EXPERIENCES OF THE NAVAJO CODE TALKERS IN WOLRD WAR TWO

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When Americans hear about the Navajo that served during the Second World War, they think about the Navajo Code Talkers and the unbreakable code that was used in the Pacific to help Americans defeat the Japanese. Some people, however, do not know anything about this group beyond their role of delivering and receiving coded messages. There is a lack of focus on the experiences of these people, despite the existence of scholarship about them in the field of history and their depiction in the Hollywood movie Wind Talkers (2002) directed by John Woo. The code talkers encountered different things during their service to the United States, but what exactly? What type of experiences did this group have? How did exposure to these changes affect the Navajo who became code talkers? The Navajo Code Talkers were well known for delivering and sending coded messages during World War II. Research, however, reveals that their experience of the war included more than just this single role.

The historical study of the Navajo Code Talkers and Native Americans concerning World War II has undergone many changes throughout the decades since the end of the war. One way that the code talkers have been studied were made by Keat Begay, Broderock H. Johnston, and other associates in *Navajos and World War II* (1977). In the book, the writers argued that the Navajo who were involved in the war effort assumed different roles aside from speaking in code. Interviews with tribal members who joined the different branches of the military and other organizations that assisted with the war effort support this. Some of the interviews dealt directly with the experiences of code talkers while some did not. Opinions were important within the book, as each account ended with a question by Jones to the members about their interpretation of the war and what they did in it. Albeit the direct connection to the Navajo, the book was without data about the interviewer.

In the book *World War II and the American Indian* (2000), Kenneth W. Townsend approached the study of the code talkers differently. His work focused on a broader view of Native Americans, including the Navajo Code Talkers. The argument by the author noted that the war allowed natives to change their behavior with the introduction of new opportunities outside of reservations. These opportunities were sought by natives wanting better work in the defense industries, travel outside reservations to join home front activities, and the desire to protect their families and land through enlistment in the military. The work itself was more advanced than the previous one, with the addition of chapter titles, endnotes for sources, and a bibliography. The most apparent thing about this work is that Townsend shifted from a consensus form of writing to a form that focuses on showing respect to sources by use of references.

The book *Code Talker Stories* (2010), by Navajo member Laura Tohe, a relative of a code talker, showed one last shift in the method of study on the code talkers. In her work, Tohe discussed how each of the code talkers lived through the war differently. Her study included interviews with previous code talkers or their living relatives. While similar to the method of using interviews like Begay and her associates, the former based their interviews on a system of questions and answers, while Tohe based her method on storytelling, an attribute of Navajo culture that the interviewees preferred to use instead. New additions in this method of study of the code talkers included sectional arrangement of the book, an introduction explaining the author's progress in her research, and background about the author and her associate Deborah O Grady, the photographer responsible for the photographs of the code talkers in the book. Relating to modern scholarly work, the book was written in a way which allowed for the average reader to understand the material while including scholarly attributes for those with academic interests.

The current study of Navajo Code Talkers connects with the previous analysis of them due to the inclusion of data from different sources. In two of the previously mentioned books, interviews were a significant source of the research, but references from the third book add more detail to the process of study and analysis. However, there is the problem with the current historiography. There is not enough attention to how the code talkers' personally perceived their experiences of the war. While previous historical studies do present accounts of the code talkers, there is less focus on their views of the things that occurred to them during World War II.

Prewar Experiences

The origin of the Navajo code talkers first began with a man's suggestion for using their language as a code for the United States Navy. In her academic work "The Navajo Code Talkers of World War II: The First Twenty-Nine," Zonnie Gorman, daughter of Carl Gorman, one of the original code talkers, provides details about Philip Johnston, the man credited for coming up with the idea to use the language of the Navajo people.[1] Born into a Protestant family, Johnston's first experience with the Navajo began when his father Will Johnston decided to move the family on to the Navajo reservation with the assistance of the Gospel Union, an affiliate of the early version of the YMCA organization.[2] Assumedly, the family was likely to have learned the language before coming to reservation or learned to speak it from Navajo who spoke English. Otherwise, it would have made no sense for the family to have established a missionary presence in an area where it would be hard to understand the local language.

