

Navajo Code Talkers

For three years their strange

language served the Marine Corps well for transmitting secret radio and telephone messages in combat. Now the story of their work can be told. By MTSgt Murrey Marder*

THROUGH the Solomons, in the Marianas, at Peleliu, Iwo Jima and almost every island where Marines have stormed ashore in this war, the Japanese have heard a strange language gurgling through the earphones of their radio listening sets—a voice code which defies decoding.

To the linguistically keen ear it shows a trace of Asiatic origin, and a lot of what sounds like American can double-talk. This strange tongue, one of the most select in the world, is Navajo, embellished with improvised words and phrases for military use. For three years it has served the Marine Corps well for transmitting secret radio and telephone messages in combat.

The dark-skinned, black-haired Navajo code talker, huddled over a portable radio or field phone in a regimental, divisional or corps command post, translating a message into Navajo as he reads it to his counterpart on the receiving end miles away, has been a familiar sight in the Pacific battle zone. Permission to disclose the work of these American Indians in marine uniform has just been granted by the Marine Corps.

Transmitting messages which the enemy cannot decode is a vital military factor in any engagement, especially where combat units are operating over a wide area in which communications must be maintained by radio. Throughout the history of warfare, military leaders have sought the perfect code—a code which the enemy could not break down, no matter how able his intelligence staff.

Most codes are based on the codist's native language. If the language is a widely-used one, it also will be familiar to the enemy and no matter how good your code may be the enemy eventually can master it. Navajo, however, is one of the world's "hidden" languages; it is termed "hidden," along with other Indian languages, as no alphabet or other symbols of it exist in the original form. There are only about 55,000 Navajos, all concentrated in one region, living on Government reservations and intensely clannish by nature, which has confined the tongue to its native area.

Complicating the Navajo language, there are dialect variations among the tribes, and in some cases even dialects within a tribe.

Except for the Navajos themselves, only a handful of Americans speak the language. At the time the Marine Corps adopted Navajo as a voice code it was estimated that not more than 28 other persons, American scientists or missionaries who lived among the Navajos and studied the language for years, could speak Navajo fluently. In recent years,

missionaries and the Interior Department's Bureau of Indian Affairs have worked on the compilation of dictionaries and grammars of the language, based on its phonetics, to reduce it to writing. Even with these available it is said that a fluency can be acquired from prepared texts only by persons who are highly educated in English and who have made a lengthy study of spoken and written Navajo.

One of the reasons which prompted the Marine Corps to adopt Navajo, in preference to a variety of Indian tongues as used by the AEF in the last war, was a report that Navajos were the only Indian group in the United States not infested with German students during the 20 years prior to 1941, when the Germans had been studying tribal dialects under the guise of art students, anthropologists, etc. It was learned that German and other foreign diplomats were among the chief customers of the Bureau of Indian Affairs for the purchase of publications dealing with Indian tribes, but it was decided that even if Navajo books were in enemy hands it would be virtually impossible for the enemy to gain a working knowledge of the language from that meager information. In addition, even ability to speak Navajo fluently would not necessarily enable the enemy to decode a military message, for the Navajo dictionary does not list military terms, and words used for "jeep," "emplacement," "battery," "radar," "antiaircraft," etc., have been improvised by Navajos in the field.

THE adoption of code talkers by the Marine Corps stemmed from a request for Navajo communicators by MajGen Clayton B. Vogel, then Commanding General, Amphibious Corps, Pacific Fleet. A report submitted with his request said a Navajo enlistment program would have full support of the Tribal Council at Window Rock, Ariz., Navajo Reservation.

Acting on this request, the Marine Corps' Division of Plans and Policies in March 1942 sent Col Wethered Woodworth to make a further report on the subject, and a test was made at the San Diego, Calif., Marine Base to determine the practicality of Navajos as code talkers.

The test revealed that the Navajos who volunteered for the experiment could transmit the messages given, although with some variation at the receiving end resulting from the lack of exact words to transmit specific military terms. For example, "Enemy is pressing attack on left flank" would come out "The enemy is attacking on the left."

Proper schooling in military phraseology, it was

*Marine Corps Combat Correspondent.

believed, could correct this variation, and the following month the Marine Corps authorized an initial enlistment of 30 Navajos to ascertain the value of their services.

