The Navajo Code Talkers

**Summary:** During World War II, a group of young Navajo men created an unbreakable code that helped the United States defeat Japan and win the war in the Pacific.


**The Code That Couldn’t Be Broken**

For 12 years, Sam Sandoval was forbidden to speak his own language. Like many generations of Navajo, he was sent away from his home to a boarding school as a child. There, he was forced to abandon (give up) much of his native culture and speak only in English.

Then, on December 7, 1941, Japanese planes attacked the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The assault killed more than 2,400 Americans and sent the U.S. into World War II (1939-1945) against Japan and its allies. Like millions of other Americans after Pearl Harbor, Sandoval signed up to defend his country, enlisting in the Marines at age 19. But he wouldn’t be an ordinary (normal) recruit. To his surprise, the Marines chose him for an experiment: to help devise (think of) and use a secret code based on the Navajo language. Sandoval would become part of a legendary group of some 400 Navajos known as the code talkers. Their unbroken code helped turn the tide in key battles in the Pacific Ocean and win the war against Japan.

For the U.S. and its allies, winning the Pacific would be a massive operation. Communication was among the biggest challenges. Relaying battle plans and controlling troop movements over thousands of miles of ocean required Marines to talk by radio—and in code so that the enemy...
couldn’t understand. But the Japanese were highly skilled at deciphering (breaking) codes. It seemed that they could anticipate (predict) the Americans’ every move.

A Complex Language

In Los Angeles, California, a man named Philip Johnston thought of a solution. The son of Christian missionaries who worked with the Navajo, Johnston had grown up on the tribe’s reservation, a huge 27,000-square-mile area in New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah. He knew how complex the Navajo language was. Because there was no widely used written version, almost no non-natives could understand it. Johnston contacted Marine officers with the idea of developing a code based on Navajo.

Devising the Code

To most Navajos, that idea would have seemed highly ironic. For years beginning in the 1860s, the U.S. government had forced Navajo children to attend boarding schools designed to replace their native ways—and language—with more “American” ones.

Now Navajos were being asked to use their once-forbidden (not allowed) language to help protect the U.S. In early 1942, the Marines started a project at Camp Pendleton near San Diego, California, with 29 young men. The Navajos were first given 211 common terms used in battle. For each, they devised (thought of) a code word with a unique Navajo spin. For example, they called fighter planes, which were smaller and lighter than bombers, hummingbirds.

The Navajos memorized the entire list, allowing them to be incredibly fast in transmitting messages. In field tests, they could send a four-line message in 20 seconds. (A standard coding machine took 30 minutes.) Best of all, no one other than the code talkers—not even other Navajos—could understand the messages. Military officials were impressed. But would the code work on the battlefield?

A Trial by Fire

They soon found out. In July 1942, the Japanese invaded Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands, giving them an air base even closer to Australia. Alarmed, U.S. military officials organized a hurried invasion of the island. On August 7, the first wave of Marines stormed the beach in what would be a six-month ordeal. In November, the code talkers joined them.

The fighting was brutal. Marines trudged through thick jungle, facing death at every step. Because of the jungle tree line, U.S. planes couldn’t see where to bomb Japanese positions or drop supplies. The code talkers and their radios were often the only lifeline the Marines had to medicine, ammunition, food, and each other.

Chester Nez, one of the original 29 code talkers, later wrote about working nonstop for 24 hours at a time, crammed into a foxhole (hole to protect troops). He described his first radio transmission, calling in an attack on a Japanese machine gun that had his patrol pinned down.

“A runner approached, handing me a message written in English. [I transmitted the message to another code talker:] ‘Enemy machine gun nest on your right flank. Destroy.’ Suddenly, just after my message was received, the Japanese gun exploded, destroyed by U.S. artillery.”
Working so quickly with a code the enemy couldn’t crack made the Navajos a valuable new weapon. By the time the Japanese finally withdrew from Guadalcanal in February 1943, the code talkers had proved themselves.

**Taking Iwo Jima**

But the fighting was far from over. The war in the Pacific became a relentless series of battles over strategic islands, leading up to a possible U.S. invasion of Japan. Sam Sandoval went through training in 1942 and soon was “in the thick of it,” as he would say. He would see action at Guadalcanal, Bougainville, Peleliu, Guam, and Okinawa—some of the most fearsome battles of the war.

In each engagement, the code talkers were crucial. One of the bloodiest fights was over the island of Iwo Jima, beginning in February 1945. In the month it took the Marines to take the island, the battle claimed the lives of some 6,800 Americans and 22,000 Japanese.

“The entire operation was directed by Navajo code,” Signal Officer Major Howard Connor later said. “They sent and received over 800 messages without an error. Were it not for the Navajo code talkers, the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima.”

**Celebrating the Code Talkers**

The war dragged on until August 1945, when the U.S. dropped two atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Sandoval still remembers the greatest message he ever decoded, on August 14: “The Imperial forces of Japan have surrendered.”

Soon the code talkers would begin coming home, but not to the post-war economic boom that the rest of the U.S. enjoyed. Instead, the Navajos headed back to their reservation, where jobs and opportunity were scarce (not a lot of).

To make matters worse, the code talkers couldn’t tell people what they had done. The U.S. government had ordered their operation top secret. The Navajo code wasn’t declassified until 1968.

Today, more than 75 years after their first mission in 1942, the Navajos are recognized as national heroes. In a White House ceremony held by President Donald Trump to honor them last November, 90-year-old code talker Peter MacDonald said that their act of patriotism crossed all boundaries of language and culture. “What we did,” he said, “truly represents who we are as Americans.”

Sandoval is also proud of his service to the country, of being a Navajo, and of his unique part in using a military code that was never cracked by the enemy. “Many have tried throughout the world to break that code,” he says. “No one can.”
Assignment 1 - Guided Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer. When you locate the answer for the multiple choice questions, if you are working online please highlight the correct response using the highlight feature on the toolbar above (the highlight feature looks like a little marker) or circle the correct response if you are working on a paper copy.

1. What claim is the author, Bryan Brown, making in this text?
   a. The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor plunged the United States into World War II.
   b. Although the Navajo language was prohibited in boarding schools, it became a secret weapon that helped the U.S. defeat Japan.
   c. Philip Johnston, the son of missionaries, grew up on the Navajo reservation.
   d. Some 6,800 Americans died at the battle of Iwo Jima.

2. Which evidence best supports that claim?
   a. “Navajos were being asked to use their once forbidden language to help protect the U.S.”
   b. “The Japanese were highly skilled at deciphering codes.”
   c. “Marines trudged through thick jungle, facing death at every step.”
   d. “In field tests, [the Navajos] could send a four line message in 20 seconds.”

3. Which was an effect of the code talkers’ efforts?
   a. The Navajo reservation became prosperous.
   b. The tide of the war in the Pacific turned.
   c. Fewer Navajos joined the Marines.
   d. English-speaking schools for Navajos closed.

4. Which of these statements is an opinion?
   a. Chester Nez was one of the original 29 code talkers.
   b. The code talkers were the most valuable weapon against the Japanese in World War II.
   c. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor crippled the U.S. Navy’s Pacific fleet.
   d. Peter MacDonald said their accomplishment crossed all boundaries of language and culture.

5. The author, Bryan Brown wrote this text as what type of source?
   a. Newspaper Article
   b. Journal Entry
   c. Letter
   d. Magazine Article

Assignment 2 - Close-Reading Questions

Directions: Using the above text, answer each question in complete sentences to the best of your abilities.

1. ANALYZING DETAILS: What role did the Navajo code talkers play in World War II?