



Forgotten Heroes:  
The Code Talkers of  
WWII

By Collin M. Barnes

“You can save a lot of lives with your words, you know”<sup>1</sup>. An army officer in World War II made this statement to a Navajo Code Talker, and it serves to show the importance of the role that Code Talkers played during the war. Their task was not an easy one, and countless lives depended on their decoding skills and self-control. It is with this in mind that I argue that the Navajo and Comanche Code Talkers were the most important non-battle related group used by the Allies during World War II. By looking at their background, why they were essential to the Allied victory, as well as several counterarguments involving other non-combat groups, it is plain to see that their job was vital to the Allied victory.

During World War II, there were two groups of Code Talkers: the Comanche Code Talkers in Europe that worked mostly with the United States Army, and the Navajo Code Talkers that served in the Pacific with the United States Marines. One question that is commonly asked is, why use the Native Americans to send the codes in World War II? The answer is that the Code Talkers were actually used in World War I first, but not as much as they were used in World War II. However, it became quickly known that bypassing telegraph wires and switching directly to radios was more beneficial. Oftentimes, telegraph wires were found by the German or Japanese soldiers who would cut them to sever communications and entice the Allied soldiers to walk into a trap<sup>2</sup>. Although the radios were more effective, they made it easier for the Japanese and Germans to pick up their transmissions, thus prompting a need for some kind of advanced

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<sup>1</sup> Bixler, Margaret T.. Winds of Freedom: The Story of the Navajo Code Talkers of World War II. Grand Rapids : Two Bytes Publishing, 1992. Page 63.

<sup>2</sup> Holm, Tom. Code Talkers and Warriors: Native Americans and World War II (Landmark Events in Native American History). United States of America: Chelsea House Publications, 2007. Page 109.

code to send the messages. By turning to the Native American languages and converting *those* into code, messages could be sent with little worry about interception.

Author Tom Holm wrote that, “The Navajo code was never broken and was a great factor in winning the war in the Pacific”<sup>3</sup>. This double code frustrated the Germans and Japanese, and it allowed the Allies to quickly and efficiently send commands concerning troop movements and other information without fear of discovery. This ended up helping the Allies *immensely*, and by the end of the war there were hundreds of Code Talkers supporting the Allied cause. However, in the beginning of this “experiment”, there were only 29 brave souls who were responsible for starting this important movement. After going through boot camp, the original 29 set to work on creating a code out of their original language. One of the original 29 Code Talkers, Cozy Stanley Brown, said:

We decided to change the name of airplanes, ships, and the English ABC’s into the Navajo language. We did the changing. For instance, we named the airplanes “dive bombers” for *ginitsoh* (sparrow hawk), because the sparrow hawk is like an airplane—it charges downward at a very fast pace. We called the enemy *ana’l*, just like the old saying of the Navajos. The name *ana’l* also is used in the Navajo Enemy Way ceremony.<sup>4</sup>

This code within a code made deciphering next to impossible if one did not know what to look for, and it was this exact reason that the Germans and Japanese were unable to successfully decrypt the code, even though they knew that Native Americans were being used as early as 1944<sup>5</sup>.

The Code Talker’s main objective was, obviously, to transmit codes directly from one person to another without having to relay it through a decoding machine, and also

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<sup>3</sup> Holm, Tom. Page 83.

<sup>4</sup> Holm, Tom. Page 74.

<sup>5</sup> Holm, Tom. Page 81.

without revealing information to the Japanese or Germans. Although they are technically deemed “non-combatant”, they still had the normal weapons training and sometimes had to actively engage enemy forces. This is partially due to the fact that they saw a massive amount of fighting, and in fact, “Code Talkers participated in every Allied offensive in the Pacific from Guadalcanal to Okinawa”<sup>6</sup>. With this amount of time actively in war (1942-1945), it would be difficult for a Code Talker to survive and not have to occasionally drop the radio and pick up a rifle. However, this was merely a secondary duty, and their main position still fell under the title of “non-combat”.

Both the Comanche and Navajo Code Talkers were essential to the Allied victory in World War II in countless ways, but there are several reasons that stand out among the others. Without the Code Talkers, many more American lives would have been lost, they kept the Axis troops from knowing their movements, the code stopped or limited fraud, and their tribal experiences gave them advantages that they could not have gained elsewhere. Among their tribal experiences, their ethnicity helped them in their assignments because they looked like Japanese soldiers and could penetrate their defenses, they could change the code quickly depending on their situation because it was their native language, and various skills learned and practiced in their tribes helped them to apply different alternatives to different situations.