During the years that Johnston lived with the Navajo as a young boy, he became close with the indigenous people and their language. Besides the lessons he had with a tutor brought to

[1] Zonnie Gorman, "The Navajo Code Talkers of World War II: The First Twenty-Nine," United States, North America: UNM Digital Repository, 2015, Accessed March 6, 2019, https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1031&context=hist_etds, 17.

[2] Gorman, "The Navajo Code Talkers of World War II,"17.

the reservation by his father, Johnston also spent time learning about the dialect of the people. According to the book *Defending Whose Country? Indigenous Soldiers in the Pacific War* by Noah Riseman, a history lecturer at the Australian Catholic University in Melbourne, one of the ways that this man learned their language was through their songs.[3] Based on his experience, Johnston learned by listening to elders as they sang during ceremonies at night around the fire within their hogans (traditional dwellings). Him learning from songs alone was likely not his only method of learning the language. Talking to the natives outside of their ceremonies may have also allowed him to increase his knowledge of the language. Despite the different ways that he may have learned the language, it does not change the fact on how his early years of living with the tribe would have affected his decision to use the language as a code. Living close to the people who spoke the language, Johnston was enveloped in the language itself, which was important in his future attempt to show the use of it to the military.

The process for introducing the language as a code involved several steps. In 1942, Johnston, then working in the Bureau of Engineering at Los Angeles, California, took his idea to use the Navajo language as a code to the Navy branch of the military. Upon arriving at the Eleventh Naval District in San Diego, he was met with difficulty with persuading the officials for the use of the code, which they turned down stating "Well, if it can be done, it would just be a marvelous thing, but, we use another – we use cipher.[4]" This statement showed that the use of secret messages instead of a language was seen as more effective at the time. On the other hand, the officials suggested taking the code to Major James E. Jones of the Marine branch at Camp Elliot. It was likely that Jones was potentially impressed with the idea of using a native language

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[3] Noah Riseman, *Defending Whose Country? Indigenous Soldiers in the Pacific War* (UNP – Nebraska, 2012), Accessed March 7, 2019, https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxyse.uits.iu.edu/lib/ius/detail.action?docID=1073754, 176.

[4] Gorman, "The Navajo Code Talkers of World War II,"19.

for code, as he allowed for a demonstration of the code to be shown in front of him and other officers. Given the chance to demonstrate the code was good, Johnston had to find volunteers – notably Navajo men – to help in the demonstration. Upon finding no volunteers at the Sherman Institute, a school established for natives near Riverside, California, Johnston then approached the Indian Placement Bureau in Los Angeles, where thanks to the courtesy of a Miss Warren, he was pointed to several Navajo men in the area who agreed to help in the demonstration.[5] Plans were soon made to return to Camp Elliot with the Navajo to receive further instruction on how to demonstrate the use of the language as code.

Upon their return to Camp Elliot, six messages Johnston and the Navajo volunteers were given six messages by Vogel to decode for the demonstration. On February 28, 1942, Johnston and his group demonstrated the code to Jones and his associate General Clayton B. Vogel along with several other officers from the Marine Corps. According to an unnamed source from *World War II and the American Indian* by Townsend, the demonstration appeared to be a success as one of the officers recalled being surprised by the Navajos' successful transmission and decoding of the messages. Astounded by the results, a majority of the officers quickly recognized the worth in using the language. With the officers' permission, plans were then made to start a program for the code. Because of his interest in helping in the program, Johnston asked for and received permission to work as a training specialist to help train recruits among the Navajo.[6] Overcoming his early challenges and by successfully demonstrating the benefit of using the Navajo language, Johnston set out the early steps that would be taken to mark the entry of the code talkers in the war.

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[5] ibid., 20.
[6] Kenneth Townsend, *World War II and the American Indian* (University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 145.

