

NOTES

THE COMANCHE CODE TALKERS OF WORLD WAR II

In yet another effort to discover how Indian languages have been used by the armed forces of the United States to transmit tactical intelligence, I visited Charles Chibitty at his home in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on March 8, 1999. Mr. Chibitty was one of 14 Comanche code talkers on the Western Front in World War II. He told me that the 4th Signal Company, organized in 1941, consisted initially of 20 bilingual Comanches, all of whom had “grown up within a 50-mile radius of Lawton, Oklahoma” and all of whom were volunteers trained as code talkers. They used 35 lb., two-way, FM radios and also telephones. While in combat, according to Mr. Chibitty, they usually used telephones, laying their own telephone lines and making their own repairs. For “about a year” they were commanded by 2nd Lt. Hugh Foster, who “drew up 75–100” technical military terms for which there were no commonly accepted Comanche translations. For these terms, the men learned and practiced special idioms. The Comanche equivalent of ‘it flies and it fights’, for example, was the standard term used to designate a fighter plane. The names of towns and of geographic features in France and Germany were spelled out with a sequence of Comanche words whose English glosses began with the appropriate letters. Thus the Rhine might be designated by the Comanche words for *rope*, *horse*, *Indian*, *nose*, and *enemy*, in that order. The selection of words was not prescribed, however. The letter <r>, for example, might be represented by the words for *rake*, or *roof*, or *radio*, etc. In this respect, the Comanche system differed from that used by the Navajo Marines, who were trained to use only one particular Navajo form to represent any given letter of the alphabet.

The 4th Signal Company trained initially at Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1941. During all of 1942 and part of 1943, it trained in England. On D-Day and D+1, it crossed the Channel with the 4th Infantry Division and served on the Western Front thereafter.

The Comanche code talkers practiced their skills on maneuvers in Louisiana in 1941. This was the same year that, according to an Associated Press story in the *New York Times* (August 31, 1941), quoted in part in Walker (1983:95–96), the 32nd Division, with three communication nets made up of bilingual Indians from Michigan and Wisconsin, was scheduled to take part in the “big Louisiana war games.” Mr. Chibitty disclaims any knowledge of the cryptographic use of Indian languages in World War II, however, by anyone other than the Navajo Marine code talkers and the Comanches of the 4th Infantry Division.

Fourteen Comanche code talkers went overseas. Two were assigned to each of three regiments—the 8th, 12th, and 22nd, the others to 4th Division HQ. None of the 14 was killed in action, although several were wounded; only one, Charles Chibitty, is alive today. He himself is hale and hearty. Indeed, he is an active partic-

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ipant in many Indian dances and, for that reason, is well known to many Indian ethnic groups in the Central Oklahoma area.

The 14 Comanche code talkers who served with the 4th Infantry Division were:

Charles Chibitty	Perry Noyebad	Roderick Red Elk
Haddon Codynah	Clifford Otativo	Larry Saupitty
Robert Holder	Simmons Parker	Morris Sunrise
Forrest Kassanavoid	Melvin Permamsu	Willie Yackeschi
Willington Mihecoby	Elgin Red Elk	

Mr. Chibitty is well aware that bilingual Choctaws served as code talkers in France during World War I, but he disclaimed any knowledge of the cryptographic use of Comanche prior to World War II. By so doing, he effectively disconfirmed the testimony reported in the *New York Times* (December 13, 1940) and quoted in Walker (1983:95). If Comanche was ever used to relay messages in World War I, Mr. Chibitty would surely have heard about it.

WILLARD WALKER, *Wesleyan University*

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