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Navajo Code Talkers Corporal Henry Bake, Jr. (left) and Private First Class George H. Kirk operating a portable radio set at Bougainville, an island in the South Pacific, in December 1943. **1**

The Code Talkers’ role in war required intelligence and bravery. They developed and memorized a special code. They endured some of the most dangerous battles and remained calm under fire. They served proudly, with honor and distinction. Their actions proved critical in several important campaigns, and they are credited with saving thousands of American and allies’ lives.

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Buffalo hide painted about 1880 by Oglala Lakota (Sioux) named Young Man Afraid of His Horse. Depicts the actions of traditional warriors in battle. **2**

For thousands of years, American Indian men have protected their communities and lands. “Warrior” is an English word that has come to describe them. However, their traditional roles involved more than fighting enemies. They cared for people and helped in many ways, in any time of difficulty. They would do anything to help their people survive, including laying down their own lives.

Warriors were regarded with the utmost respect in their communities. Boys trained from an early age to develop the spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical strength they would need to become warriors. Many tribes had special warrior societies, which had their own ceremonies, songs, dances, and regalia that they wore. Usually, a warrior had to prove himself before being asked to join a warrior society. It was a great honor to be chosen in this way.

Despite everything that American Indians had endured in the past, the warrior tradition—the tradition of protecting their people—called many of them to serve in the United States military. They cared about their communities and the lands on which their people had lived for thousands of years. Many of them also served out of a sense of patriotism, wanting to defend the United States. For some American Indians, the military offered economic security and an opportunity for education, training, and world travel.

More than 12,000 American Indians served in World War I—about 25 percent of the male American Indian population at that time. During World War II, when the total American Indian population was less than 350,000, an estimated 44,000 Indian men and women served.

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In World War I, Choctaw and other American Indians transmitted battle messages in their tribal languages by telephone. Although not used extensively, the World War I telephone squads played a key role in helping the United States Army win several battles in France that brought about the end of the war.

Beginning in 1940, the army recruited Comanches, Choctaws, Hopis, Cherokees, and others to transmit messages. The army had special American Indian recruiters working to find Comanches in Oklahoma who would enlist.



Comanche Code Talkers of the 4th Infantry Division, 1941. **3**

The Marine Corps recruited Navajo Code Talkers in 1941 and 1942. Philip Johnston was a World War I veteran who had heard about the successes of the Choctaw telephone squad. Johnston, although not Indian, had grown up on the Navajo reservation. In 1942, he suggested to the Marine Corps that Navajos and other tribes could be very helpful in maintaining communications secrecy. After viewing a demonstration of messages sent in the Navajo language, the Marine Corps was so impressed that they recruited 29 Navajos in two weeks to develop a code within their language.





United States Marine Corps Platoon 382, made up of the first 29 Navajo Code Talkers, 1942. **4**

After the Navajo code was developed, the Marine Corps established a Code Talking school. As the war progressed, more than 400 Navajos were eventually recruited as Code Talkers. The training was intense. Following their basic training, the Code Talkers completed extensive training in communications and memorizing the code.

Some Code Talkers enlisted, others were drafted. Many of the Code Talkers who served were under age and had to lie about their age to join. Some were just 15 years old. Ultimately, there were Code Talkers from at least 16 tribes who served in the army, the marines, and the navy.

*All I thought when I went in the Marine Corps was going to give me a belt of ammunition, and a rifle, a steel helmet, and a uniform. Go and shoot some of those Japanese. That’s what I thought; but later on they told us differently, you know different style, purpose of why they got us in.*—Chester Nez, Navajo Code Talker, National Museum of the American Indian interview, 2004

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Many American Indian Code Talkers in World War II used their everyday tribal languages to convey messages. A message such as, “Send more ammunition to the front,” would just be translated into the Native language and sent over the radio. These became known as Type Two Codes.

However, the Navajos, Comanches, Hopis, and Meskwakis developed and used special codes based on their languages. These became known as Type One Codes.

To develop their Type One Code, the original 29 Navajo Code Talkers first came up with a Navajo word for each letter of the English alphabet. Since they had to memorize all the words, they used things that were familiar to them, such as kinds of animals.