To remove doubt of the demonstration as the only reason for starting the code program, sources reveal other reasons for the decision to utilize the native language for the military. One was that the Germany had no knowledge of the language itself. Research by Riseman showed that German anthropologists who visited the United States years before the war did not pay attention to the Navajo language during their studies of the indigenous people in the states. Two other reasons show that language did not have any English equivalents and that words within the language had multiple meanings.[7] Due to German researchers' past mistake of not learning the Navajo tongue, their ally Japan did not have knowledge of the language prior to the war, which made it difficult for them to understand the native tongue, giving an advantage to the U.S. military in the Pacific.

One of the earliest experiences of the Navajo Code Talkers was their recruitment into the code program. According to Gorman, these code talkers were selected from several locations near and on the Navajo Reservation by two men. The process of choosing the original code talkers, twenty – nine, was left to white men Major Frank Shannon and First Sergeant Frank Shinn. In their mission to gather recruits, each man had a different approach to find them. Starting in April after the demonstration, Shannon began with schools as areas for recruitment. His first stop was at a federal Indian school in Shiprock, New Mexico. There, he and a team of recruiters were able to find six Navajo men, including twelfth grader Cozy Stanly Brown, sixteen – year - old William Dean Wilson, and nineteen - year - old athlete Sam Hosteenez Begay to name a few. The major's second stop was at a federal boarding school at Tuba City, Arizona, where recruits found there included Chester Nez. Shannon's final stop then led to the enlistment

[7] Riseman, *Defending Whose Country?,* 177.

of four students from Wingate Industrial School.[8] For the Navajo students and teachers selected from these schools, they began a new experience outside of the ones in classes.

Moving on to Frank Shinn's approach to gather recruits, his method was more direct as he decided to recruit from the Navajo in general instead of from a few places. To attract attention for enlistment in the reservation, the sergeant began by using a truck with a thirty-two foot trailer equipped with a sound system near a hospital at Fort Defiance on the reservation. For a while, his method appeared to not be working, until he discovered that orders were given to the Navajo by their tribal council to ignore him. Why the tribal council passed this decree was likely based on the fact that Shinn did not notify the council of his intentions for coming into the reservation. After clearing his intention with the tribal leader Chee Dodge, Shinn was able to expand word of his recruitment without be ignored. By May, Shinn's team was able to recruit seventeen men, including Zonnie's father Carl Gorman.[9] Essentially, for the Navajo recruited by the two men, they would begin their journey of experiencing the war.

For the Navajo that enlisted for the code program, many of them had different reasons for joining. What may appear to a strong reason was that enlistment offered them the chance to us their language without ridicule or mistreatment for a purpose, unlike when most Navajo went to boarding schools. Decades before the Second World War occurred, federal government of the United States established schools for the purpose of Native Americans in order to get them to join the society of white people. Conditions at most but not all of these schools were bad as students were forbidden from speaking in their native tongue. In her article "The Navajo Code Talkers of World War II: The Long Journey Towards Recognition," Amanda Dahl of the Santa Clara University provides an example of how Navajo children were cruelly punished for

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[8] Gorman, "The Navajo Code Talkers of World War II," p. 38, 41 -45, and 46.

[9] Ibid p. 49, 51, and 60.

speaking in other languages aside from English.[10] Based on her studies, in 1931, an incident showed the harsh treatment of the schools when a report by the *San Francisco Chronicle* revealed that a young Navajo girl was locked in a closet for speaking in her language when she was unable to speak English. For this girl, the experience of being shut in for speaking the language of her people must have been traumatizing, which many other Navajo children may have also experienced for doing the same thing. In relation to the code talkers, it was likely that the ones who attended these schools also underwent the terrible conditions of not being able to speak the language of their people.

