William Newmiller

The Navajo Code Talkers and Their Photographer

I
Once They Were Sheepherders

The Navajo believe giants once walked the earth near what is now Grants, New Mexico. *Yé'iitsoh*, translated to English as the Big Giant, was one of many monsters who preyed upon the people, the *Diné*, as they called themselves. Paul G. Zolbrod relates in *Diné bahane': The Navajo Creation Story* how the Big Giant descended from *Tsoodzi*, now called Mount Taylor, one of the four Sacred Mountains that circumscribe Navajo ancestral lands. The *Dinéé h diyiní*, the Holy Young Man, described the monster's immensity: "When he stoops to drink, one hand rests on the slope of his own mountain, while the other leans high on the hills overlooking the other side of the valley."[1] The task of ridding the world of Big Giant fell upon Monster Slayer, one of the hero-twins of Navajo mythology. Monster Slayer slew Big Giant, spilling his blood throughout the area now containing the El Malpais National Monument. Navajo tradition tells us that the scab-surfaced lava flow at El Malpais is Big Giant's dried blood.

While the Navajo continue to tell the heroic stories of Monster Slayer and his brother, Born of Water, newer heroes appear in contemporary stories: the Navajo Code Talkers. Few knew the story of the Code Talkers' contributions in World War II's Pacific Theater until 1968 when Philip Johnston released personal records that documented Code Talker training he had supervised at Camp Pendleton. Their story received more attention in 1982 when President Ronald Reagan declared August 14th National Code Talkers Day. Then, in 2001 the Code Talkers reappeared when Congress authorized special Gold Medals for the 29 Navajo Marines who were the first to train as Code Talkers. Silver medals were authorized for those who trained in later groups. The Code Talkers realized pop-culture status when MGM released John Woo's movie *Windtalkers* in 2002.

The story of the Code Talkers began in the 1940s when a number of young Navajo men—mostly sheepherders—joined the Marines and found themselves assigned to special duty creating a code within their Navajo language, a code that would find employment for tactical communication during major battles in the Pacific. On 14 August 2003, I interviewed eleven surviving Code Talkers at a ceremony in Gallup, New Mexico, that honored their service. Some of these men had seen action at as many as six major battles—Guadalcanal, Tinian, Saipan, Iwo Jima, Bougainville, and Okinawa. Despite the heavy combat they faced, all but twelve of the estimated 400 Code Talkers survived the war.

Although they grew up in a world hostile to their language and culture, the Navajo Code Talkers have achieved heroic status and now supplement traditional mythic heroes within a proud Native American culture that continues to strive for validation. In their fascinating transition from sheepherders to heroes, threads of Joseph Campbell's monomyth of the heroic journey are woven with strands of Navajo tradition.

Heroes, it seems, hold a special attraction to the young, and Sara Hoagland Hunter's children's book, *The Unbreakable Code*, published in 1996, provides Navajo youngsters with a hero in the form of a grandfather—a World War II Navajo Code Talker—who imparts courage to his young grandson. In this story, the grandson fears leaving the reservation to go with his stepfather. Grandfather tells him, "You're going to be all right. You have an unbreakable code."[2] The grandfather describes how he held on to his Native Navajo language while forced to speak English in government schools, and he explains how he used Navajo during World War II and how his Navajo traditions had kept him safe while he fought far beyond the Four Sacred Mountains.

In addition to reading books—besides Hunter's book for young children, there are books for other youthful reading levels—children can play with Hasbro's GI Joe Code Talker action figure. By lifting the doll's right arm, children can hear a phrase in Navajo followed by an English translation, such as "request air support," or "attack with machine gun."[3] The doll comes with a brief history of the Code Talkers.

