Navajo Code Talkers:

The Navajos that affected the U.S. military in World War II with their language

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The Navajo Code Talkers in World War II created and used a perfect unbreakable code to help the U.S. military win battles against Japan. There is a long history of conflict between the Navajos and the U.S. Government. The U.S. Government destroyed their land and livestock, forced them to go to a relocation camp,and forced them to go to boarding schools.[1] World War II began a new chapter in their relationship. The Navajo worked and compromised with the U.S. soldiers in the military to create the Navajo Code Talker program which saved thousands of lives and was key to the end of the war against Japan. After the war, the U.S. Government honored the Navajo Code Talkers with public recognition and awards.[2]

Out of 55,000 Navajos living in the 1940s, 3600 Navajos fought in the war. The Navajo Code Talker program started with the original 29 Code Talkers and grew to over 400 Code Talkers during WWII. It was not easy to get the code talker program started or even have the Navajos agree to participate because of the negative past. Phillip Johnston was a civil engineer who was responsible for recruiting and training the Navajo code talkers. The ability to send and receive messages without an enemy decoding them was key to a military's success. Phillip Johnson grew up learning the Navajo language and could speak it fluently. When he was younger child, he translated the language for people including Theodore Roosevelt. He knew the

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[1] Columbus, Courtney, and Erin Vogel-Fox. "Timeline: Native American Voting Rights." *NonDoc*, News21, 30 Aug. 2016

[2] "Native Words Native Warriors." *Recognition - Native Words Native Warriors*, National Museum of the American Indian, Education Office, www.nmai.si.edu/education/codetalkers/html/chapter7.html.

language was almost impossible to master. The language would create a code used to send and receive secret military tactical information.

Conflict between the Navajo and the U.S. Government in the 19th and early 20th Century

Between the 1840s and 1860s, there were increasing hostilities between the Navajos and the settlers moving onto their land. The U.S. Government repeatedly threatened the Navajo and there was a miscommunication between the U.S. Government and the Navajo about who governed the Navajos. The argument escalated to fighting, and in the 1860s, Colonel Kit Carson and his troops burned the Navajo land to nothing and they killed many Navajos. The Navajos were killed if they tried to protect their land. In 1864, they were now homeless and without food. [3]

After surrendering, they were forced to walk a 300-mile walk from Arizona to Fort Sumner in New Mexico called "the Long Walk." The Navajo had no supplies or help for their time on the Long Walk. The march was very difficult and many died. Soldiers killed the Navajo on the march who were sick, or if a pregnant woman gave birth and anyone that helped her would be killed too. Fort Sumner was a relocation camp and in the four years there, 2,000 Navajo died.[4] It is believed at least one-third of the Navajos died at the camp before the U.S. Government let them go.[5]

The Treaty of Bosque Redondo in 1864 allowed the Navajo to return home and the Navajo were granted land and supplies by the U.S. Government. As part of the treaty, the

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[3] Aaseng, Nathan. *Navajo Code Talkers*. Walker & Co., 2002.20-56.

[4]Nez, Chester, and Judith Schiess Avila. *Code Talker: the First and Only Memoir by One of the Original Navajo Code Talkers of WWII*. Berkley Caliber, 2012.,67-68

[5] "Bosque Redondo Memorial at Fort Sumner Historic Site." *MNMF*, Museum of New Mexico Foundation, www.museumfoundation.org/historic-sites/bosque-redondo-memorial-fort-sumner-historic-site

Navajo agreed to send their children to boarding schools.[6] The boarding school experience for the Navajo children was beyond horrible. When they arrived at the schools, they had to get a haircut, new clothes and had to get rid of their names and get a new American name. The school didn't care about them and their Navajo traditions. The Navajo didn't understand English and were slapped if they spoke Navajo. They heard "ENGLISH ONLY." This was just the start of the boarding schools getting rid of the Navajo traditions and culture. Students also realized not to raise their hand to answer a question because if they got the answer wrong, they would be hit with a ruler. In class, they were not allowed to move, fidget, leave to use the bathroom, or look at anything but the teacher.. Children would cry at night because they missed their family and home. Most of the Navajo had never left their home before this. Many tried to escape from the schools, but failed. The experience was so terrorizing that even after they left, they would tremble and start to cry at the thought of the awful place.[7]

