

American Indian Code Talkers, World War II

Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, brought the United States into World War II. The U.S. Army quickly revived a World War I program that employed Choctaw and other American Indians to use native languages for communicating sensitive messages from the battle lines. Veteran Philip Johnston grew up on the Navajo reservation, and he recommended that the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) recruit Navajo men for military communication needs. Johnston arranged for a demonstration in which several Navajos proceeded to send messages in their native tongue.

USMC leaders immediately recruited twenty-nine Navajos to develop a code, or dictionary, of words to transmit strategic dispatches. They matched a Navajo word to each letter of the English alphabet to spell out other words and phrases; the code grew to include hundreds of terms. The men memorized this complex encoding using oral cultural traditions. A succession of draftees and recruits, more than 400 Navajos and other tribesmen, trained at a new school established to teach the code, as well as radio and wire communications. Code Talkers served in the Pacific Theater from 1942 to 1945: thirteen died in battle and five are buried in VA national cemeteries.

At the beginning of World War II, military encoding machines required 30 minutes to code, transmit, and decode a three-line message in English. A Code Talker could complete the same message in roughly 20 seconds. Strategically the code was very successful. The Japanese never deciphered it. Non-Code Talker Navajos did not understand it. To cite just one example of its success, during the first two days of the Battle of Iwo Jima, six Code Talkers correctly transmitted and received more than 800 messages. Later, 5th Marine Division Signal Officer Major Howard Connor declared, "Were it not for the Navajos, the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima."



Navajo cousins and USMC Code Talkers, Preston and Frank Toledo, sending messages by field radio during World War II. NARA.

War-time security concealed the Code Talkers' remarkable contribution until 1968 when military records were declassified. The magnitude of this service gradually became known. In 1992, an exhibit featuring the Code Talkers opened at the Pentagon, and President George W. Bush awarded the original twenty-nine Navajo Code Talkers the Congressional Gold Medal in July 2001. Another 225 Navajo Code Talkers, later recruited into the program, received the Congressional Silver Medal that November. In September 2008, Congress authorized the issuance of additional medals as more Code Talkers from other tribes were identified. These medals were awarded in 2013.

As of 2016, twenty-nine Code Talkers are known to be buried in VA national cemeteries; half at [Santa Fe National Cemetery](#), New Mexico.

Headstone and marker for the graves of the Toledo cosins, both buried at Santa Fe National Cemetery, New Mexico.