The appeal of the Code Talkers extends far beyond the Navajo children. The ceremony in Gallup, New Mexico to celebrate National Code Talkers Day was attended by hundreds of Navajos. Speaking for young adults was Fern Spencer, Miss Eastern Navajo. Before performing a song she had composed, she thanked the Code Talkers. She stood on the stage in a long red dress, a woven white sash extending from her right shoulder, a hammered silver belt about her waist. She wore turquoise finger rings and bracelets. A tall hammered silver crown added to her height. "Without you," she spoke to the Code Talkers, "I'd not be standing

here as a proud tall American Indian woman. Because of you Native Americans are free; because of you we have the right to vote."

The enfranchisement Fern Spencer alludes to was a long time coming to Navajos. Peter Iverson in *Diné: A History of the Navajos* reports that although the US Congress granted citizenship to Native Americans in 1924, two decades later Navajos generally were still not permitted to vote in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah.[4] A 1944 appeal for the vote from Private Ralph Anderson, a Navajo soldier (but not a Code Talker), moved James M. Stewart, Superintendent of the Navajo Indian Service to respond, "While you are fighting on the battlefront, a fight must be waged here on the homefront to obtain for you the right accorded all free peoples."[5] One by one, barriers broke down in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah after World War II. In 1953, Utah joined Arizona and New Mexico, which had enfranchised Navajos in 1948, in granting the vote to Native Americans. The connection between the patriotic military service of the Navajo during World War II and the subsequent enfranchisement of Native Americans has enhanced the heroic standing of Code Talkers whose military service is most widely known on the reservation.

The passage of Navajo Code Talkers from sheepherders to heroes follows the general outline of Joseph's Campbell's monomyth of separation, initiation, and return. Campbell writes in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (30). Elsewhere, Campbell describes how the herald, calling the hero to adventure, "is often dark, loathly, or terrifying."[7] Not surprisingly, the journey taken by the Code Talkers also follows pathways of Navajo mythology, history, and traditions.

The Hero Twins of Navajo mythology are revered for making the world safe for human beings by killing the many monsters, such as Big Giant, that threatened and vexed early people. The vexation faced by Navajos during the first half of the twentieth century came from another quarter. It was made real for me as eleven of the surviving Code Talkers sat around me in a semi-circle at Red Rocks State Park near Gallup, New Mexico, on August 14, 2003. Their faces, sculpted by the desert winds, showed the wear of eighty-plus years. In their childhood, they'd heard the stories from those who had been rounded up by Kit Carson's men, taken to Fort Wingate, and then made to take the Long Walk, the euphemism for the forced march to Fort Sumner, several hundred miles southeast of their ancestral land. The negotiated return in 1868 to their homeland would further strengthen the bond between the people and their land where the Code Talkers, in their youth,

learned Navajo ways. They also would have felt, first hand, the heartbreak of the government's stock reduction program, which addressed the issue of over-grazing on the reservation by forcibly seizing and destroying Navajo sheep.[8] Code Talker Bill Toledo spoke of how, when he was a child, government officials came to his home, cut off his traditional Navajo hair bun, and took him, unwillingly, to the government school, where he was told to eschew things Navajo, including his language, and to speak only English.[9]

The herald calling the young sheepherders to heroic action came from an agency easily identified with the woes the Navajo faced: the Marine recruiter. Sally McClain in her book *Navajo Weapon* reports the promise of work and an attractive uniform drew the interest of the sheepherders. She quotes Code Talker Eugene Crawford, "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."[10] In *A Study of Navajo Symbolism*, Franc Johnson Newcomb explains that white can symbolize either good or evil,[11] but yellow, the color of brass, "is a color of spiritual blessing" and "immediate physical well-being." Of course it is also the color of corn pollen, a powerful force for good. The color "blue is the emblem of warmth and rain." In Navajo sand paintings blue is often the color of "some beneficent object or force," but it can also be the color of powerful damaging forces, such as "the blue star which wanders about and shoots people with magic arrows to cause fevers and mental aberration; also there is a great blue serpent which is blamed for epidemics and lingering illnesses."[12] Red, another important color in the Marine heraldry, "is a color of fierce power."[13]

