

The Navajo Code Talkers

Despite their poor treatment by the United States throughout history, the Navajo were ready to fight for their country in World War II. A select group of these men were chosen to form the Navajo code talkers. Their work would prove invaluable to the war effort.

On the Pacific front, American intelligence was able to interpret messages using Japan's top secret Purple Code. In turn, Japan was able to decode American messages. This meant that neither side was able to keep a secret. Because Japan employed a larger number of troops, America lost battle after battle. By the spring of 1942, Japan occupied most of the Pacific Ocean. Something had to be done—and quickly.

While military personnel were trying to devise an unbreakable code, a civil engineer for the city of Los Angeles, Philip Johnston, came up with a possible solution. Having been raised among the Navajo, he knew the language fluently and also knew that it was virtually impossible for an adult to master. After taking his idea to the Marines, a 30-man pilot program was initiated. Following the rigors of basic training, the recruits had to learn pages of military terminology. From a list of 211 terms most frequently used in the field, the Navajo wrote code words for each of these terms. An alphabet code was also added. Even intelligence experts could not crack the newly-devised code. Nineteen thousand Marines were dispatched to Guadalcanal in 1942, including the Navajo code talkers. By intercepting messages, U.S. intelligence was able to determine the routes and schedules of Japanese merchant marine ships and destroy them. The new code prevented enemy knowledge of American plans. Once Japan's raw materials supply had been cut off, they could no longer produce military goods or equipment. The Japanese were forced to abandon the island. Thanks to the U.S. code-cracking abilities, the war in the Pacific was drastically shortened.



The code talkers experienced their finest hour in Iwo Jima, a strategic Japanese stronghold. During their first 48 hours on the island, six Navajo radio units worked around the clock and received more than 800 messages without error. Classified until 1968, in 1969 the Navajo war effort finally received the recognition it so rightly deserved. Two years later President Richard Nixon honored the code talkers with a special certificate. Congress declared August 14, 1982 as National Code Talkers Day.

Suggested Activity

Brainstorm Conduct a class brainstorming session of additional questions about the Navajo code talkers. Research answers.

Reference

Navajo Code Talkers by Nathan Aaseng (Walker and Company, 1992).