*So we start talking about different things, animals, sea creatures, birds, eagles, hawks, and all those domestic animals. Why don’t we use those names of different animals—from A to Z. So A, we took a red ant that we live with all the time. B we took a bear, Yogi the Bear, C a Cat, D a Dog, E an Elk, F, Fox, G, a goat and so on down the line*.—Chester Nez, Navajo Code Talker, National Museum of the American Indian interview, 2004

Here are some of the words they used:

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Letter** | **Navajo word** | **English word** |
| C | MOASI | Cat |
| D | LHA-CHA-EH | DOG |
| E | DZEH | Elk |
| I | TKIN | Ice |
| O | NE-AHS-JAH | Owl |
| R | GAH | Rabbit |
| V | A-KEH-DI-GLINI | Victor |

See if you can translate the following coded message:

MOASI   NE-AHS-JAH   LHA-CHA-EH   DZEH   GAH   DZEH   MOASI   DZEH   TKIN   A-KEH-DI-GLINI   DZEH   LHA-CHA-EH

This is the English translation:

C-O-D-E   R-E-C-E-I-V-E-D

Here’s how the message is decoded:

MOASI (C-Cat), NE-AHS-JAH (O-Owl), LHA-CHA-EH (D-Dog), DZEH (E-Elk), GAH (R-Rabbit), DZEH (E-Elk), MOASI (C-Cat), DZEH (E-Elk), TKIN (I-Ice), A-KEH-DI-GLINI (V-Victor), DZEH (E Elk), LHA-CHA-EH (D-Dog)

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Unidentified American Indian Marine uses a “Walky-Talky” to send communications in the South Pacific, November 1943. **5**

On the battlefield, the work of sending coded messages was extremely serious. Being able to keep messages secret could make the difference between winning and losing a battle—or affect how many lives were saved or lost.

Code Talkers did more than speak into a hand-held radio or phone. They had to know how to operate both wire and radio equipment, and often had to carry it on their backs. They had to know how to set up and maintain the electronic communication wires, or lines. Sometimes their messages were broadcast over a wide area, helping to direct bigger operations. At other times, messages related to a smaller group, such as a platoon.

Code Talkers were given the messages in English. Without writing them down, they translated and sent them to another Code Talker. After the message was transmitted and received, it was written down in English and entered into a message logbook. The Code Talkers also sent messages in English. Messages were only coded when absolute security was needed.

*The commanding officer, they give you a message that’s written. It’s just short talking about how much ammunition and certain map area that Marines are getting killed. They need more machine gun ammunition. You translate that as small as you can.* —John Brown, Jr., Navajo Code Talker, National Museum of the American Indian interview, 2004

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The Navajo and Hopi were assigned to service in the Pacific in the war against Japan. The Comanches fought the Germans in Europe, and the Meskwakis fought them in North Africa. Code Talkers from other tribes fought at various locations in Europe, the Pacific, North Africa, and elsewhere.



These maps of Europe, the Pacific Islands, and Africa during World War II show the territory occupied by the enemies of the United States and where some of the important battles occurred. **6**

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Sixth Fleet during the invasion of Iwo Jima, with Mt. Suribachi in the background, 1945. **7**

Like all soldiers, Code Talkers carry many memories of their war experiences. Some memories are easy to revisit. Others are very difficult. Some veterans do not really like to discuss these memories, while others can more comfortably recall them. They remember how fierce and dangerous some of the fighting was. Some remember when their fellow soldiers were wounded or killed. They remember the noise and the violence of war. Others recall being prisoners of war. Sometimes they have more pleasant memories of different cultures and places that they had never seen before and probably would never see again. They also remember how their American Indian spirituality was important to them during the war.

*The, uh Mount Suribachi was on our left side just looming up. Here we started going over aboard the ship going down the net into a landing craft ship, a smaller ship. We took all our gear then we went down there. And we circulate round and round for awhile until they say go. When they say go, all those little bitty landing ships they go together right down to the beach. Before we hit the beach, the uh, officer on that ship he tell us to pray in your own belief. Me I just took out my corn powder as I was told by our medicine man and then pray. So, I think some of the kids join me to pray.* —Sam Tso, Navajo Code Talker, National Museum of the American Indian interview, 2004

*Utah Beach in Normandy was something else. Everybody asked me if I would go through it again, and I said, no, but I could train the younger ones how we used our language and let them go ahead and do it because it was hell*.—Charles Chibitty, Comanche Code Talker, National Museum of the American Indian interview, 2004

*A cup of hot water in the morning for coffee. A little bowl of soup at noon, then two potatoes at night. That’s what you live on. That’s what I lived on for three years*.—Frank Sanache, Meskwaki Code Talker (discussing the meals provided for him as a prisoner of war), National Museum of the American Indian interview, 2004

*We prayed to the sun, stars, whatever. It’s our way of keeping in contact with somebody. Our superior or whatever you might call him. That’s how we do it.—*Franklin Shupla, Hopi, National Museum of the American Indian interview, 2004

"Code Talking - Native Words Native Warriors." *National Museum of the American Indian*. Smithsonian Institute , n.d. Web. 3 May 2017.