cit.*

68. *Ibidem*.

Just like the Code Talkers, for the message to be decrypted, the two devices had to communicate with a twin device that had the same “keys” to figure out the substitution of each letter. In the case of the Code Talkers, the “key” represents the common definition of every coded word memorised by the two communicating person.

The “rotor” mechanical substitution of letters, that created the code, done by a machine in both American and German cases, was encrypted through the language of the Code Talker who memorised the coded words.⁶⁹

Contrary to “SIGABA”, “ENIGMA” needed two people in a communication transaction: someone that entered the message and someone that wrote down the code. However, “SIGABA” automatically printed the decrypted message and only needed one person for the transformation.⁷⁰ Also, since the devices didn’t send out messages, they could only encrypt and decrypt messages entered by a third party. The message was then to be communicated by radio, just like the system of the Code Talkers.

Nevertheless, the message transmitted by the devices was the spelling of a succession of letters, while in the Code Talkers system, the words of the sentences were substituted with other words which made the communication faster. Additional time was saved by eliminating the device which required time for input, translation, and transmission. The Japanese “PURPLE” cypher worked exactly like “ENIGMA” and was the most secure instrument they had during WWII. They worked with other systems, such as

hiding codes in more unconventional ways like disguising it in their radio weather forecast, through language, and using wind names to indicate countries with which they were at war. The United States, for example, would be referred to as “east wind rain.” The choice of words was limited and this coded communication resulted only in being used in case of emergency and to announce a breached relationship.⁷¹

The Japanese had a cypher renamed by the US as “J-25” which worked by substituting the messages using a printed book of codes.⁷²

From June to late September 1942, the Platoon 382 worked on building the unbreakable code under the supervision of John W. Hood, Corporal Massey and Caddel. Since being recruited and in training, the Navajo’s culture was constantly tested against the western lifestyle. However, they ended up creating over 220 terms while respecting their beliefs and transforming a negative connoted military vocabulary into a positive one inspired by nature. The code ended up being so complex that even a Native Navajo speaker was unable to crack it.⁷³

69. *Ibidem.*
70. *Ibidem.*
71. Chester Nez, and Judith Schiess Avila, *op. cit.*
72. Cypher Machines, *op. cit.*
73. Chester Nez, and Judith Schiess Avila, *op. cit.*

III.

THE NAVAJO CODE: A VITAL WEAPON DURING WWII

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...that they learned how to dismantle
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To simulate field training, the Code Talkers
were spread out between the air, ships, and
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code, the U.S Marines invited non-military
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In their book *The Procurement and Training
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The Code Talkers in training

TRAINING IN SIMULATED BATTLE

During the last two weeks of the 8-week training in Camp Elliot, many practical tests were set in order to recreate the real conditions of war.¹ This conditioning started with the arrival of the Navajo recruits at Camp Elliot, who were training for the “buddy system.” They had to move everywhere in pairs, even if they wanted to use the bathroom.² They were taught about different communication methods and trained for all types of communication equipment and procedures like Field Telephone, TBX Radio, SCR Portable Radio, Semaphore and the International Morse Code.

After creating the alphabet, they had to train on a set of sentences that they would most likely translate in combat. Doris A. Paul cites a few examples in *The Navajo Code Talkers*: “Reached objective at 1945, am reorganising”, “Enemy riflemen under the protection of heavy artillery support” or “Machine gun fire on right flank”, “Continue to advance”, “Am forced to dig in.”³

The communication between the Navajos was done via the TBX radio. To be able to communicate, the Code Talkers would pair up and be coupled with another pair as

two teams: one team would emit messages to the receiving team and would change roles depending on the situation. In the emitting pair, one would crank the radio while the other would handle the microphone to code and decode messages⁴ while the receiving team would translate and write down the message back in English.

