Navajo Code Talkers

by Andrew Santella
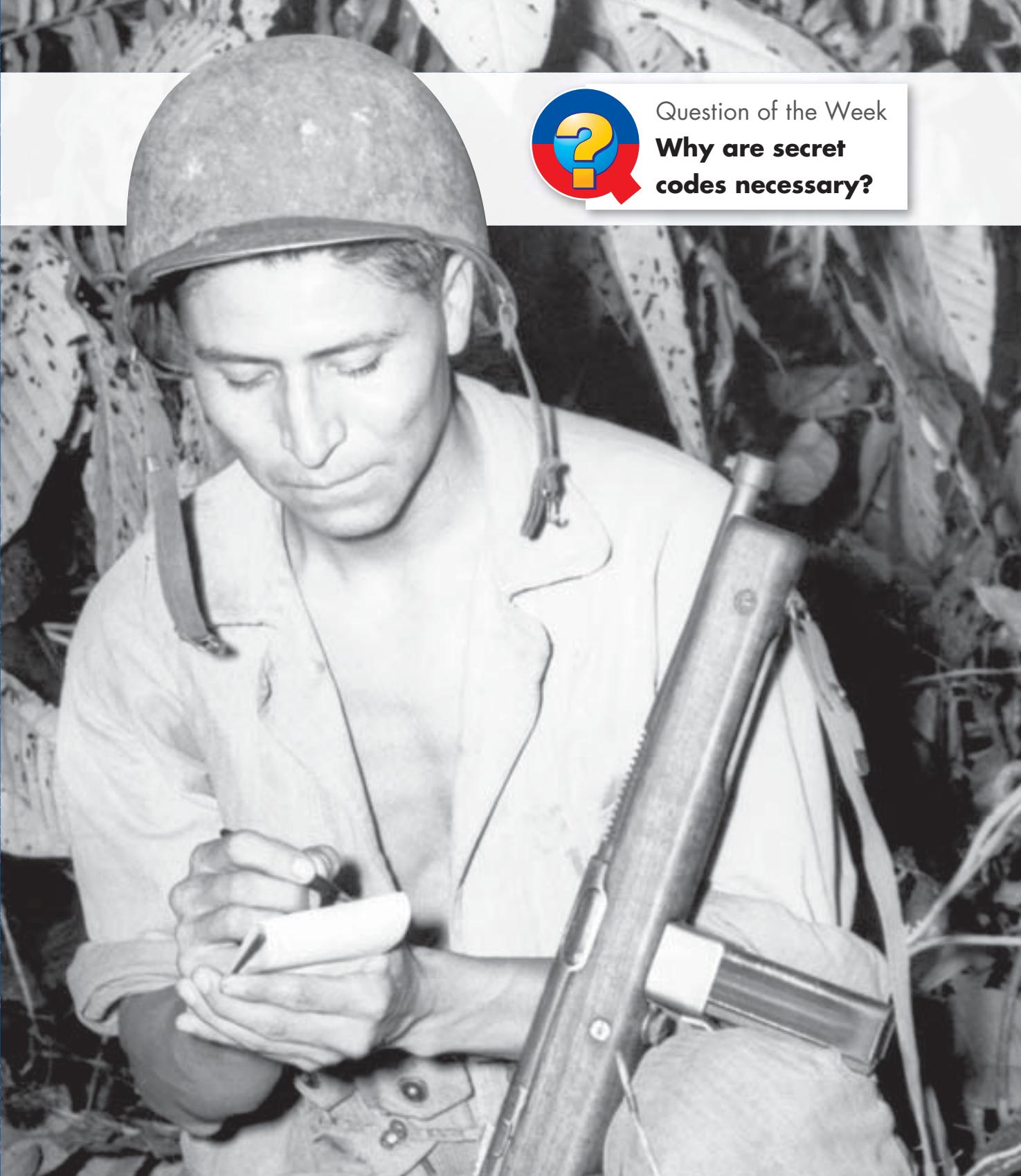