

Navajo Yil-tas Ha-neh-al-enji

Story by Tom Bartlett

Photos by the author and
Official USMC Photographers

A small group of Navajo Indians served as Marine communicators during World War II. Their effectiveness prompted one Marine officer to state: "Were it not for the Navajos, the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima."



If you can't decipher the title of this story, then you can't comprehend "American." However, seeing as how you've read this far, your English must be all right.

"American" and "English" are not too similar. For example: you know the words of "The Marines' Hymn," right? Could you recite the words of the first stanza in "American?" (If it helps, you can sing it if you care to...)

*"Nin hokeh bi-kheh a-na-ih-la
Ta-al-tso-go-ma-he-seel-kai..."*

How are you doing so far? That isn't the entire first part, but it is enough to determine your knowledge of "American," or more properly, of Navajo.

The title of this story is "Navajo Code Talkers." A small group of Navajo Indians served as Marine communicators during World War II.

"Serve" is not a good word, for in the after action report of a Marine major.... "Were it not for the Navajos, the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima."

At the outbreak of World War II, very few of the Navajos had ever been off the reservation. Not many Navajo children attended schools to learn English.

But, on December 7th, 1941, after learning about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Indian Reservation Superintendent E. M. Fryer looked out his window and saw a large number of young Navajos approaching his house. The Indians carried their personal belongings in red bandanas, knotted at the corners. They all carried rifles and ammunition.

When Mr. Fryer asked what was going on, the Indians replied, "We're going to fight!"

In New Mexico, an entire tribe of young men cleaned and oiled their rifles, packed their saddlebags and rode to Gallup, ready to fight for their country and their reservation.

Many of the Navajos were turned down at various recruiting locations because they could not speak English. The rejected Indians were humiliated. Since when did warriors have to speak?

There is a poster hanging in a Gallup bar which reads: "Once Americans lived happily and made an easy living without welfare or government. Then the white man came..."

The white man took Navajo land in the mid-1800's and then forced the Indians from their homes, driving them like cattle for 300 miles to Ft. Sumner, a "concentration camp" for Indians. The expedition came to be known as "the long walk..." The



"Ira Hayes, Pima Indian" (Painting by Joe Grandee)

Navajos were descendants of those ancestors whose homes and crops had been burned by Kit Carson and his men. After four miserable years, the Indians were finally returned from Fort Sumner to a scorched wilderness.

"Many people have asked us why we fight the white man's wars," former Marine Navajo code talker Raymond Nakai once said. "Our answer is that we are proud to be Americans, and we are proud to be American Indians. The American Indian always stands ready when his country needs him."

During World War I, eight Choctaws served with the Army's 141st Infantry. The Germans couldn't decipher the Choctaw language and therefore they were at a loss to figure out the "code."

In the Pacific during World War II

there were many Japanese who could speak English fluently, having been educated at various colleges or universities in the U.S. prior to the war. Gregory "Pappy" Boyington had some words with one English-speaking enemy soldier as he buzzed a Japanese airstrip with his "Black Sheep" squadron.

The enemy refused to take to the air as the Marine formation flew over. "C'mon up," Boyington taunted.

"No, you come down, sucker," came the reply over the plane's radio. Boyington left his calling card—a strafing run over the enemy runway.

When a Marine battalion commander asked one of his company commanders for the exact position of a reconnaissance patrol along the Lunga River on Guadalcanal, the answer came back in grid coor-

dinates. A third voice cut in on the radio: "Thank you. *Our* patrol will be there, too."

The need for quick and accurate message transmission, in code, was the brainstorm of a white man, Philip Johnston. When he was only four years old, his mother and father, Protestant missionaries, took him to the Navajo reservation. During those early years, he had only Indian children to play with, and he quickly absorbed the language, tribal songs, ceremonies and traditions.

Johnston proposed his "code" to LtCol James E. Jones, Area Signal Officer at Camp Elliott, near San Diego, Calif.

"Colonel, what would you think of a device that would assure you of complete secrecy when you send or receive messages on the battlefield?" Johnston asked.



Navajo Code Talkers Pfc Preston Toledo and his cousin, Pfc Frank Toledo, were "doing their thing" somewhere in the South Pacific while adjusting Marine artillery against Japanese positions. Both Marines were then 18 years old.