Also during the Great Depression in the 1930s, the U.S. Government said that the livestock on the Navajo land was creating land problems by having too many animals. There was fear that the sheep, goats, and horses were overgrazing the land and there were problems with dust storms. The government said the number of livestock must be reduced and assigned a number allowed to each area on the reservation with the Navajo Livestock Reduction Act.[8] The loss of livestock was damaging to their economic and spiritual life. Some Navajo went days

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[6] National Parks Service. " Navajo Nation: From Prehistory to the Twentieth Century." *New Mexico Office of the State Historian*, newmexicohistory.org/places/navajo-nation-from-prehistory-to-the-twentieth-century.

[7] Nez, Chester, and Judith Schiess Avila. *Code Talker: the First and Only Memoir by One of the Original Navajo Code Talkers of WWII*. Berkley Caliber, 2012.,46-52.

[8] "Indigenous Voices of the Colorado Plateau." *Cline Library - Indigenous Voices of the Colorado Plateau - Navajo Livestock Reduction*, Northern Arizona Library, library.nau.edu/speccoll/exhibits/indigenous_voices/navajo/livestock.html.

without food. Most of the livestock were killed at the reservation. These animals were best friends to the Navajo and they cried when they heard their animals scream and squeal when being killed. This is known as the second worst tragedy for the Navajo.

20th Century Navajo Historical Context

Before WWII, the Navajo lived in hogans in Utah, Arizona, and Colorado. Life in the Navajo nation areas was not easy for electric power was very limited, the climate was very hot and dry, and their work on the land was very hard. Few Navajo had ever left their reservation or ridden a bus or train.

They could not vote and were still attending boarding school where they could not use the Navajo language. Their language did not exist in written form and there was not an alphabet.[9] Their language was very important to them and they called it "The *Dine."* Storytelling was very important and was passed onto future generations. Children loved to hear stories that their mothers and grandmothers told them. Their favorite and most important stories were about how they believed four sacred mountains protected them. Mount Blanca called the White Shell Mountain in Colorado represented the east. To represent the west were the San Francisco peaks, known as the Abalone Shell Mountain in Arizona. The north was Mount Hesperus or Obsidian Mountain in Colorado. The final Mountain is Mount Taylor or Turquoise, Mountain in New Mexico to represent the south.

Also, goats and sheep were very important and well cared for because they provided milk, wool, income, and company to the Navajo. The Navajo used the wool from their sheep for weaving rugs. The Navajo were known for their good horsemanship and horses. The Navajo did

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[9] Wilson, William R. "Codemakers: History of the Navajo Code Talkers." *HistoryNet*, American History Magazine, Feb. 1997, www.historynet.com/world-war-ii-navajo-code-talkers.htm.

not use fences for their livestock or to block apart neighbors.[10] Sometimes coyotes tried to attack their animals and the Navajo would try to hit them with slingshots.

Prayer and blessing was something the Navajos heavily relied on and was very important. Medicine men healed the sick and injured by performing blessings and rituals. The Navajos spiritual lessons were about the right way to bring harmony and balance for good health. Another Navajo belief was that all things should be respected.[11]

Compromise for World War II

The U.S. military was trying to find a way to develop an unbreakable code. At the time of WWII, there were only a few non-Navajo who knew the Navajo language. Philip Johnston was one of those rare people who knew the language and he proposed this could be the basis of a new code in February 1942. There was hope in Johnston's plan when Lieutenant Colonel James Jones agreed to meet with him, but Lt. Jones was very skeptical. After talking for awhile Johnston convinced the Lieutenant to take the idea further up in the military. For the next round, Johnston met with Major General Clayton Vogel and Colonel Wethered Woodword in March 1942. For this meeting, he prepared a demonstration. Johnston brought five Navajos and put them into separate rooms and through a radio used the language to send different messages. People were very impressed with the accuracy and fastness. The Navajo Code Talker program was approved.[12] They agreed on initially taking thirty Code Talkers to pilot program. The