Without the Code Talkers and their unbreakable code, there is no doubt that many more American lives would have been lost that could have been saved if better communication were available. Troop movements had to constantly be forwarded so military commanders could properly strategize their next moves; but if they were sent in

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<sup>6</sup> Durrett, Deanne. Unsung Heroes of World War II: The Story of the Navajo Code Talkers. New York: Facts on File, 1998. Page 65.

code, it typically took several hours to translate it, and if it was not sent in code, Axis troops could easily tap into their communications and adjust their defenses accordingly. By limiting this (or obliterating it completely), movements were kept one-sided and the enemy soldiers were left unaware of the Allies' movements until it was too late. One Comanche Code Talker named Roderick Red Elk stated, "I think [the code] gave the Army a means of communications that they would not have otherwise had.... The impact that the code talkers had was the fact that they had this code that they use which...the enemy couldn't break. That was really an advantage that the Army had.... It definitely saved some lives"<sup>7</sup>. By not allowing the enemy soldiers to know their position, they could not properly plan for an attack, and therefore the Allies' casualties were significantly less than they would have been without the code.

While the code served to keep the movements of the Allies secret, it also allowed them the opportunity to transmit enemy movements without being detected<sup>8</sup>. On many occasions, the Japanese would try to intercept the messages and decipher them, but found that they could not even begin to understand the code. They were then surprised when the American troops knew where they were and planned their attacks ahead of time. An example of this is seen when a Comanche Code Talker realized that German forces had been drastically depleted near the end of the war, and older and weaker men were being used as soldiers instead of the sturdy youths that had comprised the outfits before. The Code Talker forwarded this information to the command post, and the American soldiers accelerated their advance based on the knowledge that German reinforcements would not

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<sup>7</sup> Holm, Tom. Page 120.

<sup>8</sup> Meadows, William C.. The Comanche Code Talkers of World War II. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003. Page 129.

be deployed<sup>9</sup>. Had the German officers heard this, they could have sent necessary troops from nearby to fortify the position, but instead they were overrun and it became an Allied victory. This shows that, through the typically non-combat efforts of the Navajo and Comanche Code Talkers, many American lives were spared, and their role was essential to their victory overall.

Another way in which the Code Talkers of World War II were essential to the Allies' victory was the fact that they prevented fake orders from being carried out. Due to the fact that both sides could fairly easily tap into the communication network of the other (sometimes it was even done completely by accident), Japanese troops that had been educated in America and lost their accent would call in fake orders, and would then bombard the area with mortar shells. At one point, a unit captured a Japanese bunker and began to establish their position, only to be fired upon by another American unit. The unit under attack called off the shells, but fearing that it was simply another Japanese trick, the attack continued. After continued messages, the attacking commander began to believe their claims, but did not want to stop the attack without proof. He asked simply, "Do you have a Navajo?" The Code Talker then relayed the message, and the bombing ceased<sup>10</sup>. After this incident, radio operators began to *only* accept messages relayed by the Code Talkers, and if a message was sent without the code, the officers would typically ask the question, "Do you have a Navajo"<sup>11</sup>. If there was not a Code Talker nearby when a message needed to be sent or they needed to prove they were a Code Talker, the radio operators would still pull from their code and start the message with the

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<sup>9</sup> Meadows, William C. Page 129.

<sup>10</sup> Durrett, Deanne. Page 73.

<sup>11</sup> Holm, Tom. Page 79-80.

words “Arizona” or “New Mexico”, where most of the Native Americans were from<sup>12</sup>. These imitations happened more and more often, and this sure-proof way of validating the shelling requests saved many from dying of friendly fire. Professor of American Indian studies at the University of Arizona Tom Holm stated that, “The Navajo code saved more than one American unit from being annihilated by their own comrades”<sup>13</sup>. By indirectly saving the lives of many American units by legitimizing messages, the Comanche and Navajo Code Talkers proved that they were an essential non-combat group in World War II.

While the Code Talkers were good at preventing fraud on the radio, they also *created* fraud in order to gain more information that normal United States soldiers could not. Due to the fact that Native American ancestry is theorized to have come from Asia, their complexions looked strikingly similar to that of a Japanese person. Many times, soldiers would dress the Code Talkers up as Japanese soldiers and they would sneak behind the enemy lines to steal information or kill the troops to save American lives.

One story of this is as follows:

Tom White, because he looked Japanese, was able to clean out a pillbox all by himself. He stripped to the waist and just walked in. The Japanese thought he was one of them. He shot from the hip with a submachine gun and completely wiped out the enemy nest. He was able to do this with another pillbox, but was later killed on Peleliu. No citations were given for his heroism.<sup>14</sup>

Their striking resemblance to the Japanese allowed these men to save American lives by gathering information (or taking it upon themselves to perform their secondary duty and kill unsuspecting Japanese soldiers), which provided better strategies that kept more

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<sup>12</sup> Durrett, Deanne. Page 64.

