The unbreakable code

by Isabel Simmons

The Tribal museum at Window Rock, Arizona, was recently the scene of a reunion of a group of World War II veterans who have been more or less unknown all these years—the Navajo Indian Code Talkers.

A code that no enemy can decipher has always been an impossible dream during mankind's bloody attempts to exterminate his fellow man. Any code, whether a simple jumble of the alphabet to the present day elaborate electronic scramble devices, had one fault—given enough time, someone could decode it. The United States Marine Corps came up with this unique solution during World War II by training a group of Navajo Indians as code talkers.

Thirty years later the Navajo language is still known mostly to Navajos and a few white traders. It is a difficult language to learn as its grammatical structure bears no relation to English or any Europen language and has a number of strange sounds which are difficult to imitate. In 1942 it is doubtful if anyone in Japan had even heard of the Navajo Indians. A brief attempt to use Indians as code talkers was made in World War I but with limited success, partly because the Indians had no words in their language for military terms such as tanks, cannon, mortar, etc.

The Navajo Code Talkers was the brain child of Mr. Phillip Johnston, a white man with an unusual background. Mr. Johnston had lived on the Navajo Reservation from the time he was four years old until he left to attend college in Los Angeles. He spoke Navajo fluently and was familiar with their customs, having worked at various trading posts on the reservation, often acting as interpreter. He had served with the Marine Corps in World War I but found that retreads were not too welcome in World War II. Chancing across an article about an armored division in Louisiana using some Indians for communications, the idea for the Navajo Code Talkers was born. Mr. Johnston took his idea to LtCol James E. Jones, Area Signal Officer, at Camp Elliott near San Diego, meeting with a lukewarm reception at first.

A few sentences of Navajo spoken by Mr. Johnston aroused the officer's curiosity but he had one valid objection—the Indians had no words for military terms. Mr. Johnston explained that he did not intend to use translations but to build up a code of Indian words. For instance *fast shooter* could designate machine gun and barrage would be *iron rain.* LtCol Jones agreed to give the idea a trial and two weeks later Mr. Johnston, accompanied by some Navajos, returned to Camp Elliott.

The small group was taken to the headquarters of MajGen Clayton B. Vogel, where two of the Navajos adjourned to another room, and the test started. After 15 minutes, the general checked the translations and was impressed enough with the results to request 200 recruits immediately. Bureaucrats, being the same yesterday, today and forever, greeted the unusual proposal with official skepticism but approval finally came through for a "pilot project" of 30 men. Unusual names like Begay, Tsosie, Chee, Nez, Littletalker, Slowtalker, Benallie, Yazzie, Manuelito and Hoskie began to appear on Marine pay records.

The Indians arriving from boot camp faced eight weeks of intensive training and memorizing. A military code of the 413 words most frequently used was built up, supplemented with an alphabet to spell out names. Chicken hawk, humming, bird, iron fish, all meant dive bomber, fighter plane and submarine. Instead of the usual Able, Baker, Charlie, the alphabet was ant, bear, cat. Africa was *Zhin-ni* for Blackies; Alaska was *Beh-Hga,* meaning with-winter. America was *Ne-he-mah,* our mother. Ammunition was *Beh-eli-doh-be-cal-ali-tas-an.* Regula English pronunciation will give the reader no idea how these words sound when pronounced in the guttural Navajo fashion from somewhere in the region of the tonsils.

All during the training, messages in Navajo came over the air from planes, tanks and half tracks, completely baffling to anyone but a Navajo Indian. Day after day, slender brown fingers rapidly printed legible messages under simulated battle conditions, consistently error free. It was a military miracle—an unbreakable code.

The amazing success of the pilot project resulted in quick approval for an additional 200 recruits. When Phillip Johnston heard about the success of the program, he asked LtCol Jones if he could enlist in the Marine Corps. The startled reply was "I never dreamed you'd want to come into the service but I'm sure we could get the necessary waivers for your age. And we'd be most happy to put you in charge of the training program." So after the usual time consuming red tape, the Marine Corps had a very happy retread for a staff sergeant in full charge of his own brain child—the Code Talkers training program.

Within two years over 300 Navajos had taken the communicators course. The failure rate of only five out of each 100, and only one AWOL for the entire group was another outstanding achievement. As training was completed, each Marine Corps division received a complement of code talkers. Men raised in hogans on the isolated Navajo reservation followed the Stars and Stripes all over the world. A great nation had not treated its brown skinned children too kindly but it was still *Ne-he-mah,* our mother, to them and commanded their services, their devotion and sometimes their lives.

Navajo code talkers first announced the raising of the flag on Mt. Suribachi at Iwo Jima. Incidentally, another Arizona Indian, Ira Hayes, a Pima, was one of the men performing this heroic feat. Where are these men today? Slowly coming out of the obscurity that had hidden them for the past 25 years, the Navajo code talkers are now proudly telling of their part in World War II. In 1969 the 4th Marine Division reunion in Chicago honored 21 Navajo Marine veterans for their service, presenting them with the American Indian Marine Award.

Window Rock, the capital of Navajo country was the scene of the latest reunion in July 1971. Sixty ex-code talkers gathered to renew old acquaintances and to record their stories on tape for future historians. Just to show they hadn't forgotten old skills, the men went into the nearby hills to demonstrate code talking, using several battery-operated radios provided by the Marine Corps for the occasion.

The most famous code talker is undoubtedly Peter McDonald, recently elected chairman of the Navajo Tribal Council, a position equivalent to the governor of a state. Capt Edmund Henry Sr., is the new commanding officer of the Tuba City Police District, a precinct covering several hundred lonely miles. George Kirk, a close friend of Phillip Johnston, has worked at Navajo Army Depot in Flagstaff since being discharged from the Marines. Mr. Johnston is retired and living in Southern California.

The recent reunion was a joyous affair with only one discordant note. The invitations had requested "bring your uniform if it still fits." Despite their valorous service to their country, 25 years had taken its toll of even these brave men. None of the once slender Navajo Code Talkers could get into his old uniform.

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