The symbolism of color remains important to the surviving Navajo Code Talkers, who appear in public wearing their uniform of red hat, gold shirt, khaki slacks, abalone colored shoes, bedecked with turquoise and silver and patches commemorating battles fought in the Pacific. In an article by Joy Prue for the Puma Press, the newspaper of Paradise Valley Community College in Phoenix, Code Talker Joe H. Kellwood explains the symbolism in this uniform: "The Red cap denotes the U.S. Marine Corps; the jewelry represents the Diné; the gold shirt symbolizes corn pollen; light-colored trousers represent Mother Earth; abalone-colored shoes stand for the sacred mountains."[14]

Traveling beyond the four sacred mountains is not taken lightly by Navajos, and the departure of young Navajo men for a distant war was of special concern to all Navajos. Clyde Kluckhohn describes a May, 1944, ceremony for "the well-being of 150 service men, Navahos working in war industries, and members of the Allied armies. Before the ritual began, photographs of the service men for whom the ceremonial was held were piled up in front of the 'medicine man.' This man, a

famous Singer, sang ancient war songs, and Christian Navahos were encouraged to add their prayers to the tribal chants. After the all-night ritual, prayer feathers adorned with turquoise were planted to help assure the warriors' safe return."[15]

In Navajo tradition and mythology entering enemy territory calls for the use of what Gladys A. Reichard describes as a "war language." The war language has been referred to variously as "irritably they speak," or as a "twisted language used by warriors." In Navajo mythology, Turtledove, a messenger sent by Monster Slayer to report on the progress of Turtle and Green Frog's attack on Taos, reported that both Turtle and Green Frog spoke such a language. According to Reichard leaders of Navajo war parties required their warriors to speak in such code when they approached enemy territory.[16] Clearly, the success of World War II Code Talkers has come to honor this tradition more broadly in American culture.

The paternalism inherent to the federal government's Indian policy provides another striking parallel between the Code Talkers heroic assent and the mythic accounts of heroes. Joseph Campbell illustrates the significance of atonement with the father by using the story of how the Hero Twins, before they could begin to slay monsters, had to visit their father, the Sun, and pass his tests to receive his approval.[17] From him, they also received the lightning bolts that they would use to defeat the monsters. Much of what has been written about the Code Talkers, and much of what they will say in their stories of military service, centers about their initiation through Marine Basic Training. Despite the reservations some Marine officers had, the Navajos did well in training. Soon they were issued the guns and radios they would use to defeat enemies in the Pacific.

The returning hero, as described by Joseph Campbell must survive the impact of the world,[18] and face his "ultimate difficult task," to "render back into light-world language the speech defying pronouncements of the dark." For many Code Talkers, as for other returning soldiers, the return from battle was marred by psychological scars. Peter Iverson writes that the work of Code Talkers was "the stuff of nightmares ever afterward for many of the survivors, even after Enemy Way ceremonies had been conducted."[19] Our interviews with eleven Code Talkers confirmed this observation. For example, Code Talker Samuel Smith said, "I've been sick ever since I came back. My mind: nightmares, flashbacks. I went to medicine men. They worked for a while, but it always came back."[20] Dan Akee, commenting on Samuel Smith's remarks, said, "There was too much: the Marshal Islands, Saipan, Tinian, Iwo Jima. It got into our minds. Every one of us was the same way as Samuel Smith."[21] The difficulty of return may have been heightened because they were told upon discharge from the Marines that they were not to tell anyone of their wartime experiences. That official Marine stricture may have

received reinforcement from tribal elders after the war. Code Talker Albert Smith recalls his exchange with elders:

> They asked me if I returned with stories of the war and I said 'yes, I had." Then they asked if I had brought back pictures of the war. 'No, we weren't allowed to take pictures,' I said. And they asked if I brought back the feeling of the war, and I said 'No.' The smell of the war? 'No.' The taste of the war? 'Not that either.' So they said, 'since you brought back only one of these five, you must not tell your stories because you will mislead the children.'[22]