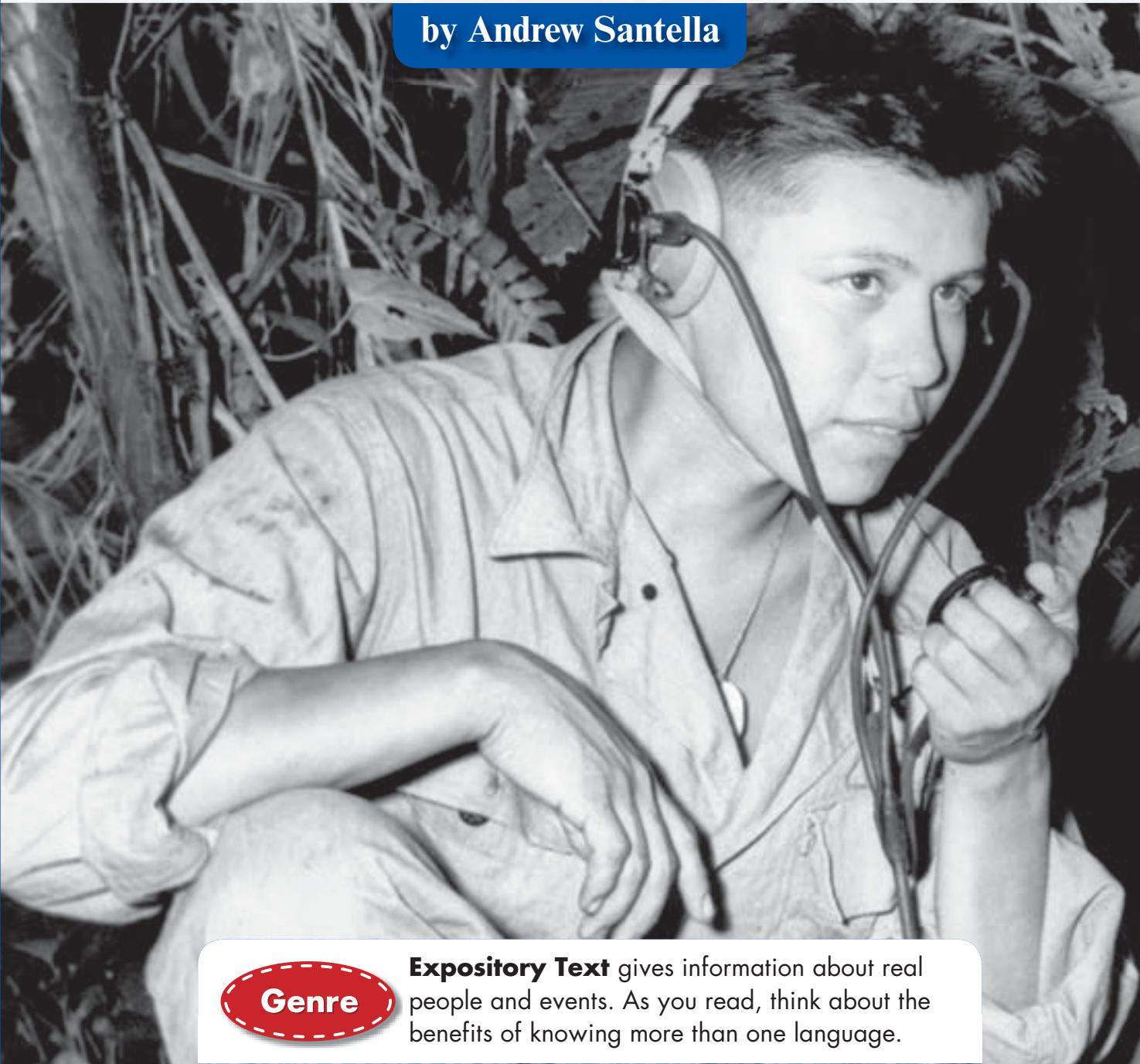
Genre