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[10]"Navajo Code Talkers, True Heroes | Navajo Code Talkers." *Interviews, Videos & More*. N.p., n.d. Web. 26 Nov. 2017
https://navajocodetalkers.org/

[11] Nez, Chester, and Judith Schiess Avila. *Code Talker: the First and Only Memoir by One of the Original Navajo Code Talkers of WWII*. Berkley Caliber, 2012.

[12] Aaseng, Nathan. *Navajo Code Talkers*. Walker & Co., 2002.84-93.

program was called the 382nd platoon of the Marines. In April 1942 they started to look for recruits.[13]

Once they started the pilot program, they recruited thirty Navajos to join. Many Navajos were excited about the opportunity for the Navajos in America to be seen an impactful way**.** Some Navajos were skeptical about the government would treat and asked themselves did the U.S. really deserve the Navajos. Even some of the thirty lied about their age because they were underage or overage. By August of 1942, twenty-nine recruits made it to Camp Elliott because one dropped out. The Navajo made the code in two weeks and in four weeks they had 176 hours of work completed. To make sure the code was unbreakable, they had it go through multiple very experienced codebreakers who were unable to break it. The code was 211 words at the beginning, but throughout time it became 411 words.[14] For each word they created, it had to follow 4 rules. First, it had to be logical and easy to remember. Second, it had to be creative. Third, it had to be short. Last, it had to be unique from other words so that it could not be confused.[15] The Code Talkers had to have good memorization. The Navajo also learned about the radios they would have to carry around to communicate through them and how to fix them in case they break. The Marines created a Code Talker school and eventually over 400 Navajo were part of the Code Talker Program.

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[13] "Interviews | Navajo Code Talkers." *Interviews, Videos & More*. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Nov. 2017. https://navajocodetalkers.org/category/interviews/

[14] "Navajo Code Talkers and the Unbreakable Code." *Central Intelligence Agency*, Central Intelligence Agency, 6 Nov. 2008, www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/2008-featured-story-archive/navajo-code-talkers/.

[15] "Navajo Code Talkers and the Unbreakable Code." *Central Intelligence Agency*, Central Intelligence Agency, 6 Nov. 2008, www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/2008-featured-story-archive/navajo-code-talkers/.

During WWII, the Code Talkers were not allowed to tell the marines soldiers they were with of their mission which was highly classified. The Navajo Code Talkers were assigned to the Pacific in the war against the Japanese. The Navajo were not prepared for the violence and death they saw. "The stench of bodies filled my nostrils so strong it became a taste in my mouth…these were decaying bodies of men. I tried but could not block the fact from conscious thought"(Nez, 2001, p. 155).[16] They were often scared out of their minds at night not knowing if they were going to wake up to being under attack. An interesting thing to note was that the Navajo looked enough like Japanese soldiers that they could be mistaken for enemy soldiers. During battle, they feared being mistaken by American soldiers.

A runner would approach the Navajo with a message that they had to translate through the radio and were surprised by how quickly the military could respond. When using Morse code, it took hours to translate a message. With the Navajo code, messages could be translated in minutes. They never stayed on the radio longer than they should for fear that the Japanese would find them. The Code Talkers often had to watch out for their backs because the Japanese were experts at targeting people. Their job was to never stop transmitting codes if needed even when under fire. The Navajo Code Talkers were a strong asset to the Marines. The signal officer, Major Howard Conner, said "were it not for the Navajos, the Marines would not have taken Iwo Jima" [17]

Change and Recognition

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[16] Nez, Chester, and Judith Schiess Avila. *Code Talker: the First and Only Memoir by One of the Original Navajo Code Talkers of WWII*. Berkley Caliber, 2012.,155.32-36,145-151

[17] "Native Words Native Warriors." *Recognition - Native Words Native Warriors*, National Museum of the American Indian, Education Office, www.nmai.si.edu/education/codetalkers/html/chapter7.html.