The Code Talkers did, however, bring back the means and ambition to pursue higher education. Albert Smith earned a college degree and spent 40 years as a school teacher. Former Code Talker President Sam Billison, who passed away in November of 2004, earned a Doctorate in education and remained active in tribal education programs. Carl Gorman, one of the original 29 Code Talkers, taught Native American Art at the University of California, Davis, where the museum of Native American Art bears his name. All of these men and other Code Talkers returned to the reservation where they encouraged young Navajos to value their heritage and to seek further education.

Although the focus of the Code Talkers is on the land and people living within the four sacred mountains, their contributions have flowed beyond the reservation. It may be instructive to recount the story of another victory by the Hero Twins, this one over a flying monster, called by some Cliff Monster, who threw people to their deaths on rocks where they would be eaten by his wife and his two children. After killing the adult monsters—Cliff Monster became the rock formation at Shiprock, New Mexico—Monster Slayer transformed the offspring into an eagle and an owl, creatures that soar over reservation lands on feathered wings and make important contributions to many Navajo ceremonies.[23] Today the descendents of those led by Kit Carson, who marched the Navajo to internment at Fort Sumner, fly over the reservation lands on aluminum wings and reconsider the importance and contributions of the Navajo culture.

II
Kenji Kawano

Anyone who has flown over the ancestral lands of the Navajo, who has gazed upon Monument Valley or Canyon De Chelley, hiked through the Chuska Mountains, or surveyed the broad expanses of sage cannot help but sense the importance of the land as a starting point for understanding those who live on it. To the Navajos it is the land that lies between the four sacred mountains, the land that extends from the Four Corners into New Mexico, Utah, and Arizona, the land of the modern Navajo Nation—but, more importantly, the land given the Navajo by the Holy Ones. Never mind anthropological evidence showing the Navajo to be newcomers to the desert southwest. What the Navajo *believe* drives their identity far more than what academics can only *know*.

So the story about Kenji Kawano, the photographer of the Navajo Code Talkers starts with the land…

Ship Rock, New Mexico. Photo courtesy Lou Maher

I pulled off US Highway 491, a roadway identified in less superstitious times as US 666, and gazed at the basalt formation from which the nearby town of Shiprock, New Mexico gets its name. The Ship Rock Landform evidences the dramatic geological tumult of tectonic forces during the Oligocene epoch thirty million years ago when it was thrust up by an ancient volcano. To European settlers, the rock formation looked like a clipper ship, adrift on a sea of desert tan

and sage gray. I could see the resemblance, but there was more. A rugged sublimity issues from the fractured volcanic rock's dark spires and crags. And I pictured the extraordinary faces of the old Navajo men, creased by sun and time and worry, faces that tell of lives well-lived despite the tumult of America's Century and its impact on native lands. These are the faces of Navajo Code Talkers and it is in Kawano's photographs of these faces that the Japanese photographer tells their story. Although many others have begun to tell the Code Talkers' story, no one has told it as Kenji Kawano has. And no one would have seemed a less likely candidate to champion the Code Talkers.

I first encountered Kawano on my 2003 trip to Gallup, New Mexico. There at a ceremony honoring the Code Talkers, I noticed the thin Kawano, camera in hand, moving among the Code Talkers and their families. He was invited to the stage and, with an aging Code Talker, sang a Japanese folk song. I learned later that his 1991 book, *Warriors: Navajo Code Talkers*, which contains photographs of Code Talkers in their homes and fields, remained in print. And I learned that Kawano, the son of a World War II Japanese sailor, had settled on the Navajo reservation with his Navajo wife.

I took one more look at Ship Rock and returned to the highway, and headed towards Window Rock, Arizona and my appointment with Kawano. He'd tell me his remarkable story of cultural immersion and of art transcending war.