Expository Text gives information about real people and events. As you read, think about the benefits of knowing more than one language.

Wol-la-chee • Ant • Shush • Bear • Ba-goshi • Cow • Lha-cha-eh • Dog • Dzeh • Elk • Ma-e Ah-tad • Girl • Lin • Horse • Tkin • Ice • Klizzie-yazzie • Kid • Ah-jad • Leg • Na-as-tso-si Mouse • A-chin • Nose • Ne-ahs-jah • Owl • Bi-so-dih • Pig • Ca-yeilth • Quiver • Gah • Rabbh • Snake • A-woh • Tooth • Wol-la-chee • Ant • Shush • Bear • Ba-goshi • Cow • Lha-cha-eh • Dog • Dzeh • Elk • Ma-e • Fox • Ah-tad • Girl • Lin • Horse • Tkin • Ice • Klizzie-yazzie • Kiad • Leg • Na-as-tso-si • Mouse • A-chin • Nose • Ne-ahs-jah • Owl • Bi-so-dih • Pig • Ca-yeilth • Quiver • Gah • Rabbit • Klesh • Snake • A-woh • Tooth • Wol-la-chee • Ant • Shush • Beaoshi • Cow • Lha-cha-eh • Dog • Dzeh • Elk • Ma-e • Fox • Ah-tad • Girl • Lin • Horse • Tkin • Ice • Klizzie-yazzie • Kid • Ah-jad • Leg • Na-as-tso-si • Mouse • A-chin • Nose • Ne-ahs-wl • Bi-so-dih • Pig • Ca-yeilth • Quiver • Gah • Rabbit • Klesh • Snake • A-woh • Tooth Wol-la-chee • Ant • Shush • Bear • Ba-goshi • Cow • Lha-cha-eh • Dog • Dzeh • Elk • Ma-e Ah-tad • Girl • Lin • Horse • Tkin • Ice • Klizzie-yazzie • Kid • Ah-jad • Leg • Na-as-tso-si

Speaking the Language

At Roy Hawthorne's school, there was one sure way to get in trouble. Hawthorne lived on the Navajo reservation in New Mexico in the 1930s and attended a school run by the United States government. Students at the school were strictly forbidden to speak their native Navajo language. If they spoke anything other than English, they would likely have their mouths washed out with soap.

Hawthorne never stopped speaking Navajo, though. At home and at play, he still used the language that had been passed down through many Navajo generations. Years later, Hawthorne's knowledge of the Navajo language paid off for him and for his country. Hawthorne became a code talker.

Former code talkers Roy Hawthorne (left) and John Brown Jr. attend the premiere of the 2002 movie *Windtalkers,* which tells their story.

A Navajo family stands in front of their home in the mid-1930s.

The code talkers were a group of about 400 Navajos who served in the United States Marine Corps during World War II (1939-1945). Their job was to send and receive secret coded messages. The code talkers invented a code that was never broken by the enemy. The code helped the United States and its allies win the war. The code they invented was based on the Navajo language—the same language that once got Navajo children like Roy Hawthorne in trouble.

A World at War

On December 7, 1941, Japanese forces attacked the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. The next day, the United States declared war on Japan, and U.S. forces were soon at war around the world.

Victory depended upon the ability to quickly communicate battle plans and other important information over long distances.

The Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Top Code talkers Preston Toledo (left) and his cousin Frank Toledo send coded messages over a wireless radio.

Bottom Members of the Japanese Army listen in on radio broadcasts during a training session in World War II.

By the 1940s, the military had developed new wireless radios that could send and receive messages. They were bulky and heavy, but they allowed troops to stay in almost constant contact with other friendly forces. The trouble was, the enemy could hear these radio conversations too. The Japanese military used groups of English-speaking soldiers to listen in on American military radio messages.

The Japanese hoped to learn details about American defenses or troop movements. They hoped to get advance warning of American plans.

The U.S. military would develop codes to make it more difficult for the enemy to understand their messages. However, enemy code breakers would figure out these codes, and then new ones were needed.

What was needed was a simple, but unbreakable, code. The solution came not from the military, but from a Los Angeles engineer named Philip Johnston. He was the son of missionaries who had spent years working with the Navajos.

Though Johnston wasn't a Navajo himself, he had grown up on a Navajo reservation and knew the Navajo language well. Johnston had read about the military's efforts to develop secret codes. He believed that a code based on the Navajo language would be almost impossible to break.

Johnston was one of just a few non-Navajos who could speak and understand the Navajo language. He knew from personal experience how hard it was for non-Navajos to learn the language.

Philip Johnston's Idea

Johnston contacted Marine Corps offices in southern California and eventually arranged a meeting with Major James E. Jones. However, military leaders knew that even students from other countries, including Japan and Germany, had begun to study Native American languages.

