Navajo Code Talkers

"Without the Navajos, the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima."

That is how one Marine major remembers that bloody fight. The Navajos he was referring to were the Code Talkers, a corps of 420 radio operators who transmitted secret messages in a code that was never broken.

Secrecy is essential to wartime maneuvers. How do you let a distant military unit know that you are about to start shelling the enemy? How do you warn them that the enemy is heading toward them? How do you tell them to pull out before it's too late? And how do you communicate these messages without letting the enemy know what you are saying? Over time, the military has developed many different codes to send secret messages. All these codes have been broken except the one developed during World War II by the Navajo Code Talkers.

The idea of using Navajos to transmit wartime messages came from a young civil engineer, Philip Johnston, who had lived on a Navajo reservation where his father was a missionary. Early in 1942, he approached the U.S. Marines with the idea of recruiting Navajos to transmit battle messages. Johnston pointed out that there were only about two dozen non-Navajos in the whole world who could speak the language. A code based on Navajo words would be impossible to break.

CREATING A SECRET CODE

Marine recruiters had no problem finding young Navajos eager to join up. The Navajo recruits formed the 382nd Platoon which was ordered to develop a secret code. Since their language contained no terms for the weapons of war, the Code Talkers resorted to descriptive language. For example, a dive bomber became gini—Navajo for "chicken hawk." They called bombs by the Navajo word for "eggs." An anti-aircraft gun became the Navajo term for "tortoise shooter." To ensure secrecy, the code was never written down. The Code Talkers relied strictly on memory. But as one of the code's designers said, "Well, in Navajo, everything is in memory."

The Navajo Code Talkers were thrown into action at Guadalcanal. English-speaking Japanese soldiers who listened in on marine messages were dumbfounded. They could make no sense of what they were hearing. The navy also used the Code Talkers to help with air attacks on the Japanese.

As the marines fought westward toward the Japanese islands, the Code Talkers fought with them. In the first two days of the attack on Iwo Jima, six networks of the Code Talkers worked around the clock, transmitting a total of 800 messages without error. In the month-long battle that followed, three Code Talkers were killed. Like the Code Talkers who had been killed earlier, their bodies were shipped home, but the nature of their duties remained secret. It was not until 1969 that the existence of a Navajo code was declassified by the military, and the crucial work of the Navajo Code Talkers was made public.

1. Who were the Navajo Code Talkers?

2. What role did the Navajo Code Talkers play in World War II?

3. How were the Navajos able to maintain total secrecy?

4. When were the Navajo recognized for their contribution during the war? Why do you suppose it took so long?

5. "Without the Navajos, the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima." How would you support this statement?

To learn more visit: **www.navajocodetalkers.org**