<sup>13</sup> Holm, Tom. Page 80.

<sup>14</sup> Bixler, Margaret. Page 88.

Americans away from harm. This is just one more reason why they were the most important moderately non-combat group in World War II.

Another way in which the Navajo and Comanche Code Talkers proved their worth was by implementing their skills that they gained in their respective tribes to the battlefield. For instance, by now it is clear to see that the code was extremely efficient at conveying messages, and that is mostly due to the fact that this was the language that many spoke on a day-to-day basis in their tribes. During the heat of battle, it was even reported that the Code Talkers would add to and change the code to convey information that could not be told differently<sup>15</sup>. They were able to deviate from the original code while still keeping the meaning intact because they spoke the language of the code regularly. Their language skills also made it so they rarely made mistakes. There was a cadence that a Code Talker could say if they messed up, but as shown during the attack on Iwo Jima, it was hardly ever needed. During this particular attack, “more than 900 messages were sent and received without an error”<sup>16</sup>.

The fact that their language was practiced regularly and the Code Talkers were extremely efficient with it made it possible for extremely secure codes to be transmitted very quickly. Before the Code Talkers were used, messages would be sent through a decoding machine that would then send the message to the proper recipient. This was a very inefficient practice, since the time span between sending the code and receiving it was upwards of four hours. In fact, to test their efficiency with the code, a signal officer named Lieutenant Hunt challenged the code talkers to beat their machine. He boasted that his machine would finish the task in less than four hours, but he was quickly put to

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<sup>15</sup> Bixler, Margaret. Page 80.

<sup>16</sup> Bixler, Margaret, Page 79.



shame when the message was sent via the Code Talker, transmitted, received, and decoded in exactly two minutes thirty seconds<sup>17</sup>. This skill was essential to coordinating combat situations during World War II. The Code Talkers' language skills made them indispensable to the United States military, and their efficiency was something to be admired.

Another way in which their tribal experiences helped the Comanche and Navajo Code Talkers was simply by keeping their traditions alive and using skills that were implemented by their ancestors. One author wrote:

These young men had never fought before, but they had some of the skill possessed by their fighting ancestors.... The fighting, especially in the jungle, was much on the old Indian style. This meant sudden attacks by a small group of men, rushing from cover. It meant tracking single enemies through the jungle and watching the chance for a quick deadly spring.<sup>18</sup>

Although this point is up for debate, there is no denying that many of these Native Americans brought experiences gained in their tribal groups that aided them in the war. These traits also allowed the men that were originally supposed to only send and receive codes to also double as excellent scouts. Apart from the fact that they looked similar to Japanese soldiers, the Navajos and Comanches were able to use hunting and other practical skills picked up with their tribes to perform better than many of the Marines or Army men. Commenting on this, one person said:

The Navajos were also naturals at finding their way through the dark jungle, which made them good night scouts and guerrilla fighters. Accustomed to running in the desert, they were the fastest couriers. The Navajo were physically adept at survival in rough terrain and more able to meet the rigors of combat than were many of their fellow Marines.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Derrett, Deanne. Page 64.

<sup>18</sup> Underhill, Ruth. Here Comes the Navajo. Hayden: Treasure Chest Books, 1983. Page 255.

<sup>19</sup> Durrett, Deanne. Page 65.

The Code Talkers of World War II were indispensable not only because of their language fluency, but also because of their experiences in the American Southwest. Skills used there translated to the various battles in Europe and the Pacific, and their proper implementation saved many American lives.

Although it is clear that the Navajo and Comanche Code Talkers were essential to the Allied victories in Europe and the Pacific, there is debate as of whether or not they are the *most* important non-combat group during this time. One of the main reasons why they were the *most* important group was because of the immense amount of stress that they were under all the time, and yet they still performed impeccable work consistently. Their stress levels were higher than those of other groups because they were constantly being threatened by their own troops as being Japanese spies because of how they looked, they had to transmit messages quickly and accurately under fire, and their cultures overall do not deal well with death, which they were surrounded by every day that they were overseas.

As stated earlier, the Code Talkers looked strikingly similar to Japanese soldiers, to the point where they could even walk right into a pillbox without being noticed. While this helped sometimes, it also proved to be extremely dangerous among their own edgy soldiers. There were so many threats against the Code Talkers that they eventually had to each have their own personal bodyguard to protect them from *their own comrades*<sup>20</sup>. One Code Talker recalled an incident where he was mistaken for a Japanese soldier and caught:

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<sup>20</sup> Holm, Tom. Page 82.