In response to Jones's doubts, Johnston explained how the Navajo language could be used to create a code. He said the Navajo language was not as well understood as other Native American languages.
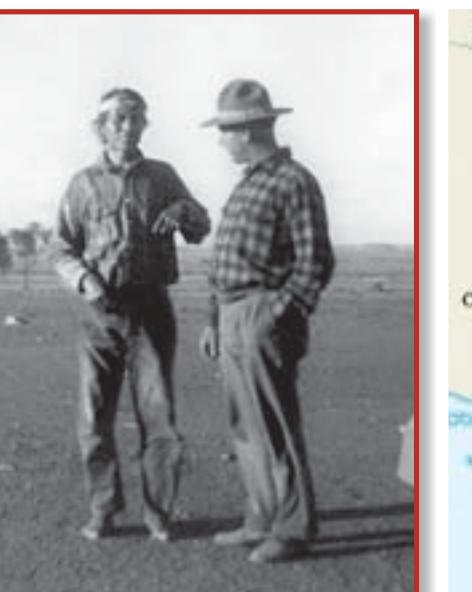
Above Philip Johnston (right) talks with a Navajo friend in 1941.
Right A map of the Navajo reservation and surrounding area

Even if enemy code breakers could understand other languages, they would likely be puzzled by Navajo.

Johnston's presentation convinced Jones. In March 1942, he arranged for Johnston to meet with Major General Clayton Vogel and Colonel Wethered Woodward from U.S. Marines headquarters in Washington, D.C. Johnston sold them on the idea, too, and the top leadership of the Marines agreed to give Johnston's plan a tryout. The Marines would recruit a group of Navajos, who would develop a code using their language.

To find Navajos to enlist in the Marines' code program, recruiters traveled to the Navajo reservation. The largest in the United States, the Navajo reservation stretches across parts of Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico.

The Navajo code project was top secret, so the Navajos didn't know they were signing up to be code talkers. They knew only that they were joining the Marines and helping to defend the United States.

Military Training

In May 1942, the new Marines from the Navajo reservation were sent to the Marine Corps Recruit Training Depot in San Diego. For many, the trip marked their first time on a bus. Some had never left the reservation before. Most had never been in a big city. Like most Marines, they struggled to complete the seven exhausting weeks of training.

In some ways, the training course clashed with Navajo traditions. Many Navajos wore their hair in thick braids, but as Marine recruits they had to shave off their hair. Marine drill instructors insisted on looking directly into the eyes of recruits, but in the Navajo culture this is considered rude. Even wearing a military uniform seemed foreign to some of the Navajos. Despite the difficulties, the 29 Navajos completed boot camp and graduated to the next step in their training. They were about to become code talkers.

New recruits stayed in barracks like these at Camp Elliott.

The original 29 code talkers were sworn in at Fort Wingate, New Mexico, in 1942.

Creating the Code

After boot camp, the Navajos were sent to Camp Elliott, a Marine Corps post in southern California. There they received training in radio communications and basic electronics. They learned to use, care for, and repair the radios that would send their coded messages. Only at Camp Elliott did it become clear to the Navajos what their special mission would be. Finally, it came time to create the unbreakable code.

A Navajo code talker named Chester Nez later recalled how the code came to be. "We were told to use our language to come up with words representing each letter, from A to Z," he explained. "And they also told us to come up with code words for military terms. They put us all in a room to work it out and at first everyone thought we'd never make it. It seemed impossible, because even among ourselves, we didn't agree on all the right words."

However, the Navajos devised a code that worked extremely well. They made a list of Navajo words that would represent each letter in the English language alphabet. For example, the Navajo word for apple (*be–la–sana*) stood for the letter A. The Navajo word for bear (*shush*) stood for the letter B, and the Navajo word for cat (*moasi*) stood for the letter C. The code talkers sent messages by using Navajo code words to spell out words in English. For example, to say "Navy," code talkers would say the Navajo words that stood for each letter: *Nesh–chee* (or nut, for N), *wol–la–chee* (or ant, for A), *a–keh–di–glini* (or victor, for V), and *tsah–as–zih* (or yucca, for Y).

Later, the Navajos made the code more difficult to crack by adding more code words. Some English letters could be represented by as many as three different Navajo words. For example, for the letter A, code talkers could use *wol–la–chee* (ant), *be–la–sana* (apple), or *tse–nill* (ax).