Just like the demonstration set by Johnston, a message arrived written in English by a runner called Spotter to the emitting team. The Code Talker translated and transmitted the message in Navajo to the receiving team, who translated and wrote the message back to English. If mistakes were made, listening Code Talkers would send multiple red signals to the emitting radio notifying them of a possible error. Chester Nez also mentions in his biography, that they learned how to dismantle and reconstruct a radio.⁵

To simulate field training, the Code Talkers were spread out between the air, ships, and ground, from tanks and half-tracks to the message centre. To test the security of the code, the U.S Marines invited non-military Navajo speakers to attempt to decode the codes, but they were unable to do so. The messages transmitted were all about the enemy’s information, known or estimated, as well as schemes, mission, direction of attack, general locations.” Cryptologists also took notes and sat around trying to decode the messages for weeks.

In their book *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat troops*, Robert R Palmer,

1. Zonnie Gorman, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-25.

2. Nez Chester, and Judith Schiess Avila, *op. cit.*

3. Doris A. Paul, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

4. Nez Chester, and Judith Schiess Avila, *op. cit.*

5. *Ibidem.*

THE NAVAJO CODE: A VITAL WEAPON DURING WWII — *The Code Talkers in training*

Bell I Wiley and William R. Keast mentions Even though they trained day and night, no one knew how the Navajo recruits would react in the stress of combat, however the training might simulate the war.”⁶ Apart from sending messages, the Code Talkers would witness the real war, they would communicate under exploding bombs, and face extreme level of exhaustion while being responsive and keeping the communicated code intact.

EXPANDING THE CODE

Captain Stilwell, a cryptographer, analysed and monitored Navajo communications and gave a few notes. He proposed inventing more words since 220 terms didn’t cover the entire military vocabulary. The Code Talkers had to spell out the missing words which took more time and made the communication less secure because of the repetition of letters used thus creating a pattern.

For example, in the word Guadalcanal, translated to: Goat – Ute – Ant – Deer – Ant – Lamb – Cat – Ant – Nut – Ant – Lamb, the word Ant was repeated too many times and could quickly be decrypt as the letter A. The letter A was part of the six letters most used in the English language, at the same level as the letters E, T, O, I, N. Therefore, Stilwell suggested creating at least 3 translations for each of the letters and 2 translations for the letters: S, H, R, D, L, U which are also frequently used.

Following the training at Camp Elliot, John Benaly and Johnny Manuelito, two of the original Code Talkers stayed in Camp Elliot while the other 27 left for Guadalcanal. They took on the role of recruiters to form and train the new Navajo recruits and to continue expanding the number of terms in the code. Following Stilwell’s advice, they came up with two different words for the letter A, “Ant”, “Apple” or Belsana in Navajo, and “Axe” or tsenhil in Navajo which made the word Guadalcanal spelled into: Goat – Ute – Ant – Deer – Apple – Lamb – Cat – Axe – Nut – Axe – Lamb, making it harder to determine the pattern.

The code was being used to transmit combat details from the front line to the rear echelon. They would report back on the locations of American or Japanese troops, the number of captured soldiers, the number of dead American soldiers, and to signal a code black, red, yellow, etc. The additional 200 terms created in response to Stilwell’s recommendations were mostly vocabulary.

These were codes for words such as important, obstacle, wood, and emergency thus, making the communication and transmission faster. Keeping these pieces of information secret was crucial to keeping the war strategy intact.

The new Code Talkers had to remember the 411 terms from scratch. As such, every month a gathering was made amongst Code Talkers to learn the new codes.

6. Robert R. Palmer, et al., *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops*, (Historical Division, Dept. of the Army, 1948), p. 11.

The Pacific Theatre

USING THE CODE:
DO AND DON'T

After graduating in late September 1942 from Camp Elliot in San Diego, Platoon 382 didn't have furlough and 27 of the original Code Talkers were off to Guadalcanal with the Marine 1st division to face the ongoing war against the Japanese troops. As soon as they arrived to Guadalcanal, they had to prove their effectiveness to their commanding officer, Commander Hunt.⁷

The Code Talkers' mission was still not revealed to the other Marines. Commander Hunt remained unconvinced about the Code Talkers and their efficacy. He mumbled to them "you guys are more trouble than you're worth."⁸ Indeed, at the beginning of the use of Navajo in war communications, the American troops weren't warned, and it was the first time that the American soldiers heard the Navajo code on their radios, set on different tonal and phonetics qualities than English. The Marines thought the language heard was Japanese and that the enemy had infiltrated their stations. It caused panic and the Code Talkers had to temporarily suspend their communication.⁹