CODE TALKERS (cont.)

"In all the history of warfare, that has never been done. No code, no cipher is completely secure from enemy interception," the colonel replied.

"My plan is *not* to use translations but to build a code of Indian words, with terms such as 'fast shooter' (*a-knah-as-donih*) for machine gun and 'iron rain' for a barrage."

Col Jones agreed to give Johnston's idea a test. A demonstration by Navajos was arranged for Major General Clayton B. Vogel, then commanding general of the 1st Marine Amphibious Corps. The test was a success and General Vogel sent a letter to the Commandant and requested 200 Navajo recruits.

Headquarters was slow in acting, and when they finally responded, they granted permission for the recruitment of an initial group of 30. (For some reason or other, only 29 began the initial project.)

Organized as the 382nd Platoon, San Diego, Calif., the Navajo Code Talkers began making up their "code." They'd take a word, say "amphibious," and determine what Navajo word most closely resembled that word. "Frog" is close, right? And frog is "*chal*" in Navajo. "Artillery" was "*be-al-doh-tso-lani*" meaning "many big guns" in Navajo. (Personally, I like "anti-tank," which was "*chay-ta-gahi-be-wol-*



(ABOVE) Pfc Joe Kellwood was with the Fifth Marines at Okinawa. (LEFT) His son, Paul, lost a leg while serving with the Marines in Vietnam. The Navajo-Marine tradition continues....

doni" or "tortoise-shooter.")

In all, 411 words were incorporated into the "code." Why not simply use Navajo instead of coding the language? Because Navajo doesn't have words such as "dive bomber," "battleship," or "semaphore." ("Battleship" was "whale," pronounced "lo-tso" in Navajoese.)

"Some of the Indians enlisted when they were only 12 years old," Bill Kien, a Navajo, said. "They lied about their age, of course." (White men's records did not contain facts and figures about reservation life, and births, deaths and marriages were not recorded by Anglos.)

"I signed up thinking I was going into the cavalry," he continued. "I went with a bunch of others, and I raised my right hand and was sworn in. That's when I was told I was a Marine. So I ask a sailor, 'What's a Marine?'"

"And he says, 'They're okay. They chase prisoners.'"

Bill enlisted from Santa Fe, New Mexico, in April 1943. He was shipped to San Diego for recruit training. "We hardly knew if we were coming or going," he recalls. "That's where they separated the men from the boys."

"I was selected as a Code Talker and sent to Pendleton for six months of schooling, and then I joined the 3rd Battalion, 25th Marine Regiment of the Fourth Marine Division. I worked for 'Jumping' Joe Chambers, who won the Medal of Honor."

Kien landed in the Marshalls in 1944 and won the Bronze Star with Combat "V" for bravery at Iwo Jima in 1945.

"A Japanese mortar barrage wounded the wireman. He was down, hurt, and in the open. It was one of those things. I jumped out of my fox-hole and got him and dragged him back to the aid station. He was hurt bad, but he lived."

"After the war, they told us to forget the code talk. It would never be used again. I'm not so sure," Bill said. "I got out of the Marine Corps and went to work for the railroad. I was making pretty good money, too. Then one day one of the men said that North Korea had invaded the south and Marines were going to land to fight."

"I quit my job right then and there and came back to the Marines."

He was a member of the Third Replacement Draft, arriving in Korea in late 1950, and was assigned as a wire



Two Navajos, overlooking Garapan, emulated the silent watchfulness of their forefathers while manning their post. Pfc Carl Gorman is the Marine with the binoculars. The other is unidentified.

chief and forward observer for an 81-mm. mortar platoon. He returned for a second tour of Korea in 1952, when he was communications chief for a 4.2 mortar unit of the Seventh Marines.

"I've got broken time, but I managed to put it all together and retire in 1966. I made Tinian, Saipan and Iwo Jima, and I had two tours in Korea. I volunteered for Vietnam, but I broke my kneecap."

"That was the saddest day for me," he admitted, "when they told me my career was washed up. I'd have stayed in if they'd let me. But what good was I with a bum leg? So I retired on January 1, 1966, at Camp Pendleton."

Kien now works as a Navajo silversmith at the Red Rock State Park in Gallup, New Mexico, demonstrating to tourists how Indian jewelry is made.