Kawano grew up in Fukuoka, Japan, where he watched John Wayne westerns with his father, who had survived World War II despite his assignment as a kamikaze. The war's end came before his sacrifice was required. After high school, Kawano worked as a graphic designer and discovered his interest in photography. Meanwhile, he felt the pull of the American west and, in 1973, visited Los Angeles. What he had expected to be a stay of but a few months in America still continues.

While in Los Angeles and seeking subjects for his photography, Kawano learned about the Navajo and saw on a map that the Navajo reservation was in the neighboring state of Arizona. A friend knew a Navajo family in Fort Defiance, Arizona, who could host him. So in 1974 Kawano came to the reservation, able to speak neither English nor Navajo. "In Los Angeles," he says, "I took classes to learn English, but it didn't work. When lunchtime came, all the Japanese would speak in Japanese, and I shared an apartment with a Japanese speaker and we always spoke Japanese. On the reservation people spoke only English or Navajo, so I had to learn."

He found work in a gas station and during his free time, he hitchhiked about the reservation with his camera. The rides with Navajo drivers would become a more effective study of English for Kawano, who says, "Always they would ask the same questions: Where are you from? What are you doing? So it gave me practice.

And sometimes, I'd ask them what things meant in Navajo. That's how I picked up English and Navajo."

His immersion in Navajo culture also meant a change in diet. "The nearest Japanese restaurant was in Albuquerque, three hours away. When you're young, you can fit into any kind of culture," he says.

Navajo children were Kawano's first subject. "It's easier to take pictures of kids," he says, "because in any country kids are always curious about something new or unusual. Many Navajo kids had never seen a Japanese person before. I was also unusual because I always carried a camera." Older people were more challenging subjects: they didn't speak English and they were often uncomfortable with someone taking pictures of them. The children, however, could become an entrée to their elders, explaining why Kawano wanted to take their pictures and putting the elders at ease.

Despite the dramatic landscape of the desert southwest, Kawano's interest has always been with people and human activity. "When I started taking pictures in Japan," Kawano explains, "I'd go to Yokota Air Base and take pictures of soldiers shipping to Viet Nam. I couldn't speak English, but we could still communicate, and those communications I really enjoyed. You can't communicate with a landscape."

In the summer of 1975, Kawano had still not found his specific photographic subject; he was still taking pictures of children, sometimes of their elders, sometimes of rodeos. That summer, as he stood beside a road in Window Rock, Arizona, camera bag slung over his shoulder, a chance meeting with Carl Gorman resulted in Kawano's finding the subject that still drives his passion. The events leading up to his meeting with Gorman were set in motion six years before Kawano was born, in 1942.

Gorman was one of the first Marine Corps recruits to become a Navajo Code Talker. After boot camp, Gorman and 28 other Navajo men were transported to Camp Elliott where they were told to develop a code from Navajo that they would use during combat in the Pacific. After working to develop the code, Gorman went on to use it in combat at Guadalcanal, Taraw, Tinian, and Saipan. In 1944, Gorman was evacuated from Saipan to a naval hospital at Pearl Harbor for treatment of malaria, which had hit him hard. A hospital psychiatrist, impressed by Gorman's drawings, urged him to use his GI Bill benefits to go to art school. In 1947, Gorman enrolled at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s Gorman enjoyed increasing success in his art and found himself on the forefront of efforts in Los Angeles to improve the conditions of Southern California's Navajo population. In 1964 he returned to the reservation to direct the Navajo Arts and Crafts Guild. In 1966, he hired on to a grant-funded program to gather oral histories from elderly Navajos. Then, in 1970, he

