

# *The Unbreakable Code*

By Marc Phillip Yablonka

*The unique language of the Navajo Nation provides a secure communications link during the island fighting of World War II*

“We were all pinned down. Our tanks were bogged down in three or four feet of volcanic ash. The only way to move was to crawl,” recalls Sam Billison of the month he spent on Iwo Jima in February 1945.

Billison was not your ordinary World War II grunt. What set him apart from the other U.S. Marines in the South Pacific was the distinction he had of being one of 200 Twentieth Century warriors who would come to be called the Navajo Code Talkers.

The U.S. government had gleaned the Code Talkers from the Navajo National beginning in February 1942. By that time the American intelligence community was aghast over the fact that the Imperial Japanese Forces had broken all codes used by the Allied Pacific Command, leaving it at a great disadvantage. In fact, by 1942, the Japanese were on the march in a conquest that would soon include the Philippines, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indochina, the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) and New Guinea.

Enter Los Angeles civil engineer and World War I veteran Philip Johnston. The son of a missionary, he had grown up on the reservation and spoke the Navajo language fluently. Johnston had a sense that the Navajo tongue might prove to be indecipherable, since it is not only complex with many dialects but also unwritten without an alphabet or symbols.

Aware of the military’s search for a code that could bypass the Japanese defenses, Johnston decided to approach Major General Clayton B. Vogel, the commanding general, Amphibious Corps, Pacific Fleet. Under simulated combat conditions, he demonstrated for Vogel how the Navajos could encode, transmit and decode a three-line message in 20 seconds—something it took cryptographs of the day 30 minutes to do. Needless to say, the general was impressed and soon enthusiastically recommended that the commandant of the Marine Corps recruit 200 Navajos.

Before that could be done, however, the Code Talkers had to develop an intricate system that even fooled other Navajos whose command of English was not up to par with their native skills. “We arranged a phonetic alphabet, identifying words from A to Z, which we memorized,” says Albuquerque native John Bornw, one of the first Code Talkers, who, at 78, has been a Navajo Tribal Council chief as well as a social worker counseling his people.



*While his unit consolidates its position, a code talker on Saipan mans an observation post overlooking one of the island’s cities.*

“We would make associations,” adds Albert Smith, Code Talker from Gallup, N.M. “The Navajo words for different birds, ‘Gini,’ meaning Chicken Hawk, would be used for Dive Bomber, ‘Da-he-tih-hi,’ which means Hummingbird, stood for fighter plane.” When codes for ships required transmission, Navajo words for different varieties of fish were substituted. All in all, nearly 200 such associations developed. Describing the process, Smith says, “The officer would write out a message, then we would encode it.” For words that were not in our vocabulary, we would make up names from animals, plants and metals.

To signify divisions, regiments and battalions, the Navajo used their Clan system. “In Navajo culture, the family united was determined by wherever you wanted to live,” explains Smith. “If you that were by water, you would call your clan the Water clan. If you moved near a salt-water area, you would then be known as the Salt Clan.”

Despite its marvelous intricacies and Vogel’s approval, the code was not an easy sell to Washington. For one thing, the notion of sending messages via Native American languages was nothing new. Indeed, during World War I, Choctaw had been successfully used by the 141st Infantry Division to send and transmit telephonic orders, prompting the Signal Corps to include the Oneida, Chippewa and Comanche languages as well. Even at that, the feeling still persisted that Indian communications were not likely to be useful to the military on any large scale.

Then, too, many German students had come to the United States after “The Great War” to study Native Americans. From this, the Army concluded that the Germans had a good understanding of most Native American languages and could easily share that information with their allies in Japan. In reality, though, fewer than 30 non-Navajos *worldwide* reportedly understood the language in 1940.

Arguments, pro and con ensued until, finally, government leaders became convinced of the viability of using Navajo in the U.S. war effort. Thirty Navajos, hand-picked by the Marines from the reservation, would end up paving the way for the Code Talkers who were to follow.



*On an island in the South Pacific, two code talkers use a field telephone to relay orders in their own tongue.*

John Brown, one of the original thirty, will never forget the day Marine recruiters came to the reservation. Eighteen at the time, he had graduated from the Indian High School in Albuquerque and was working as a janitor in a Fort Defiance, Ariz., hospital. “They told us we had three days to get ready. But I lived 60 miles from home and there was no such thing as pavement on the reservation in those days. I never got back to Chinle [Ariz.] to tell my parents good-bye.”

The recruiters simply swore in the Navajos, loaded them up and carted them overnight to Camp Elliot, just outside San Diego. Here or at Camp Pendleton, the Code Talkers would endure rigorous training that—aside from physical conditioning—also included intensive studies in their native Navajo and English.

After the sheltered life of the reservation, Brown knew life in the Corps would not be easy. “In the Marines, you learned to take orders,” he remembered.

That was a lesson that Sam Billison and the other Code Talkers learned too, but taking orders often included discrimination beyond being labeled “chief” or standard Marine Corps training.

“In Boot Camp, I had a lot of fights and soldiers calling me ‘you damned Indian.’ It really bothered me until I found out that this was common language in the Corps,” said Billison, 73, a retired Wichita Falls, Tex., high school principal.

Reflecting on his war experiences, Brown recalls almost getting shot several times during the constant barrage from Japanese snipers. “They really surprised me,” he says. Memories also remain of hunkering down in his foxhole; the sirens signaling Mitsubishi Zeros taking off from Tokyo; and hearing allied anti-aircraft fire finding its targets. Through it all, though, Brown feels his Indian heritage enabled him to withstand fears that some of his fellow marines could not.

Another Code Talker, Albuquerque native Thomas Begay landed at Iwo Jima. “When I hit the beach, I was numb, really scared,” he said. A veteran also of the Korean War, the 73-year-old Begay arrived on the island, together with the 27th and 28th Marine Regiments of the 5th Marine Division, Nisei Japanese Army interpreters, flame throwers and the 13th Engineers. He was charged with setting up the radio network and testing radios, as he had been trained to do back at Camp Pendleton.

He had been told by his commanding officer that it would only take a couple of days to get the Japanese off the island. “I heard a whistle overhead and hit the deck,” he said, the incoming narrowly missing him. “I don’t remember what happened next. There was debris on the beach and bodies all over. It was a horrible thing to see.”

“I had to maintain radio communication. I couldn’t throw my radio down and hide. I just lay low and did my job. It was a vital scene. I was surrounded by infantry. They were pretty good shooters, but the Japs were underground with their 16-inch guns strafing us. We couldn’t do anything to them because they were in their tunnels. The Japs went to town.”

The volley that almost cost Begay his life actually started the battle for Iwo, which lasted 37 days and culminated in the famous scene of Marines planting the U.S. flag atop battle-torn Mount Surubachi. “We made way for {Pima Indian} Ira Hayes to put that flag up,” Begay says.

The Navajo Code Talkers proved their love of this country under horrific conditions. To the man, almost all of them felt that, not only were they fighting for their country—its treatment of the Indian in the past century aside—they were also fighting for Mother Earth. “All native Americans are very patriotic,” insists Billison. “We consider the land our mother. We didn’t want the Japs or Germans to take her.”

During the course of the war, many of the Code Talkers received Bronze Stars and Navy Crosses. “We made our contribution as Navajos toward ending the war and showed just how good Americans we are,” reflects Begay. A nation’s recognition of that collective contribution finally came in 1981, when Ronald Reagan presented the Code Talkers with a Presidential Citation.



*A code talker on Okinawa beats out a native call on an abandoned drum found at a shrine*