Frank T. Thompson enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1942. "I graduated from high school at 10:00 in the morning and enlisted at 2:00 p.m. that same day. After boot camp and 'code school,' I went to New Zealand."

"I was with the 3rd Battalion, Sixth Marines. We made Guadalcanal and the Tenaru River campaigns. We had some rough times," he said. "Then it was back to New Zealand."

Thompson landed at Tarawa. "We didn't use the code there. We took the island in only three days."

Next came a rest camp in Hawaii. "We got ready to board ship, getting set for Saipan, when one of the ships

blew up. I don't remember a thing after that, but I was told that I helped save some men from drowning. I stayed in the area, helping with casualties until I blacked out from the loss of blood." (His arm wound was bleeding badly.)

He woke up in a hospital.

Thompson was in the second wave, landing on the north end of the island of Saipan. He worked in the observation post, using the Navajo Code Talk. And then on to Tinian.

"We went back to Saipan for a rest, and we were getting ready for Iwo," he recalled. "By this time, I had 26 months overseas. I was given a choice," he continued. "Did I want to go on, or go back to the States? I was only a corporal, but I was a Code Talker all the way."

Frank Thompson kept going.... (Recently Frank's son, Floyd, graduated with honors from the Marine Military Academy at Harlingen, Texas and is now a pre-med student at Northern Arizona University.)

"I had an uncle who was captured at Corregidor in the Philippines," Frank said. "The Japanese had heard some Navajo over Allied communication lines, and they wanted him to give them the code. He wouldn't do it. They wound wire around his head and kept tightening and tightening.... But he wouldn't give them the code."

"We found out later that the Japanese would write down what they heard, but they couldn't make any sense out of it at all. It drove them nuts. What would you think if you heard 'Dibeh Wol-la-chee Tkin Bi-so-

CODE TALKERS (cont.)

dih Be-la-sana Nesh-chee? That spells 'Saipan' in Navajo. 'Sheep Ant Ice Pig Apple Nut' is what it boils down to in English, but we translate that to Navajo, and pronounce it in our tongue."

Frank Thompson and his brother, Francis T. Thompson, were the only pair of closely related Navajo Code Talkers to survive the war.

Thomas H. Begay enlisted in the Marine Corps in August 1943 and landed at Iwo Jima with the 27th Regiment of the Fifth Division. He was assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Company.

"I can remember it vividly," he said. "We hit the beach and my knees went weak. I became sorry that I had ever joined the Marine Corps. Remember, I was only 17, then. But once I began doing my job and got my mind off the bullets and mortars and the wounded and the dying, I kind of settled down."

After the war, he was released from active service and he joined the Army Airborne and became jump (parachute) qualified at Ft. Benning, Ga. During the Korean fighting, he served with the Army, and like Marines of the "Fighting First Division," he survived the ordeal of the Chosin Reservoir.

"I've got two boys, now. Not like me, though. They're both Army officers. I was only a Marine private."

But, after being released from the Army, he would become Superintendent of the Gallup Navajo Agency—about as high as you can advance on the reservation!

W. Dean Wilson, one of the original 29 Code Talkers, was released from the Marine Corps as a junior enlisted man but he continued his education and went on to become a judge.

Peter MacDonald was born on a reservation and given the Navajo name that means "He who clasps hands with strength." His parents were poor, and neither spoke English. When he was 12, he left school to herd sheep, and later, to work at a sawmill.

At the age of 15, he became a Marine and saw action in the Pacific. Released from active service, he finished high school in nine months and went on to graduate from the University of Oklahoma with a degree in electrical engineering. His

education led him to a job with the Hughes Aircraft Corporation and as an executive in the Polaris missile program.

MacDonald was inaugurated on January 5, 1971, to serve a tour as Chairman of the Navajo Tribal Council.

Eugene Roan Horse Crawford served from May 4, 1942, to November 1, 1945, as a Marine. "I was a communicator with Carlson's Raiders," he recalled. "At New Georgia, I went in (on the amphibious landing) with Harry Liversedge and the First Raiders."

One of the original 29 Navajos selected for the Code Talker program, Crawford also participated in the battle for Okinawa, but was part of the reserve forces during the Iwo Jima operation.

"I was a Pfc when I got out, and I'm proud of that," he grinned. "I had a chance for a commission because they found out that I had two years at the University of Arizona. But I turned the gold bars down. Heck. I was an old man," he said. "I was 29 years old when I enlisted."