The enlistment order required that recruits meet full Marine Corps physical requirements and have a sufficient knowledge of English and Navajo to transmit combat messages in Navajo. The recruits were to receive regular Marine training, attend a Navajo school at the Fleet Marine Force Training Center, Camp Elliott, Calif., and then receive sufficient communications training to enable them to handle their specially qualified talent on the battlefield.

All the recruits spoke the same Navajo basically, but there were certain word variations. In Navajo, the same word spoken with four different inflections has four different meanings. The recruits had to agree on words which had no shades of interpretation, for any variation in an important military message might be disastrous. As might be expected in any group of youths, they were not equal in education or intelligence. Some of the military terms were very complex to the unschooled; all had to be able to understand them thoroughly in order to translate them into their native language. Some were not easily adaptable to communications work. It was difficult in several instances for non-Navajos to instruct the recruits in Marine Corps activities; a few marine instructors were unable to cope with the typical Indian imperturbability.

On the other hand, many of the recruits were well-educated, intelligent and quick to learn. A number had worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs as clerks, and almost all the Navajos had the highly developed Indian sensory perceptions.

THREE were some recruits like PFC Wilsie H. Bitsie, whose father is district supervisor of the Mexican Springs, N. Mex., Navajo District. Bitsie became an instructor in the Navajo School at Camp Elliott for a time, and helped work out the much needed military terms. He went on to join the marine Raiders and at New Georgia his Navajo ability helped the Raiders maintain contact with the Army command at Munda while the marines knocked out Japanese outposts in the jungle to the north.

Other code talkers went with the Third Marine Division and the Raiders to Bougainville. There some manned distant outposts, maintaining contact in Navajo by radio. It was found best to have close friends work together in teams of two, for they could perfect their code talk by personal contact.

The men in their units learned that in addition to their language ability the Navajos also could be good marines. They could do their share of fighting and they made good scouts and messengers.

There had been concern in some quarters that dark-completed Navajos might be mistaken for Japs. In the latter days of the Guadalcanal action one Army unit did pick up a Navajo communicator

on the coastal road and messaged the marine command: "We have captured a Jap in marine clothing with marine identification tags." A marine officer was startled to find the prisoner was a Navajo, who was only bored by the proceedings.

The code talkers went on into more campaigns, proving their ability, and the Navajo quota in the Marine Corps rose from 30 to 420. At their TBXs they transmitted operational orders which helped us advance from the Solomons to Okinawa.

It was found that the Navajos are not necessary at levels lower than battalions. For messages between battalions and companies the extra security is not required and speed is the paramount issue.

The III Amphibious Corps reported that the use of the talkers during the Guam and Peleliu operations "was considered indispensable for the rapid transmission of classified dispatches. Enciphering and deciphering time would have prevented vital operational information from being dispatched or delivered to staff sections with any degree of speed."

AT IWO JIMA, Navajos transmitted messages from the beach to division and Corps commands afloat early on D-day, and after the division commands came ashore, from division ashore to Corps afloat.

Last April authority was granted to establish a re-training course for Navajos at FMFPac. Under this plan, five code talkers are taken from each division to attend an intensive 21-day course which gives emphasis to plane types, ship types, printing and message writing, and message transmission. These Navajos then return to their divisions to instruct the remaining men. It is emphasized that code talkers work out successfully only where interest is shown by the command and where training continues between operations.

As for the Navajos themselves, they probably are not any more enthusiastic about the concentrated schooling than most young marines would be about schooling, for they are amused as being regarded as different from other marines.

On rare occasions, though, they do lapse into some typical Indian gyrations. Ernie Pyle, in one of his last dispatches from Okinawa, described how the First Division's Navajos had put on a ceremonial dance before leaving for Okinawa. In the ceremony, they asked the gods to sap the strength of the Japanese in the assault. The other marines looked on, interested and amused, but when the division reached Okinawa the Navajos pointed out the ease of the landing and reminded the division men of their pre-embarkation ceremony.

According to a later report, when the First Division met the strong opposition in the south of Okinawa, one marine turned to a Navajo code talker and said,

"O.K., Yazzy, what about your little ceremony? What do you call this?"

"This is different," answered the Navajo with a smile. "We prayed only for an easy landing." END