To decide whether to keep the Code Talkers or not, Commander Hunt set up a competition between the military ciphering machine and the Code Talkers to evaluate time and efficiency of the different methods. The system of ciphering would encrypt the inserted

message in a random selection of letters and numbers that a soldier would enunciate using the radio. On the receiving end, the message was heard by a soldier and inserted back to a machine that could deciphered it into an coherent sentence. This system took 4 hours, and was not very accurate, whereas the system of the Code Talkers took 2 min 30 seconds and was crystal clear.¹⁰

In his biography, Chester Nez recounts the events of being a Code Talkers during battle. He was stationed on the ground, at the front line, and was paired with his friend Roy from Tuba City. They would take turns handling the microphone or cranking up the radio, both wearing headphones to hear themselves through the battle's chaotic sounds. On the frontlines, they had to take care not to get hit and they had to be aware. Most of the time they had to use the code under extreme duress or exhaustion, and would spend hours without water, food, medical attention, or being relieved.

Since all activities were monitored closely by the Japanese, they didn't spend more time than needed on the radio. They had set out a protocol: they change constantly the radio frequency between messages, and move a lot during transition to avoid being hit by bombs. As the Japanese could easily trace back the location where radio signals were sent, Code Talker's never wrote down any Navajo messages, they had to make sure no trace would compromise the code.¹¹ The unit signalled when they needed them by using the code words Geronimo, Hiawatha, Arizona, or New Mexico.¹²

7. Chester Nez, and Judith Schiess Avila, *op. cit.*

8. *Ibidem.*

9. Doris A. Paul, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

10. Chester Nez, and Judith Schiess Avila, *op. cit.*

11. *Ibidem.*

12. *Ibidem.*

COVETED CODE TALKERS

Back at Camp Elliot, Philip Johnston proposed his services to the Marines to help train the new Navajo recruits with John Benaly and Johnny Manuelito. He had been visiting Camp Elliot quite frequently since the formation of the Code Talkers. He had a hard time finding the necessary number of new recruits required because of the high level of illiteracy amongst the Navajo community and had the idea to form already enlisted Navajos in the Marines to become Code Talkers. Realising the shortage of Code Talkers, the Marine's took his recommendation into consideration, and a centre was set up in South Pacific.¹³

Throughout the war in the Pacific Islands, the Code Talkers were exclusive and extensively used for radio communication, though the frequency and use of the Code Talker was different depending on their Commanding officers, the location and context. They were not needed if the American Marines were in locations secure from Japanese eavesdropping. During combat some were more needed in the rear echelons, and with their portable equipment on the front lines.¹⁴ Some revealed themselves to be very valuable in very tense situations, such as coordinated assaults with allies like the Australians or the Army Forces which required fast communications for establishing planned strategies. Some were used quite exclusively for very stressful messages while others were more used in a

light situation. General R.E Crushman Jr. mentions that under his service the system of the Code Talkers was used between battalions (people on the battlefields) to company level (report to higher level organisations), using the code instead of English as the communication language. It was for classified messages that Lieutenant General (Ret) A.L. Browser recalled needing the Code Talkers.¹⁵

Nevertheless, the Code talkers became a sure and essential established system. It was recommended that a minimum of 78 Code Talkers be distributed in each Marine's division:

- 2 per Infantry and Artillery Battalion
- 4 per Infantry and Artillery Regiment
- 4 per Engineer Regiment
- 2 per Engineer Battalion
- 8 per Pioneer Battalion
- 4 per Amphibian Tractor Battalion
- 6 per Special Weapons Battalion
- 6 per Tank Company
- 6 per Scout Company
- 8 per Signal Company
- 2 per Parachute Battalion
- 4 per Parachute Regiment
- 8 per Raider Battalions
- 6 per Raider Regiment
- 8 per Corps Signal Battalion
- 8 per Corps Anti Tank Battalions
- 4 per Corps 115m Artillery Battalion¹⁶

The Code Talkers were to a large extent during WWII, a war that wasn't theirs to fight. Starting with the pilot project of 29 Codes talkers; the army had recruited over 400 Navajo Code Talkers by the end of the war. They served in 6 divisions from Guadalcanal to Okinawa.¹⁷ Major

13. Sally McClain, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

14. Doris A. Paul, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

15. *Ibidem.*

16. *Ibidem.*

17. The Navajo Code Talkers served in Guadalcanal, Bougainville, Western New Britain, Saipan, Tinian Guam, Peleliu and Iwo Jima.

