Code Talkers

MULTI
LEVEL
P·S·V

Written by Susan Lennox

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U.S. troops unload supplies at Iwo Jima on February 19, 1945.

Introduction

The date is February 19, 1945. A group of U.S. **Marines** reaches the beach of Iwo Jima island in the Pacific Ocean. All will be lost if the enemy learns of their plans, but the marines have a secret **code**. They can **transmit** messages that no one else can understand.

Philip Johnston's Bright Idea

By 1942, the United States had entered World War II. The U.S. military was sending coded messages between groups of soldiers to keep them safe and ready to fight. However, the enemy was getting hold of those messages and was very good at **breaking** U.S. codes. In some cases, this led to many American deaths.

Philip Johnston contacted the military about using a code based on **Navajo** (NA-vuh-hoh). Johnston had lived around Navajo Indians as a child. He knew that few people outside the tribe understood the Navajo language. He also knew that Navajo was a "hidden language"—it was only spoken and had no written **symbols**. These things made Navajo perfect for top-secret messages.

Philip Johnston in 1944

The U.S. military agreed to try it.

The Navajo Nation

Nevada

Utah

Colorado

● Las Vegas

NAVAJO RESERVATION

Flagstaff ●

New Mexico

Albuquerque ●

Arizona

N
W ● E
S

United States

Many Native Americans live on reservations, which are lands set aside for them by the U.S. government. The Navajo Nation is the largest reservation —it's about the size of West Virginia. Its territory surrounds the smaller Hopi Indian Reservation.

Philip Johnston (center) in 1904 at around age twelve. Johnston moved to the Navajo reservation with his family in 1896.

Mysterious Messages

Sending hidden messages dates back to ancient times. Early on, only the sender and the person getting the message would know how the message was hidden. Sometimes they used invisible ink, which seems to disappear once it's put to paper. Later, heat or chemicals would make the ink visible so the message could be read.

At other times, the sender would shave and then tattoo words on a man's head. Once his hair grew back and covered the message, he traveled to visit the person the message was for. That person would shave his head to read the message!

With most modern coding systems, the message itself is not hidden, but its meaning is. Even if the message falls into enemy hands, the reader must know the code in order to understand it.

Message in Disguise

How does coding work? Here are two different ways to encode the message "Send help now."

Swapping: A method called the Caesar Cipher involves swapping out each letter in the message for another. Used by the Roman emperor Julius Caesar, it involves swapping letters by simply moving the alphabet. Here, each letter will move three letters to the left.

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W

"Send help now" becomes "**PBKA EBIM KLT**."

Scrambling: Another method of coding a message involves scrambling the letters. An example is the Rail Fence Cipher. The message is encoded by writing the letters of each word on two or more lines, then putting the lines together.

S		N			E		P		N		W
	E		D		H		L			O	

"Send help now" becomes "**SNEPNW EDHLO**."

At the start of World War II, the American military changed codes all the time. Yet over and over, their efforts failed. Many Japanese students had learned American English in the United States. The Japanese code breakers could break messages almost as quickly as the Americans sent them.

Why Navajo?

The idea of using
a Native American
language was not
new. During World
War I, the United
States had used
several Native

WWI Choctaw Telephone Squad

American languages to transmit secret
messages. So why not use those same
codes during World War II?

After World War I, both Germany and
Japan had sent students to the United
States. They had learned those Native
American languages.

However, any student would have had
a hard time learning Navajo. It belonged
to a different family of languages than
many other Native American languages.
The marines believed that no one
outside the country would understand
the Navajo code.

Communicating in Code

Twenty-nine Navajo soldiers helped come up with a system for coding messages based on their language. The coding system had two parts. The first part used Navajo words to stand for English letters. For example, the Navajo word for "bear" is *shush,* so the word *shush* was used for the letter *B.*

Two Navajo soldiers send orders over a radio using the Navajo code. In some cases, the soldiers already knew each other from living on the same reservation. These two were cousins.

