

THE NAVAJO CODE TALKERS



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Cloaked in secrecy and syntax, code machines were the pride of World War II cryptographers. State-of-the-art devices with cryptic names like "Enigma," "Purple," and "The Bomb," these black boxes used rotors and ratchets to shroud messages in a thick alphabet soup. But U.S. Marines storming Pacific beaches used a different kind of code machine. Instead of rotors, each Marine cryptograph had two arms, two legs, an M-1 rifle, and a helmet. Their code name was *Dineh* – "The People." In English, they were called "Navajos."

As Marines fought cave to cave on Iwo Jima, a foreign language crackled over field radios. Bombers were called *jayscho* (buzzards), and bombs were *ayeshi* (eggs). The commanding officer was *bihkehhe* (war chief), and each platoon was a *hasclishnih* (mud clan). On the morning of February 23, 1945, when six soldiers on a mountaintop hoisted the Stars and Stripes for all the world to see, the word went out in code: "*Naastsosi Thanzie Dibeh Shida Dahnestsu Tkin Shush Wollachee Moasi Lin Achi.*" Marine cryptographers translated the Navajo words for "Mouse Turkey Sheep Uncle Ram Ice Bear Ant Cat Horse Intestines," then told their fellow Marines in English: The American flag was flying over Mount Suribachi.

In most movies, the Navajos speak in a primitive pidgin and still fight on horseback. But long after the West was won and lost, a group of Navajo patriots sharpened speech into a precise weapon and went to war for the nation that surrounded their own. They hit every Pacific beach from Guadalcanal to Okinawa, but their story is at best a footnote in war chronicles. They are the Navajo Code Talkers, and theirs is one of the few unbroken codes in military history.

More than 3,600 Navajos served in World War II, but only 420 were Code Talkers. Members of all six Marine Corps divisions in the Asian-Pacific Theater, they coded and decoded messages faster than any black box, baffling the Japanese with a hodgepodge of everyday Navajo and some 400 code words of their own devising. In early Pacific invasions, their code was barely used by skeptical officers, but Marine commanders came to see it as "indispensable for the rapid transmission of classified dispatches." For three critical years, these Navajo linguists proved that when it came to heroism, The People, too often known for their silence, spoke volumes.

Like all Americans of his generation, Keith Little remembered exactly where he was when he heard the news of Pearl Harbor. Little recalled the boarding school on the reservation of Ganado, Arizona, where he and his fellow students had some choice words for the cafeteria gruel. So on Sunday afternoon, December 7, "Me and a bunch of guys were out hunting rabbits with a .22. We had a rabbit cooking down in the wash, and somebody went to the dorm, came back and said, 'Hey, Pearl Harbor was bombed!' One of us asked, 'Where's Pearl Harbor?'

"'In Hawaii.'

"'Who did it?'

"'Japan.'

"'Why'd they do it?'

"'They hate Americans. They want to kill all Americans.'

"'Us, too?'

"'Yeah, us too.'

"Then and there, we all made a promise," Little recalled. "We were, most of us, 15 or 16, I guess. We promised each other we'd go after the Japanese instead of hunting rabbits."

The morning after Pearl Harbor, the superintendent of the Navajo reservation looked out his office window. There stood dozens of ponytailed men in red bandanas, carrying hunting rifles, ready to fight. A year earlier, the Navajo Tribal Council, acknowledging a world at war, had unanimously resolved to defend the United States against invasion. "There exists no purer concentration of Americanism than among the First Americans," the council declared. But on December 8, 1941, the Navajo volunteers were sent home. No official call to arms had been issued, and besides, most of the men only spoke Navajo.

When the war broke out, Philip Johnston was working in Los Angeles as a civil engineer. With wire-rimmed glasses and a buttoned-down mind, Johnston did not seem a likely candidate to speak Navajo. Yet as the son of missionaries, he had grown up on the Navajo reservation in Arizona. Decades later, reading

about an Army test of Native American languages in combat maneuvers, Johnston had a mousetrap of an idea. During World War I, Indians in the American and Canadian armies had sent messages in their native languages. But lacking words like "machine gun" and "grenade," their use was limited. Early in 1942, Johnston visited the Marine Corps' Camp Elliott, north of San Diego to propose an up-to-date code he guaranteed would be unbreakable. The Marines were skeptical at first, but a few weeks later, Johnston returned with some Navajo friends. For fifteen minutes, while the iron jaws of Marine brass went slack, the Navajo translated messages from English to Navajo and back. Code machines would have taken up to thirty minutes to complete the translation; the Navajo did the same work in seconds. A few days later, Marine Commandant Thomas Holcomb received a letter describing the test and urging the recruitment of Navajo men whose language "is equivalent to a secret code to the enemy, and admirably suited for rapid, secure communication." In April 1942, as the Japanese sent American prisoners on the Bataan Death March, Marine recruiters set out for the land of "Changing Woman," the Navajo fertility goddess.

The Marines had been from the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli, but they had never seen a place like the Navajo Nation. Scattered across the red-rock Southwest desert, fewer than 40,000 Navajos lived in a territory the size of West Virginia. The reservation had few paved roads, no electricity or plumbing, only a handful of schools. Nearly all Navajos herded sheep, lived in houses called hogans and bought what little they could not grow or make at the nearest trading post. Recruiters set up tables in the sagebrush and sandstone, called them enlistment offices and began looking for a few good men fluent in Navajo and English. Recruitment figured to be a tough job.

Fewer than eighty years had passed since the Navajo Nation had fought against the U.S. military. In 1864, following Kit Carson's scorched-earth campaign, bands of starving, ragged Navajos were forcibly marched 350 miles across New Mexico. Along the way, some 200 died, while others staggered on, bewildered, heartbroken at the loss of their land.