Origins of the NAVAJO CODE TALKERS

CRYPTOLOGIC BRILLIANCE, LINGUISTIC EXPERTISE, DEDICATION TO DUTY

Years after the Pacific War, the world would learn of the courage and bravery of a dedicated group of Navajo Indians who provided a priceless advantage to their country at a crucial time. They would come to be known as the "Code Talkers." This is the story of how they came to be and the vital role they played in helping thousands of Marines to return home at war's end.

Beginnings

As long as he could remember, Philip Johnston had loved the Navajo culture and language. By age five, he had learned the tribal language well enough to serve as a translator for his missionary parents. By age nine, when most boys his age were riding bikes and trading baseball cards, he had served as an interpreter for a Navajo delegation sent to Washington, DC, to lobby for Indian rights. He had no way of knowing it at the time, but his affinity for, and mastery of, the Navajo tongue would one day help to save the lives of countless United States Marines.

In time, Johnston would leave the American Southwest and the people he loved to serve in World War I. After the war, he would earn his civil engineering degree at the University of Southern California. December 7, 1941, found him hard at work as an engineer for the city of Los Angeles. At the time, Johnston was in his 50s and well beyond the grasp of his local draft board; however, his experiences on the battlefields of Europe in an earlier time motivated him to try to put into action a plan that he was sure could help the war effort.

Johnston's hope was to help the Marine Corps protect their communications so well that every Marine who wore the uniform would be provided a huge advantage in combat. His idea revolved around a code. But, unlike many coding systems, this code was not dependent on a complicated machine or a series of numbers or ciphers. Rather, the heart of his proposal rested on the language of the Navajo Indians. He was convinced that, used properly, the Navajo dialect would provide unprecedented security to those who would need it most. All he needed was a chance to prove it.

Camp Elliott

Johnston's initial efforts to convince the Marines of the worth of his project were less than successful. The Corps had serious doubts. American Indians, particularly the Choctaw, had been used as Code Talkers in WWI with positive results. However, it was no secret that after 1918, any number of German nationals had visited the United States with the expressed purpose of learning the languages of American Indian tribes. Most assumed that the Third Reich would share its knowledge of these American Indian languages with its Axis partners. For this reason, many viewed the notion of using these languages to protect military communications as an idea whose time had long passed. But Johnston persisted in his efforts. He believed, with good reason, that the Navajo language was unique. The tribe came from a remote region, and only a handful of non-Navajos had any knowledge of the language.

Despite the prevailing wisdom of the time, the Marine Corps finally agreed to host a test of Johnston's proposed system at Camp Elliott near San Diego, California. At the conclusion of the trial run, everyone agreed that the results had been impressive. The Navajos involved in the demonstration had clearly shown that they could take messages from a variety of sources in English, translate and transmit them in Navajo, and then send them back in English. Due to the success of the trial run, those who had witnessed the testing initially lobbied for the recruitment and training of over 200 "Code Talkers." In the end, a total of only 30 men would be approved for the first group; however by VJ Day, over 400 Navajos would work in the program.

From Window Rock to Camp Pendleton

In May of 1942, with the imprimatur of the Navajo Tribal Council, formal recruiting efforts began at Window Rock, Arizona, the capitol of the Navajo Nation. Johnston, despite his age, expressed a desire to be involved in the recruiting and training of the men. After some thought, the Corps agreed to grant him a waiver and allowed him to enlist in the Marine Corps at the rank of Staff Sergeant. Johnston would only remain in uniform for a short time; but he would always have the satisfaction of knowing he had been the driving force behind a program that would benefit the Corps for years to come.

Shortly after the initial recruit training at the San Diego Depot, the group was sent to Camp Pendleton for training in standard radio procedures. After their primary skills had been honed, Johnston and his compatriots began putting into place the system that would protect critical Marine battlefield communications for the duration of the war. At first glance, it would seem that the language itself would be enough to provide the required level of security. However, the Marine Corps realized they could make the system virtually unbreakable by further encoding the language through word substitution. In addition, because the Navajo language contained no words to describe the modern implements of war, the trainees took familiar words from their language and applied them to items such as tanks (turtles) and planes (birds). Finally, in order to protect the code from falling into enemy hands, the aforementioned system was committed to memory. This intense training regimen achieved the desired goal of making the code undecipherable to everyone but the Code Talkers.

From Guadalcanal to Okinawa

The work of the men of the Marine Corps in its conquering of the strategic islands and atolls of the South Pacific is one of the great success stories of modern warfare. Many were responsible for their success, but it cannot be denied that the Code Talkers played a critical role. Wherever they were employed, whether it was on Saipan or Tarawa, Peleliu or Guam, they performed brilliantly.

On Iwo Jima, the Marines fought an entrenched enemy in caves and redoubts, from one end of the island to the other. In many cases the enemy could only be dislodged through fierce hand-to-hand combat, followed up by grenades and flamethrowers. When the battle began, 20,000 Japanese troops occupied the island; 36 days later, at the battle's end, only 1,083 members of the Imperial Army were left. In this kind of environment, any advantage one could gain over the enemy was welcomed. In this regard, the Code Talkers, and their ability to provide secure communications, were a godsend.

The record shows that despite the horrific conditions previously described, during the first 48 hours on Iwo Jima, 6 Code Talkers working 24-hour shifts sent and received over 800 messages, all without error. Major Howard, the 5th Marines Division Signal Officer, stated succinctly that, "Were it not for the Navajos, the Marines would have never taken the island." The work of the Navajos on Iwo Jima was impressive, but the larger point is that wherever they did their work they provided an indispensable advantage to those who wore the Globe and Anchor.

Semper Fi

At war's end, Johnston, ever the believer in the Code Talkers' abilities, sought to make the program permanent, but was ultimately turned down. Instead, like millions of other American soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines, the Navajo Code Talkers returned to their homes and their families. Of the 400 or so Code Talkers who fought on the unforgiving battlefields of the South Pacific, 13 never returned. Those who lived would have the privilege of knowing that they played an indispensable role in protecting critical information from the enemy and in saving countless lives. Even today, when communications circle the globe and the universe at lightning speed, their accomplishments serve as an outstanding example of what can happen when cryptologic brilliance is combined with linguistic expertise and dedication to duty