accepted an invitation to teach Indian art at the University of California, Davis, a position he held with distinction for four years. Its museum, featuring Native American art, is named for him. In 1974, Gorman returned to the reservation to be the director of healing science for the Navajo Health Authority. That an artist should work in public health may seem strange to those unfamiliar with Navajo tradition, and especially to those who have come to see art as mere decoration; however, in Navajo tradition, art is vital to spiritual and physical well-being. At the center of many Navajo ceremonies are poetic chants handed down through generations and sand paintings, meticulously drawn to invoke the powers of the Holy Ones. One of Gorman's tasks was to work with medicine men to increase cooperation between traditional healers and physicians on the reservations. One of the most widely used traditional Navajo healing ceremonies is the Enemy Way, also called the Squaw Dance, a purification ceremony often accorded returning military veterans. Many Code Talkers have reported the use of this ceremony as a treatment for what is today labeled post traumatic stress disorder.

So it was on that summer day in 1975 that Carl Gorman and his wife Mary were driving their pickup truck to a Squaw Dance, when they stopped to give a ride to Kenji Kawano. They invited Kawano to come with them, telling him that he couldn't take pictures of the ceremony, but he might take pictures of women butchering sheep and making fry bread. Kawano also recalls Gorman's wife Mary asking if he knew about the Navajo Code Talkers. The story of the Code Talkers impressed Kawano and soon he found himself photographing Code Talkers at their meetings and at public appearances on the reservation. In those days, Kawano recalls, few people, even on the reservation knew much about the Code Talkers.

"People ask me," Kawano says, "why take pictures of Japan's former enemy? For me, though, the nationality doesn't matter." What troubled Kawano was his realization that many non-Native Americans, whom the Navajo call Anglos, needed to rethink the stereotypes often applied to Native Americans. When he went to a Phoenix restaurant with Navajo friends, the waitress's shabby treatment of them made him wonder how he might change things. He came to see his camera as a tool that could tell the story of the Code Talkers' military service and break down the walls of prejudice. Publishing a book of his photographs rather than just exhibiting them became important to Kawano because it would mean a wider audience for the story he wanted to tell with his photographs.

When the *Navajo Times Today*, where Kawano worked, shut down in 1987, he took it as an opportunity to focus on producing such a book. He reviewed his existing photographs of Code Talkers at parades and other public events, but found them wanting. He realized that he needed more photographs and that he

needed photographs that approached his subject more intimately. He decided to photograph the Code Talkers where they lived and to have them tell him something of their war experience. Their words became captions for the photographs.

The use of these captions has had its effect at exhibitions. Exhibition directors have noticed that patrons will spend up to twice the time they'd normally take with a photograph when they view Kawano's photographs. They'll look at the photograph, then to the caption, and then reflect a second time on the image. I found that to be the case as I looked at his photographs in *Warriors*. I looked at the photograph of Johnnie Alfred, his Purple Heart resting on his outstretched left palm, and my eyes went to the caption, "All I can say is that I was just lucky," and I reflected on the simplicity of survival in the battles he faced, among them Saipan, Tinian, and Okinawa. My eyes returned to the photograph. I saw the face of a man who had passed the test, who had aged with a confident posture, his right thumb tucked in the pocket of faded denims. Behind him new life blooms in fruit blossoms on branches that seem to emerge from his shoulders and encircle his head. Beyond the blossoms an ancient stone wall suggests strength and permanence.

The photographs' captions exhibit a diversity of wartime memories. Some are brief and suggest the repression of combat horrors, such as Lewis F. Ayze's simply stated, "These stories I don't care to relate." Others are poignant reminders of carnage faced in the Pacific. John Kinsel, Sr. recounts his memory of a soldier he saw step on a landmine. With both of his legs and one hand destroyed, the soldier "asked for a smoke, saying 'I still have one hand.' " Some tell stories that recall episodes of unexpected humor in the midst of combat, such as Samuel Tom Holiday's recollection of pitched combat on Saipan. Hunkered down in a foxhole with bullets flying and wounded soldiers screaming out on the battlefield, he "heard a deep 'THUMP' next to me, where my fellow code talker was lying, and I was scared I would be next. It took every ounce of courage I had to look over at him—I expected blood and guts. To my relief—and the relief of my foxhole partner—I saw one of the biggest bullfrogs I'd ever seen on my partner's back." Thomas H. Begay speaks of enduring Iwo Jima and other battles, attributing his survival to discipline, training, luck, and "maybe because I believe in the traditional Navajo ways and felt that the Great Spirit was protecting me. My parents, both very traditional Navajos, had ceremonies for me using clothes that I had worn before I left home to go in the service. These ceremonies protected my well-being, so I could survive."