After the war, the Code Talkers were told to keep silent about their work during the war and the Navajo Code Talker program was kept a military secret. Those who served in the war received benefits which helped their families and communities. Some attended college on the G.I. Bill. Many Code Talkers received medals like Silver Stars, Purple Hearts, and Combat Badges during and after the war like many soldiers, but it was much later that they would be recognized for their Code Talking. The Navajo Code Talker program was finally declassified in 1968. After a long delay, the Navajo Code Talkers were recognized for their contribution. After their work became known, the code talkers spoke to large crowds and they became honored at parades and fairs. As more citizens learned about the importance of the Navajo Code Talkers and their language for U.S. success in WWII, they were greatly praised publicly. In 1971, President Nixon gave certificates to the Navajo code talkers and celebrated their service for the U.S.[18] In 1986, President Ronald Reagan made August 14th Navajo Code Talkers Day because he wanted to them to be acknowledged.[19] In 2000, Bill Clinton signed the Honoring the Navajo Code Talkers Act which was senate bill 2408. The act awarded the original 29 Navajo Code Talkers with the Congressional gold medal. Also, silver medals were given to other Navajo Code Talkers.[20] President Bush stated in a speech honoring the Code Talkers"Native Americans have served with the modesty and strength and quiet valor their tradition has always inspired. That

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[18] Nez, Chester, and Judith Schiess Avila. *Code Talker: the First and Only Memoir by One of the Original Navajo Code Talkers of WWII*. Berkley Caliber, 2012.
Book,255-270

[19] Sorknas, Harold. "Navajo Code Talkers." Center for Technology and Teacher Education - Social Studies Modules,
www.teacherlink.org/content/social/instructional/navajo/.

[20] Ibid.

tradition found full expression in the Code Talkers, in those absent, and in those today. Gentlemen your service inspires the respect and admiration of American, and our gratitude is expressed for all time, in the medals it is now my honor to present. May God bless you all."(Bush,p.2).[21] Among the Navajo, the Code Talkers are seen as heroes. At a National Code Talkers Day, Fern Spencer said " Without you, I'd not be standing here as a proud tall American Indian woman. Because of you, Native Americans are free; because of you we have the right to vote" (p.7-8)[22]. None of the original code talkers are alive, the last one to survive was Chester Nez who passed away from kidney failure in 2014.[23]

During my research, I visited the Navajo reservation and went to the Code Talker Museum in Tuba City, Arizona which is where Chester Nez went to school.[24] I was excited to see the reservation after learning about the Navajo culture and history in this research process. Arriving to the Navajo reservation I could tell Navajo took pride in the Navajo Code Talkers because I saw many signs about them as we traveled. At the Code Talkers Museum, I got to see the actual uniforms and radios used by the Code Talkers during World War II as well as many photographs from the Code Talker's training and war experience. Looking around, I could tell the Navajo were not financially well off for their houses and schools were in poor condition. The land that I saw looked harsh, it seemed to be mostly sand and rock. The towns we passed

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[21] Nez, Chester, and Judith Schiess Avila. *Code Talker: the First and Only Memoir by One of the Original Navajo Code Talkers of WWII*. Berkley Caliber, 2012.
Book

[22] Newmiller, William. "The Navajo Code Talkers and Their Photographer." *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities*, vol. 17, no. 1/2, 2005, pp. 6–21.,
[23] Nicks, Denver. "Last of the Navajo Code Talkers Dies at 93." *Time*, 4 June 2014, time.com/2823322/navajo-code-talkers/
[24]Miller, Samantha and Inez Russell. "The Word Warriors." *People*, 17 June 2002. http://people.com/archive/the-word-warriors-vol-57-no-23/

through were marked by having a “trading post” for tour groups to shop at. The people were helpful and nice, and I saw children having fun and laughing, but witnessing the poverty is something I will not forget.