Sample of the Navajo Dictionary

English Letter	Navajo Word	Meaning
A	Wol-la-chee	Ant
B	Shush	Bear
C	Ba-goshi	Cow
D	Lha-cha-eh	Dog
E	Dzeh	Elk
F	Ma-e	Fox
G	Ah-tad	Girl
H	Lin	Horse
I	Tkin	Ice
J	Yil-doi	Jerk
K	Klizzie-yazzie	Kid
L	Ah-jad	Leg
M	Na-as-tso-si	Mouse
N	A-chin	Nose
O	Ne-ahs-jah	Owl
P	Bi-so-dih	Pig
Q	Ca-yeilth	Quiver
R	Gah	Rabbit
S	Klesh	Snake
T	A-woh	Tooth
U	Shi-da	Uncle
V	A-keh-di-glini	Victor
W	Gloe-ih	Weasel
X	Al-na-as-dzoh	Cross
Y	Tsah-as-zih	Yucca
Z	Besh-do-tliz	Zinc

English Word	Navajo Word	Meaning
Corps	Din-neh-ih	Clan
Switchboard	Ya-ih-e-tih-ih	Central
Dive bomber	Gini	Chicken hawk
Torpedo plane	Tas-chizzie	Swallow
Observation plane	Ne-as-jah	Owl
Fighter plane	Da-he-tih-hi	Hummingbird
Bomber	Jay-sho	Buzzard
Alaska	Beh-hga	With winter
America	Ne-he-mah	Our mother
Australia	Cha-yes-desi	Rolled hat
Germany	Besh-be-cha-he	Iron hat
Philippines	Ke-yah-da-na-lhe	Floating island

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Mouse • A-chin • Nose • Ne-ahs-jah • Owl • Bi-so-dih • Pig • Ca-yeilth • Quiver • Gah • Rabbh • Snake • A-woh • Tooth • Wol-la-chee • Ant • Shush • Bear • Ba-goshi • Cow • Lha-cha-eh

Not all words had to be spelled out letter by letter, however. The code talkers came up with a list of Navajo words or phrases that could be used to represent common military terms. Many of these code words came from the Navajo knowledge of the natural world. Fighter planes flew quickly and made a buzzing noise, so they were given the code name *da-he-tih-hi*, which is the Navajo word for hummingbird. Dive bombers were named for chicken hawks, or *gini*. The bombs they dropped were given the code name *a-ye-shi*, the Navajo word for eggs.

Battleships were called *lo-tso*, or whales in Navajo. Submarines were called *besh-lo*, which translates as iron fish. The code word for the United States was *ne-he-mah*, which means "our mother" in Navajo.

Navajo Code Talkers in formation at Camp Elliott, California, 1940

Philip Johnston (right) with five Navajos who served as instructors at Camp Elliott. They are (from left) Johnny Manuelito, John Benally, Rex Knotz, Howard Billiman, and Peter Tracy.

To start with, the code had about 200 such words, but by the end of the war it had grown to include about 600 words. The code talkers had to memorize the entire code before being shipped out for active duty. To keep the code secret, no written lists were allowed outside Marine training centers. Code talkers also practiced sending and translating messages quickly. They practiced until they could send and translate a three-line message in just 20 seconds. Most important of all, they learned to send and translate messages without errors. The slightest mistake could change the meaning of a message and place troops in danger.

Marine Corps leaders were so pleased with the code that they expanded the code talker program. From the original 29 code talkers, the program grew to include about 400 Navajos.

trenches they dug for protection from enemy fire. At the key battle of Iwo Jima, six code talkers worked day and night to send more than 800 messages. They made not a single mistake. Later, Marine Major Howard Connor said, "Were it not for the Navajo, the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima."

Army Private Floyd Dann speaks in his native Hopi language to send messages in 1943.

On the Battlefield

By the summer of 1942, the first Navajo code talkers were ready to join troops at the front line. Between 1942 and 1945, code talkers took part in most of the major battles fought in the Pacific Ocean. United States and allied forces were able to stop Japanese advances.

Code talkers were often in the middle of the heaviest fighting. They were usually among the first wave of troops to storm enemy positions. They carried their bulky radios and set them up while under intense fire from the enemy. They reported the location of enemy forces, sent word on the progress of allied forces, and made requests for reinforcements. With bullets flying all around them, the code talkers worked calmly to send and receive the information that helped ensure victory. Often they worked in foxholes, or shallow

Navajo code talkers were among the first Marines to land on Saipan in June 1944.

Left Marines raised the flag at Iwo Jima on February 23, 1945.