I had been on Guadalcanal for some time and was hungry for something like orange juice.... I walked over to the army supplies and started digging for orange juice when somebody put an iron in my back.... [The soldier] finally said, "Get out of there, you damn Jap!".... Finally, they took me back to my outfit. I had 15 men around me, and the sergeant of the guard had a .45 cocked against my back all the way and I had my hands up all the way. When we got to the beach, they asked, "Is this your man?" and of course get the answer, "Yeah... that's our man. Hey—are you guys serious?" "You're damn right we're serious," they said. "If you guys don't make a positive identification we're going to take him back."<sup>21</sup>

Accidents like this happened quite often, and a Code Talker could rarely do *anything* without fear of being shot at or being mistaken as a Japanese soldier.

The Code Talkers' main purpose was, obviously, to transmit and receive codes quickly so that commanders could know the locations and events happening in their designated areas. However, even though it was their own language, this was not an easy task. In order to keep the code from being cracked, they could not use the same word twice in one transmission, and had to constantly think of different ways to phrase something, even while they were actively being shot at<sup>22</sup>. This made for a constant and unyielding sense of stress while they were on the battlefield, and with every transmission they had to make. These were all compounded in addition to the stresses they already felt as a soldier in the middle of a war. If they messed up, entire units of American men could be killed. While other non-combat groups felt stress, they were trumped by the indescribable amounts of it felt by each and every Code Talker.

Another reason why the Navajo and Comanche Code Talkers felt more stress than other groups was because of their culture in general. Due to certain traditions, these people do not deal well with death, and intense ceremonies (known as the *Enemyway*

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<sup>21</sup> Paul, Doris A.. The Navajo Code Talkers. Pittsburgh: Dorrance Publishing Co., 1973. Page 87.

<sup>22</sup> Holm, Tom. Page 78.

ceremonies) are performed for anybody who has seen death or been near a dead human. Due to the fact that they were surrounded by death constantly while overseas, the Code Talkers had just one more obstacle that they had to overcome in order to function effectively. Professor Tom Holm explains the story of one Navajo man whose water transport capsized 300 yards from shore, and in order to make it to land had to cut off his pack. He was physically wounded, but in order to make it out alive he had to do something that would emotionally affect him for a long time to come:

He found there [on the beach] the bodies of many marines who had been killed in the initial assault. He had to take another pack and a weapon from one of the bodies.... The Navajo marine who had to take a pack and a weapon from a dead person must have suffered emotionally in addition to being physically wounded.<sup>23</sup>

This caused a lot more stress than other soldiers would have felt at seeing a dead body, and it was something that many other non-combat groups did not have to deal with as much.

While there is much evidence to the contrary, some would argue that the Navajo and Comanche Code Talkers were not the most important non-combat groups in World War II, but that others played a more important role instead. One of these groups is the American Red Cross. This organization went overseas and worked in the military hospitals under adverse conditions trying to save peoples' lives. While there is no denying the stress levels and importance of holding somebody's life in your hands and possibly watching it slip away, the Code Talkers still played a more crucial role because, without them, many more lives would have been lost due to cracked codes and sneak attacks that the American Red Cross would not have been able to help with. The Code

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<sup>23</sup> Holm, Tom. Page 80-81.

Talkers were also able to physically pick up a weapon and attack the enemy if necessary, allowing them the opportunity to kill enemies that could have later killed more American soldiers. This was the *most* direct way of helping the war effort, and the Code Talkers proved their worth many times over. *Many* more lives would have been lost if it were not for the Code Talkers, and the ARC would not have been able to help them all.

Another non-combat group that some would say was potentially more important was the WAVES (or the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service). The point of this group was to perform many military-like jobs that would have typically been filled by men, but could not be due to shortages<sup>24</sup>. These were jobs for the Navy that included routine but necessary tasks aboard boats and airstrips that did not involve any direct fighting, only outfitting those that were going into battle. While the WAVES were important, they had little *direct* effect on the outcome of the war. They helped a lot both physically and financially (since they were volunteers), but did very little to save lives directly by their actions.

The Navajo and Comanche Code Talkers were the most important non-combat group in World War II because they were absolutely essential to the Allied victories in both Europe and the Pacific. Their codes saved countless American lives (both from the enemy soldiers *and* their own), they prevented (and caused) fraud, their actions kept the Axis powers from knowing the Allied movements, and they used their previous experiences in their tribes to perform tasks that could not have been done otherwise. These were truly incredible men, and they deserve our honor and recognition.

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<sup>24</sup> Yellin, Emily. Our Mothers' War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II. New York City: Free Press, 2004. Page 137.

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