George H. Kirk was 25 when he enlisted in March 1943. "I went to Camp Elliott for some radio school, then to Camp Pendleton for further military training," he recalled. "We shoved off then and landed at New Caledonia. That was a strange country," he continued. "Such a peaceful

island. Then came Guadalcanal. I made Bougainville, too. At Guam, a Japanese bullet went through my helmet, but didn't hit me.

"We trained for Iwo Jima, and then we were supposed to go in on the first wave, but the Code Talkers couldn't make it. So we went in on the second wave. I have many memories; not all good. Not all bad."

Released from the Marine Corps as a corporal, he served 28 years with Civil Service and nearly three years with the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

"I'm enjoying retirement," he said. "I've been a Council member for the Navajo Tribe for four years, too. I keep busy..."

Carl N. Gorman was another of the original 29 Code Talkers. He enlisted in 1943 and helped make up the original code. "After leaving code school, we were busy," he recalled. "I served with the First and Second Marine Divisions. We went from San Diego to New Zealand, then to Guadalcanal in reserve. Then Tarawa, Saipan and Tarawa, and that's when I was evacuated.

"I was suffering from concussion and recurrent malaria attacks, so they sent me to hospitals at Pearl Harbor, Oakland, Calif., and to Klamath Falls, Ore. I got what they called a 'Point Discharge,' meaning that I'd served enough time overseas and qualified for getting out of the service."

He studied art for seven years and then learned that "art is a lifetime study." He became a technical illustrator and worked for Douglas Aircraft. He also taught art at the University of Southern California for four years.

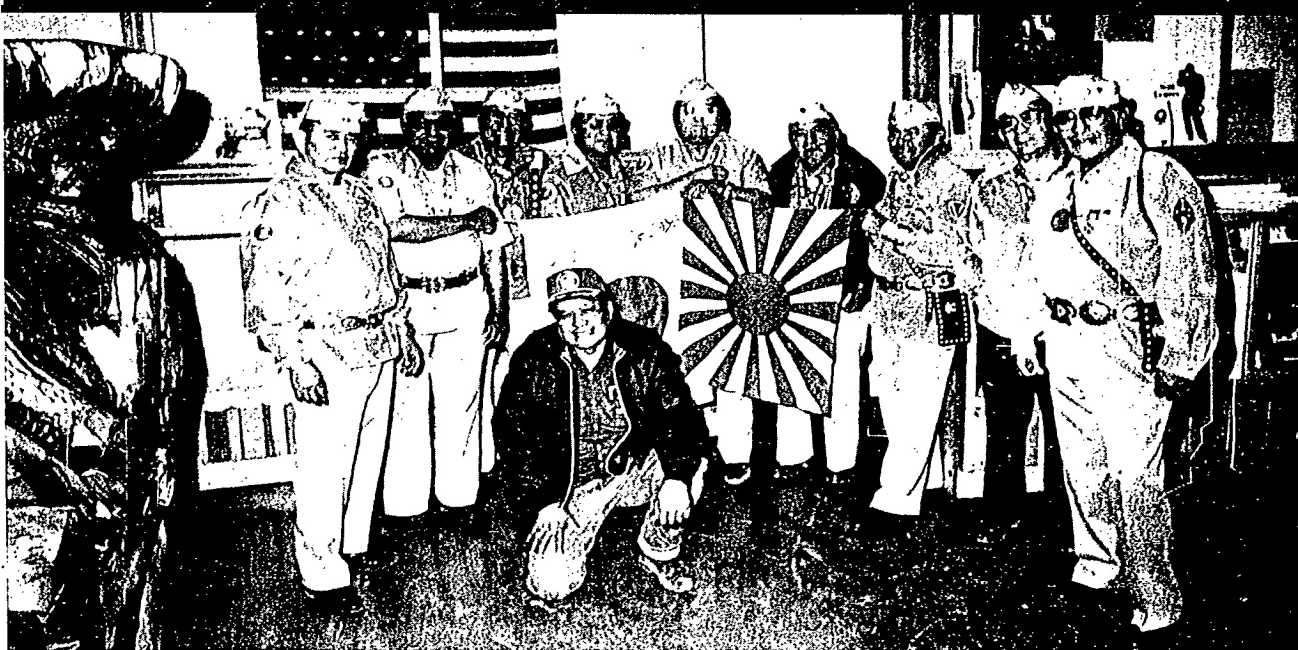
"Then I came back here to work for the tribe," he said, "at the Navajo Community College." He is a member of the Board of Directors for the Code Talkers, and Vice President of the Association. James T. Nahkai is the President.