The Navajo Code Talkers' Dictionary

Alphabet Code

Letter	Navajo Word	Navajo Meaning
A	wol-la-chee	ant
B	shush	bear
C	moasi	cat
D	be	deer
E	dzeh	elk
F	tsa-e-donin-ee	fly

Common Words

Word	Navajo Word	Navajo Meaning
commanding officer	hash-kay-gi-na-tah	war chief
dive bomber	gini	chicken hawk
battleship	lo-tso	whale
bombs	a-ye-shi	eggs

You can see how confusing this must have been to the enemy!

The second part of the system gave new military meanings to a list of 211 Navajo words. The Navajo words used were often based on the appearance or job of each one described. For example, *owl* meant "observation plane." The Navajo word for *shark* meant "destroyer," a type of warship. A "submarine" was called an *iron fish*.
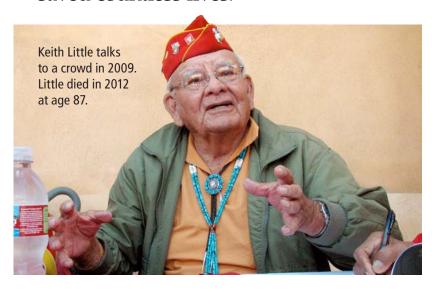
Navajo people were taught from an early age to listen to and learn the stories of their people. The Navajo soldiers had no problem learning the new code. When they took a test to see how well they could transmit radio messages, the military was amazed. The **code talkers** could do in seconds what other coders needed half an hour to do!

Navajo code talkers Henry Blake Jr. (left) and George Kirk use a radio in December 1943 in an island jungle northeast of Australia.

The military quickly started using the code and began training more code talkers. Many Navajo men were eager to **serve**. In total, more than four hundred Navajo code talkers served brilliantly in the Pacific. One of the biggest battles of the war was the Battle of Iwo Jima. During it, six code talkers sent and received more than eight hundred messages in the heat of combat without a single error. One of those six, Keith Little, said, "My weapon was my language, and that language probably saved countless lives."

Keith Little talks to a crowd in 2009. Little died in 2012 at age 87.

Unsung Heroes

The Japanese could not make sense of
the code. Even after Japan gave up on
September 2, 1945, the code stayed secret.
The code talkers could not talk about
their work. They remained silent for
years.

They also returned to hard lives after the
war. For many who had been soldiers,
jobs were tough to find, and Native
Americans often faced **discrimination**.
Navajo and other tribes in Arizona and
New Mexico could not vote until 1948.
Tribes in Utah could not vote until 1957.

Native Americans register to vote for the first time in New Mexico in 1948.

President George W. Bush shakes hands with John Brown Jr. They met at the Navajo Code Talkers Congressional Gold Medal ceremony in 2001.

Finally, in 1968, the silence around the code talker program ended. Then the world learned about the amazing work of these men. To this day, the Navajo code is the only spoken military code that has never been broken.

Glossary

breaking *(v.)*   solving or figuring out (p. 5)

code *(n.)*   a system of letters, symbols, or signals that are used to send secret messages (p. 4)

code talkers *(n.)* Native American soldiers who used their native language as a code during World Wars I and II (p. 12)

discrimination *(n.)*   the unfair treatment of a person or group based on gender, race, age, religion, or other differences (p. 14)

marines *(n.)*   members of the U.S. Marine Corps, a branch of the U.S. military (p. 4)

Navajo *(n.)*   a member of a Native American people in the Southwest; the language of these people (p. 5)

serve *(v.)*   to work for an organization or government, especially in a branch of the military (p. 13)

symbols *(n.)*   pictures or signs that represent ideas, letters, or words (p. 5)

transmit *(v.)*   to pass something from one person to another (p. 4)

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Back cover: Navajo code talker Teddy Draper in 2002

Front cover: Navajo code talkers Henry Blake Jr. and George Kirk operate a portable radio on an island northeast of Australia during WWII.

Title page: In 2009, Navajo code talker Lloyd Oliver holds a photo of himself from World War II.

Page 3: Navajo code talker Cecil Trosip works a radio in July 1944 on Saipan, an island in the Pacific Ocean between Japan and Hawaii.

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