Interestingly, the country that once tried to rid the Navajos of their language and culture, needed that to win WWII. Saved thousands of lives. The participation of the Navajo Code Talkers in the war changed the relationship between the U.S. Government and the Navajo Nation from conflict to a partnership. As a result of the Navajo Code Talkers in the war, the Navajos were honored and their culture is appreciated today.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Aaseng, Nathan. *Navajo Code Talkers*. Walker & Co., 2002.

This book explains the process of how the Navajo became the Navajo Code Talkers. Also, the book explained what they risked and how it was difficult for them to leave home. The book is also really good at explaining how they affected the war.

Bush, George W. "George W. Bush: Remarks on Presenting the Congressional Gold Medal to Navajo Code Talkers - July 26, 2001." *The American Presidency Project*, *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, 30 July 2001, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=73606.

This is text of the speech given by President George W. Bush on July 26, 2001 to honor the Navajo Code Talkers. The Code Talkers were given the Congressional Gold Medal for their service during WWII.

"Interviews | Navajo Code Talkers." *Interviews, Videos & More*. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Nov. 2017. https://navajocodetalkers.org/category/interviews/

This website helped me figure out how the Navajo felt about what happened. It included their traditions and culture. It was really neat that they interviewed the Navajo code talkers face to face.

Miller, Samantha, and Inez Russell. “Code Talkers 60 Years Later:Sudden Celebrity.” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 30 July 2001, www.csmonitor.com/2001/0730/p1s4.html.

This source discusses the historical basis of the motion picture ”Windtalkers” released in 2001. The article interviewed Chetser Nez and other Code Talkers and their reaction to the movie and publicity.

Miller, Samantha and Inez Russell. “The Word Warriors.” *People*, 17 June 2002. http://people.com/archive/the-word-warriors-vol-57-no-23/

The article provides historical background on the Navajo Code Talker program. The authors interviewed Teddy Draper, Sr. a Najavo Code Talker about his life and experience.

"Navajo Code Talkers, True Heroes | Navajo Code Talkers." *Interviews, Videos & More*. N.p., n.d. Web. 26 Nov. 2017 https://navajocodetalkers.org/

This primary source became very helpful for me during my research because this is the official Navajo Code Talkers website. There were many examples in depth about the Navajo traditions and how the Navajos felt about everything with the code talkers.

Nez, Chester, and Judith Schiess Avila. *Code Talker: the First and Only Memoir by One of the Original Navajo Code Talkers of WWII*. Berkley Caliber, 2012.

Book

This source was my most helpful source because this author is one of the original 29 code talkers, Chester Nez, and his experiences. He explained many Navajo traditions of storytelling, and how much they care for their animals, and how they were affected they were about the Livestock reduction act. Also, he explained the painful experiences of boarding school. He explained life during the code talker school and during the war and how the code talkers helped. Finally, he talked about coming back home for the war to his Navajo community and how after the Code Talkers where declassified the recognition.

Nicks, Denver. "Last of the Navajo Code Talkers Dies at 93." *Time*, 4 June 2014, time.com/2823322/navajo-code-talkers/

This is a primary source that documents the death of the last original 29 Code Talkers and mentions their contribution to WWII.

Sorknas, Harold. "Navajo Code Talkers." Center for Technology and Teacher Education - Social Studies Modules,

www.teacherlink.org/content/social/instructional/navajo/.

On this primary web source was a copy of one of the awards the Navajo code talkers received named the certificate appreciation. This award was given to them by Ronald Reagan.

Secondary Sources

"Bosque Redondo Memorial at Fort Sumner Historic Site." *MNMF*, Museum of New Mexico Foundation, www.museumfoundation.org/historic-sites/bosque-redondo-memorial-fort-sumner-historic-site
This describes a memorial site for the Native Americans who were at Fort Sumner the U.S. military internment camp in the 1860s. It provided information on The Long Walk, the poor conditions of the camp, and how many Navajo died while there.