Below John Brown Jr. receives a Congressional gold medal from President Bush at the Capitol in 2001.

in World War II. They received no special recognition or honors. Instead, they quietly resumed their lives on the reservation.

Not until 1969 did military officials <mark>reveal</mark> the secret of the Navajo code talkers. Slowly, interest in the story of the code talkers grew.

Finally, in 2000, an act was signed into law officially honoring the original 29 Navajo code talkers. In 2001, the President of the United States awarded the code talkers and their families with Congressional gold medals. As Senator Nighthorse Campbell of Colorado said, "All Americans owe these great men a debt of gratitude."
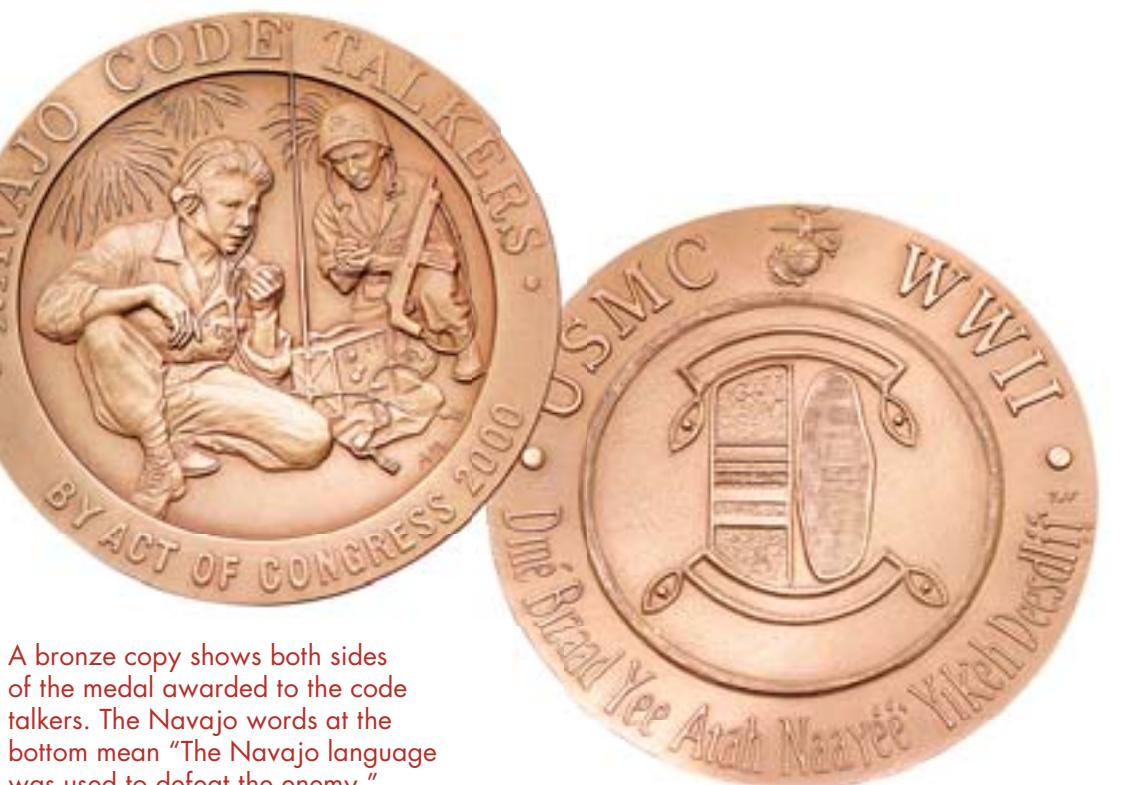
Back Home

The code worked exactly as the Marines had hoped. When the enemy was able to listen in on American radio conversations, they failed to understand anything being said. All they heard were noises that sounded like no language they knew. The Japanese never broke the Navajo code.

Japan's surrender in 1945 brought an end to the fighting in the Pacific Ocean. The work of the code talkers was complete. Of the 400 or so Navajos who served as code talkers, 13 had died in action. At the end of the war, the survivors were instructed not to talk about their jobs. The Marines wanted to keep the Navajo code a secret, in case it had to be used again in future conflicts. As a result, very few people knew of the remarkable role the code talkers had played

A bronze copy shows both sides of the medal awarded to the code talkers. The Navajo words at the bottom mean "The Navajo language was used to defeat the enemy."