

American Airpower Heritage Museum's Navajo Code Talkers Midland, Texas

The Navajo Code Talkers traveling exhibit was one of several major exhibits I wrote for the American Airpower Heritage Museum. This particular exhibit was one of three traveling exhibits highlighting the World War II contributions of minority groups overlooked until relatively recently. The client's goal for the style and tone of the text as well as the look of the layout was a clean, informative magazine page.

Navajo Code Talkers

America's Secret Weapon

When six American soldiers raised the American flag on Iwo Jima on February 23, 1945, report of the victory was transmitted in Navajo:

"Naastsosi Thanzie dibeh Shida Dahnestsa Tkin Shush Wollachee Moasi Lin Achi."

These words told the world that the American flag flew over Mount Suribachi. The month-long battle for Iwo Jima was won.

An elite corps of Navajo Marines, called Code Talkers, helped win the war in the Pacific during World War II. They developed a military code based on their native language that defied every attempt to decipher it.

"Were it not for the Navajos, the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima."
—Major Howard Connor, 5th Marine Division Signal Officer

Courage Under Fire

With bullets whining and men dying all around them, the Navajo Code Talkers quickly and accurately transmitted more than 800 messages without error during the first two days of the battle for Iwo Jima. They also saw action in some of the bloodiest battles in the Pacific, including Guadalcanal, Guam, and Okinawa. Without their speed, skill and accuracy, thousands more American soldiers might have been killed or wounded in the intense fighting in the Pacific island campaigns.

New Life for an Old Idea

The idea to use Native American languages as military codes was not new. During World War I, the U.S. Army used Choctaw Indians to convey sensitive verbal communications over field telephones. Just before the United States entered World War II, it worked with a variety of Native American tribes to determine if their languages could be used for a military code, including Oneidas, Chippewas, Sacs, Foxes, and Comanches. However, these efforts were discontinued because Native American languages lacked modern military terms.

In early 1942, Philip Johnston, a civil engineer for the City of Los Angeles, proposed using the Navajo language for secret communications to the U.S. Marine Corps. He had served with the U.S. Army in France during World War I, and was fully aware of the need for secure battlefield communications between units. The son of Presbyterian missionaries, Johnston was raised on the Navajo reservation near Flagstaff, Arizona and spoke Navajo.

American Airpower Heritage Museum's Navajo Code Talkers (*continued*)

Why Navajo?

Navajo is an oral language of incredible complexity. Its subtleties of inflection, tone and syntax make it difficult for non-natives to learn. A tonal language, its vowels rise and fall, and these changes in pitch determine the meanings of words.

The complexity of its syntax is evident in its verb structure. A single verb contains its own subjects, objects and adverbs, and can translate into a complete English sentence. Perhaps most importantly, the Navajo tribe was the only American Indian group that had not been diligently studied by visiting German anthropology students during the 1930s.

Weapons Testing

To prove his idea, Johnston brought a handful of Navajo volunteers to meet with Marine Corps Major General Clayton Vogel, Commanding General of the Pacific Fleet's Amphibious Force, and several Marine Corps observers. On February 28, 1942, they gathered at Camp Elliott in San Diego, California to test Johnston's proposal.

Messages were given to one group of Navajo volunteers. These messages were translated into Navajo and transmitted via field telephone to a second group of volunteers in another location. The message was then translated back into English. The speed and accuracy with which the Navajos transmitted the message amazed General Vogel, and he recommended that Navajo volunteers be recruited as Marine Corps communications specialists.

Developing the Code

Their first task was to develop a military code based on the Navajo language. It had to be short, accurate, and easy to memorize. Earlier experiments using American Indian languages for military communications simply translated the messages in the native language. The Navajos developed a formal code that substituted words from the natural world for military terms. For example, aircraft were named after birds: a fighter was a dahhetihhi, or hummingbird; a dive bomber was a gini, or chicken hawk; and a torpedo plane was a taschizzie, or swallow. Ships were named after fish: a battleship was a lotso, or whale, and a submarine was a beshlo, or iron fish.

The code also needed an alphabet for spelling out proper names. Again the Navajos turned to nature. The Marines' Able Baker Charlie became Wollachee Shush Moasi, or Ant Bear Cat. Alternate words were eventually chosen for each letter so that a listener could not detect any specific pattern that might allow the code to be broken. By the end of 1942, the Navajo Code contained 263 code words. Nearly 400 more words were added by the end of the war.

Never Broken

After the code was complete, Navy intelligence officers spent three weeks trying to break it. They failed. Even the Japanese, who were skilled code breakers, were baffled. Lieutenant General Seizo Arisue, Japanese Chief of Intelligence, admitted that, while they deciphered all the codes used by the U.S. Army and Army Air Corps, they never cracked the code used by the Marines.