While relating the Code Talkers' wartime experience was important to Kawano, he also "wanted to show how Navajo people live. I wanted people in New York to see that Navajos were raising sheep and growing corn and living in hogans and

using cradle boards." When he first arrives to take a portrait, Kawano takes time to consider what he might use to tell the story that will become his photograph. In the case of George Yoe's portrait, Kawano chose to show Yoe holding his grandson in a cradle board. The wiry Yoe sits on the trunk of his car, arms around his tightly bound grandson. An expanse of open land under a threatening sky reveals a landscape that engenders the kind of self-reliance that overcomes the fear Yoe speaks of in the picture's caption.

In setting up each of his photographs, Kawano searches for the backgrounds and objects that will help tell the story of his subject. Code Talker Dan Akee unfolds and displays the Honorable Discharge certificate he received from the Marine Corps, its deep creases mirroring the lines in his face. Arcenio Smiley holds up his right arm showing a massive bracelet embossed with the Marine Corps emblem. Behind him is a traditional Navajo hogan, its entrance facing the rising sun. "I don't think too much about the photograph," says Kawano. "I think about the story. Photography for me is a bit like baseball. Sometimes I strike out, but sometimes I can get a hit."

Reaching the Code Talkers on the vast Navajo Reservation—it's about the size of West Virginia—was a difficult task complicated by the lack of telephones throughout much of the reservation. In the late 1980s, according to Kawano, only 28% of the reservation residents had telephones. Kawano also had to track down Code Talkers, many of whom weren't members of the Code Talkers Association and who had been living quietly in the reservation's widely dispersed small communities. "Sometimes I'd drive three hours to a place, and no one would be home," Kawano says. "It wasn't like Japan where I could call someone and say I'll be there at three o'clock and then show up and people would be waiting. It doesn't work that way here. I had to learn the Navajo way." One of his adaptations to the Navajo way was in how he'd begin his visits with the Code Talkers. "In Japan," he says, "I'd just bring my camera bag in and I'd start talking and taking pictures." On the reservation, though, he'd leave his equipment in the car and chat with the Code Talker for an hour before even mentioning his book project and the pictures he wanted to take. His skill in gaining the confidence of the aging Code Talkers resulted in almost all of them agreeing to his photographs. A few graciously refused, wishing not to recall their time of combat. Kawano reports only one Code Talker who held his Japanese ancestry against him and refused to cooperate fully with what he still viewed to be the enemy. Far more Code Talkers were pleased with his visits and the opportunity it presented for them to speak to him in rusty Japanese, which they'd learned during occupation duty after the war, but had little chance to use on the reservation. "Many," Kawano reports, "became really good friends."

Kawano's photographs of Code Talkers have been widely distributed. They've appeared in both *National Geographic* and *Smithsonian Magazine*. His picture of Code Talker James T. Nahkai, Jr. appears on the cover of Sally McClain's book *Navajo Weapon*. In addition to the traveling photography exhibitions he has in the United States, he's displayed his photographs of Code Talkers in Tokyo, Sapporo, and Fukuoka. His work has appeared in the Japanese edition of *Photography*, and the Japanese edition of *Newsweek* has featured him.