Columbus, Courtney, and Erin Vogel-Fox. "Timeline: Native American Voting Rights." *NonDoc*, News21, 30 Aug. 2016 https:/nondoc.com/2016/08/27/timeline-native-american-voting-rights/.
This website outlines major events on a timeline starting in 1830 with the signing of the American Indian Removal Act. It includes the founding of boarding schools for Native Americans in the 1870s. Also, it details how Native American voting rights kept changing in the 20th Century.

"Indigenous Voices of the Colorado Plateau." *Cline Library - Indigenous Voices of the Colorado Plateau - Navajo Livestock Reduction*, Northern Arizona Library, library.nau.edu/speccoll/exhibits/indigenous_voices/navajo/livestock.html.
This web source explains the Navajo Livestock Reduction Act happened to prevent overgrazing and soil erosion. Livestock is a very important part of the Navajos economic well being and the act leads to the use of permits.

Jerec, Adam, and Lee Ann Potter. “Memorandum Regarding the Enlistment of Navajo Indians.” *Social Education*, vol. 65, no. 5, Sept. 2001, pp. 262–268., www.archives.gov/education/lessons/code-talkers.
The is a website from the National Archives and provides articles and lessons that are educator resources. This memorandum describes how the Navajo Code Talkers program started, background information about the Navajo language, and the importance of this code for the war.

Little, Becky. “How Boarding Schools Tried to 'Kill the Indian' Through Assimilation.”*History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 16 Aug. 2017, www.history.com/news/how-boarding-schools-tried-to-kill-the-indian-through-assimilation.
This source talks about the experience of the boarding schools and how the U.S. tried to remove the culture of the Native Americans. This source is from the History Channel.

National Parks Service. “ Navajo Nation: From Prehistory to the Twentieth Century.” *New Mexico Office of the State Historian*, newmexicohistory.org/places/navajo-nation-from-prehistory-to-the-twentieth-century.
This source is useful because it provides details of the 19th Century which lead to the Long Walk and the details of the Treaty afterward which included sending Navajo to boarding schools.

“Native Words Native Warriors.” *Recognition - Native Words Native Warriors*, National Museum of the American Indian, Education Office, www.nmai.si.edu/education/codetalkers/html/chapter7.html.

This website describes the recognition of the Code Talkers after the war. It provides specific details on the declassification of the Code Talker program and what types of medals Code Talkers received.

"Navajo Code Talkers and the Unbreakable Code." *Central Intelligence Agency*, Central Intelligence Agency, 6 Nov. 2008, www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/2008-featured-story-archive/navajo-code-talkers/.

This explains how Native American languages were used for making codes in WWI and WWII. It provided specific details on how many words were part of the code and how they used word association to represent military details. For example, they used different types of birds to describe different types of airplanes. It also included information of President Reagan declaring Navajo Code Talker day.

Newmiller, William. "The Navajo Code Talkers and Their Photographer." *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities*, vol. 17, no. 1/2, 2005, pp. 6–21., doi:http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/19134196/navajo-code-talkers-their-photographer.

This source overviews the history and culture of the Navajo and the contribution of the Navajo Code Talkers. This is a good source for learning about what happened after the war for the Code Talkers. The second half of the article is about a photographer who used his photographs to tell the story of the Code Talker's military service and how he tried to fight the prejudice against the Navajos.

Wilson, William R. “Codemakers: History of the Navajo Code Talkers.” *HistoryNet*, American History Magazine, Feb. 1997, www.historynet.com/world-war-ii-navajo-code-talkers.htm.

This resource provides information about the Navajo at the start of WWII. The article is from the American History Magazine. This is a very detailed resource. The article tells who Philip Johnston was and how he started the Code Talkers program. It also describes how they developed the code, their experience as Code Talkers in the marines and how the Navajo benefited after the war.