THE NAVAJO CODE:
A VITAL WEAPON DURING WWII
— *The Pacific Theatre*

Howard M. Conner argues “were it not for the Navajos, the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima” and he wasn’t the only one. The commanding of the fleet Marines stated “The Navajo language is the simplest, fastest and most reliable means we have of transmitting secret orders via radio or over telephone circuits exposed to the enemy wiretapping.”¹⁸ They became instrumental in the victory of the U.S over Japan.

Indeed, between the use of their cypher device “SIGABA” and the Code Talkers, the U.S Marine’s communications were safe from being decoded. On the contrary, Japan’s “PURPLE” cypher was decoded before the attack on Pearl Harbor and in the battle of Midway, breaking the code of “JN-25.” The cypher used for military communication was a turning point for the war with Japan that led to the elimination of a majority of Japanese naval aviation.

Back in motherland

The Japanese surrendered to the Americans after the two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The end of War World II was declared on the 2nd of September, 1945 and a peace treaty was signed the 28th of April, 1952. The Marines were sent back home from the Pacific and were greeted with celebration from their family, friends, etc. The Navajo Code Talkers returned home to no such fanfare. The Navajo only honoured their Holy People, and so the Code Talkers’ return was neither celebrated nor acknowledged. They did what was required and it wasn’t a reason for festivities. Nevertheless, coping with post war trauma was not easy for the Code Talkers. Additionally, their role in helping to win WWII was classified, and they were asked not to disclose anything to anyone, including their friends, family, wives, sisters etc. from the design of the code to being a Code Talker. The U.S Marines wanted to ensure the ability to use the code if needed, in case another war would explode, especially during the Cold War between the USSR and the United States. It’s important to say, that the Code Talkers were used again, in a smaller scale, during the war between Korea and Vietnam.

It took decades before the Code Talkers got recognition. The code was eventually declassified in 1968 and slowly the legacy of the Code Talker was celebrated by the US Marines. On the 26th of July 2001, the Code Talkers received a medal by President George W. Bush who declared “Today, we mark a

18. *Ibidem.*

THE NAVAJO CODE: A VITAL WEAPON DURING WWII — *Back in motherland*

moment of shared history and shared victory. We recall a story that all Americans can celebrate, and every American should know. It is a story of an ancient people, called to serve in a modern war.”¹⁹

The Navajo Platoon was often portrayed in the newspapers throughout the war,²⁰ with a positive perception overall showing their strong and brave contribution at war. After the war, those old differences between Native American and American returned. The economic situation of the Navajo didn’t change. There was still 51% of unemployment in the Navajo Reservations. They were still not allowed to vote in Arizona until 1948, until 1953 in New Mexico, and 1957 in Utah. They were also still restricted in their consumption of alcohol. Since 1834, the reservations were subject to a ban on alcohol and Native Americans were not allowed to consume or purchase alcohol²¹. The Navajo faced discrimination against their veterans as described by Wilsie Bitsie; they were not allowed to go to places such as hotels and cafes. Jimmie King also complained about this inequality in a letter to Philip Johnston.²²

After experiencing war and the “American way of living,” a lot of Code Talkers changed lifestyles and renounced life on the reservations. The Bureau of Indian Affairs offered to relocate and assimilate Navajos in cities and offered to cover moving expenses, aid in finding residencies, and work opportunities which helped lure them away from the reservations. By subsidizing this assimilation to a more mainstream American way of life, the BIA effectively replicated

the model they had established in the late 19th century with compulsory attendance at boarding schools. This time, the practices of the BIA provoked an impassioned and engaged national movement against this new “colonisation” technique.²³

The resistance to the Code Talkers disappeared after their first mission in Guadalcanal, and they became indispensable during WWII. They were so essential to military operations in the South Pacific that communication schools were established in that theatre of war to teach Navajo Marines to learn and use the code. The initial class of 29 Code Talkers grew to over 400 before the end of the war. Even if the racial difference wasn’t apparent during the war, once back home, the Code Talkers couldn’t talk about the code or their mission in the Marines until 2001. This forced silence and their lack of recognition meant that their valorous contributions were unknown and the value of Navajo culture and language was hidden for decades.