Kawano continues to photograph Code Talkers and is working on a second collection he hopes to publish in the future. He senses the urgency of his work, with many Code Talkers now well into their eighties. And he knows the comfort his photographs have given to the families of Code Talkers who have passed on. During my visit, Kawano showed me some of his new collection. Its arresting images provide a sense of the continuity that distinguishes Navajo life. Some of the photographs showed a Code Talker striking a pose that recalls an earlier one from Kawano's original collection. Sometimes the subject holds an earlier photograph. Just as Kawano frequently included family members of Code Talkers in his first book, he includes them in the new collection. For example, there's a picture of George Yoe's grandson, the infant seen originally in a traditional cradle board held by his grandfather. The new photograph shows Yoe's grandson, now a teenager holding the original photograph.

As Kawano continues his work, we see the Code Talkers age, and we see young Navajos growing up with reverence for their accomplishments. We continue to learn the ways of the Navajo, and we gain insight into an attitude expressed by Code Talker Carl Gorman: "A bridge involves going back and forth. I don't stand up and say another man's culture is no good. We exchange ideas and knowledge and look for the good in both sides. That is the bridge." Kenji Kawano has become a bridge between Japanese and American cultures, and between Navajo and Anglo cultures in America. His work reminds us of the healing power of art.

Kenji Kawano

Notes

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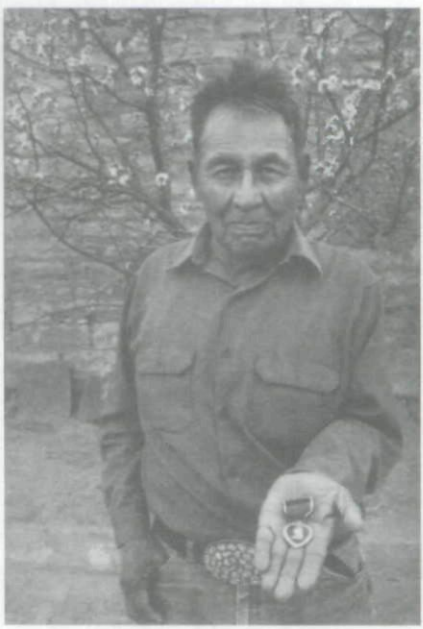
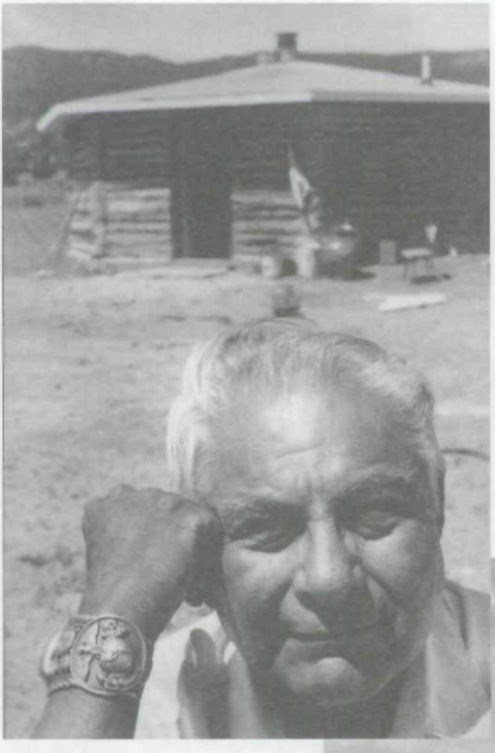
Carl Gorman: "I was in sick bay at Pearl Harbor and thought I was going to die."

Dan Akee: "The war was very sad. I saw dead Marines on the beach at Iwo Jima... we had to go through them."



Johnnie Alfred: "All I can say is that I was just lucky."



Arcenio Smiley: "My overseas duty assignment as part of the replacement force began with hard manual labor—transporting war material and supplies via ship and L.S.T. between Saipan and Okinawa. I also participated in radio communications operations."

George Edward Yoe: "We moved from place to place with our radios. Even if we were scared, we just went on until we finished our duty."