Mary Gorman, Carl's wife, is originally from Rhode Island. An Anglo, she was appointed as Secretary to the Code Talkers and has been a working member of the association for the past six years. "They're wonderful people," she said. "Wonderful. It is a pleasure to be associated with them. You wouldn't believe how proud they are to have served their country as Marines!"

Not all of the Code Talkers saw combat. Arcenio Smiley enlisted in 1943, looking to fight. "I went to



Navajo Code Talker George Kirk served with the Third Marine Division. He showed Marine recruiter MSgt Jerry Scoggins a Japanese bayonet from World War II.



Navajo Code Talkers served with all of the Marine divisions during World War II. They recently presented combat souvenirs of that war to the museum at the Red Rock State Park in Gallup, New Mexico.

Okinawa and stayed in the rear with the gear," he grimaced. Presently employed by the Environmental Health and Public Health Service, he totaled 33 years of government service, including a tour with the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

"I am proud that I was a Marine," he grinned. "I was a corporal!"

Richard Thomas enlisted in January 1944. "I wanted to sign up earlier, but I was too young," he said. "I went overseas, all the way to Pearl Harbor, and a brief tour at Guam with anti-aircraft batteries, and then back home for my discharge. Not very glorious, huh?"

Martin Link never served as a Marine; he was an Army MP who made corporal before being released from active service. Originally from Raleigh, Calif., Link is a historian and an archeologist.

"One day while I was working as the Director of the Navajo Tribal Museum at Window Rock, Ariz.," he recalled, "I got a phone call from Philip Johnson. When he got out of the Marine Corps, he kept the original letters, documents and so forth. He had an idea; a concept. He waited 25 years before coming forward with this material. He wanted to turn it over to the Navajo museum."

"The Fourth Marine Division Association, coincidentally, was having a reunion that year and it was

decided to honor some of the Code Talkers. At that time, plans were made to hold a Code Talker reunion.

"So, that's what we did," Link continued. "We got about 90 of them together in 1971 to organize a 'living history.' After all, the young Navajos need heroes just like everyone else."

"I watched the wives and kids as the different Code Talkers were introduced during the reunion. There was so much pride. They were proud to be Navajo, and American, and Marine."

"There are 13 former Code Talkers on the Tribal Council; one was Businessman of the Year; some are in the 'Who's Who' of the Navajos."

Link thinks very highly of the Navajos. "They're a neat bunch," he said. And the Navajos have high esteem for Link, too. He was more than a little instrumental in forming the Code Talkers' Association.

In 1978, Link was transferred to take charge as Park Manager of the Red Rock State Park in Gallup, N.M., with ample space for monthly meetings of the Code Talkers. Space in the museum has been provided for mementos and souvenirs acquired by the Navajo Marines during their tours as Code Talkers.

The effectiveness of the Navajo Code was described by Maj Howard Conner, signal officer of the Fifth Marine Division at Iwo Jima. "Dur-

ing the first 48 hours, while we were landing and consolidating our shore positions, I had six Navajo radio nets operating around the clock," he recalled. "In that period alone, they sent and received over 800 messages without an error."

"Were it not for the Navajos," he continued, "the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima."

The primary duties of the Navajos were those of "talkers," for transmitting messages in their own language and code over telephone circuits and field radios. Their secondary duties were those of message center personnel and runners.

The Navajos continue serving country and Corps.... Former Code Talker Joe Kellwood and others contribute money which enables Navajo youths to attend the Marine Academy at Harlingen, Texas, and other Navajo youngsters enlist in the Corps locally through their Marine recruiter in Gallup, MSgt Jerry Scoggins.

"For the Navajos, the Marine Corps is a family tradition," Scoggins said.

The Code Talkers were unanimous in their pride of being Americans, of being Code Talkers and "*Washig-don be Akalh Bi-kosi-la...*"

(For those who don't read "American," that translates into "United States Marines...")