19. “Congressional Gold Medal Ceremony,” *C-Span*, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?165354-1/congressional-gold-medal-ceremony>.

20. Amanda Dahl, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

21. “Native American Nations & State Alcohol Policies: An Analysis,” National Alcohol Beverage Control Association, <https://www.nabca.org/native-american-nations-state-alcohol-policies-analysis>.

22. Noah Jed Riseman, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

23. *Ibidem*.

CONCLUSION



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...age and
...our voices betray us.
...the emergence of digital technologies,
intelligence gathering doesn't need an
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any territory. Under the assumption that we
are constantly under surveillance, it is no
longer only our conversations but our voice
that is recorded, analyzed and retained
and it's a vicious cycle. The more voices are

With *Reclaiming Voices*, I expose a long process of patronisation by the U.S of the Navajo Nation. It is a paradoxical study in which I start by explaining the reasons behind the oppression of the Navajo language by white colonisers and the imposition of the American nation and its values upon previous settled nations and how during WWII this act was followed by a sudden shift in which the oppressor requested the aid of the oppressed. *Reclaiming Voices* not only reclaims the lost Navajo language but it is also claiming that language is as well a code in itself. It is a potent and powerful tool and cannot be dismissed as it often is in our societies of an all-pervasive visuality and the globalisation of imposed language, as English is today. I unravel the culturally rich force within Navajo language as a political case study and I underline how the Code Talkers used their singularity to design the required concepts to forge an efficient and valuable code for the US Marines. This study case reveals how the consequences of globalisation sacrifices the specificity of language as well as the thinking each language could provide. I finally analyse how the use of the Navajo language, defined as “savage,” became indispensable for the U.S Marines mission and outstripped somehow the technological cryptologic devices.

Those paradoxes raised issues about the Navajo language and identity, and expose the opportunistic use of this same language by the American military. Those paradoxes also shed light on the cryptologic battle between machine and the individuals and how, in this case study, they would merge.

When one is being surveilled, language and voice generate information. The Code Talkers however, were generating noise since their language was not understandable. Their communication was intruding and interrupting the enemy’s quest for information, and violently disrupting the normative audible patterns and tonalities with their code.

Despite all those efforts, the Navajos Code Talkers remained invisible. A situation that the American government has willingly continued to perpetuate until today. The importance of Code Talkers is still situated at the margin, and it is still not included as part of the Great History of the American war effort.

Beyond this invisibility, the dynamic of the oppressed and the repressed, the claim of language as a code, the creation and use of a code that challenged the machines, the case study of the Code Talkers echoes a contemporary situation that is still difficult to grasp in all its complexities. They highlights a situation in which language and voice rescued.

In opposition, today, our voices betray us. With the emergence of digital technologies, intelligence gathering doesn’t need an organic body anymore and is not limited to any territory. Under the assumption that we are constantly under surveillance, it is no longer only our conversations but our voice that is recorded, analyzed and retained and it’s a vicious cycle. The more voices are

recorded, the more effective the surveillance technology becomes. Your voice becomes, without your authorization, an extended biometric identifying tool. While heavily jeopardizing our rights to privacy, the switch from those technologies developed initially for military use by the NSA is now being sold to commercial parties, with an estimate that the voice biometrics industry will reach near to \$5 billion a year by 2024.¹

The contemporary issues of the voice in regards to political outcome can be as the Intercept journalist Ava Kofman recently admitted: “we may be entering a world in which more and more voices fall silent.”²

1. According to Tractica, a market research firm.

2. Ava Kofman, *op.cit.*

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**Under the tutorship
of Alexandra Midal**