How the previous paragraph relates to Navajo Code Talkers joining the code program is best described by examples of those who experienced the trauma of the schools. In their book, *Arizona Goes to War: The Home Front and the Front Lines During World War II,* Brad Melton and Dean Smith - editors from the University of Arizona – provided details on how Carl Gorman experienced such punishment when he attended the Rehoboth Mission School in New Mexico.[11] At the age of ten, Gorman was chained to a corner of the basement of the school for refusing to speak in English. For a child to undergo this type of punishment at a young age, the experience was likely to have a negative to him. Because he did not feel safe at the school Gorman ran away back to his family. Data from the National Museum of the Native American later revealed that he continued his childhood education at Albuquerque Indian School, where conditions were less harsh.[12]

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[10] Amanda Dahl, "The Navajo Code Talkers of World War II: The Long Journey Towards Recognition, " *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History*, Series II: Vol. 21 (2016), Accessed March 9, 2019, https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/hist_etds/32/, 2.

[11] Brad Melton and Dean Smith, eds., *Arizona Goes to War: The Home Front and the Front Lines During World War II* (University of Arizona Press, 2003), 83.

[12] "Boarding Schools," Native Words, Native Warriors, National Museum of the American Indian, Accessed February 20, 2019, https://americanindian.si.edu/education/codetalkers/html/chapter3.html.

Additional proof to show how code talkers were prohibited from speaking their language as children in schools comes from an interview with Jack Jones, a later recruit to the code talker program. In 2009, he explained to Tohe, daughter of Navajo Code Talker Benson Tohe, how children who spoke their native language would be reported for speaking Navajo. In her interview with Jones in *Code Talker Stories,* Based on his tale, Jones explained how he and his fellow Navajo students at the school at Shiprock lived under constant watch for moments when they spoke their language. On school grounds, if any Navajo student was caught speaking their language, other students would tell on them by informing the instructors. Continuing on, Jones explained that for students speaking the language "they would get their names written down and were punished for Saturday and Sunday."[13] In sum, due to their restriction of speaking their language in schools as youths, it was likely that aside from their support of the war effort and defending their country, the opportunity to show their language as something useful was an advantage for the Navajo code talkers to prove that it was not a nuisance.

Loyalty to the land was another reason for which Navajo code talkers were likely to join the program. Despite harsh mistreatment by the United States government since their removal from their homeland, the Navajo still felt a sense of protecting the land from a foreign enemies, such as Germany under Hitler. In the text of the article "Coded Contributions: Navajo Code Talkers and the Pacific War" by Lynn Escue, progress was made by the Tribal Council of the Navajo reservation to ensure that everyone living on the reservation would show their support through loyalty. Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the council passed a resolution stating

[13] Laura Tohe and Deborah O'Grady, *Code Talker Stories* (Rio Nuevo Publishers, Tucson, AZ, 2012), 74.

their support towards the United States and proclaiming themselves to be against Germany.[14] Instructions were soon made for every member of the Navajo Nation to follow the proclamation. The result of the proclamation may have touched the ancient sense of responsibility of the Navajo to their land, for many men from far and wide on the reservation set out to enlist at the nearest recruitment station, trekking long distances to join to protect their land.

Public interest alone was not the only indication of the willingness of the Navajo to become code talkers. Among those who became code talkers, a few listed personal interest such as military benefits and peer pressure as reasons for joining. Wilfred E. Billey in 2009 and Kee Etsicitty in 2010 described in their interviews with Tohe these examples.[15] According to his story, Billey joined because of his decision to follow his friends who had joined before him. Albeit his sense of friendship to his comrades, his choice was maybe based out of the feeling of being embarrassed if he had chosen to not enlist instead. In the case of Etsicitty, his reason was based on the allure of military life. Having heard from different sources about life in the military, the young man became attracted to the fashion of a uniform, adequate wages, and the buddy system that allowed for pairs of code talkers to work together. At first glance, it appears that both choices by the two men were based on personal interest. Another glance would show a difference because Billey was affected by the feeling of being left outside his group, an inner force, while Etsicitty was affected by an outer force such as the appearance of being in a uniform. For many Navajo code talkers, it was likely that they followed the same style of these two men, basing their choices on either inner, or outer forces, or a combination of forces.

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[14] Lynn Escue, "Coded contributions: Navajo talkers and the Pacific War," *History Today*, Vol. 41 (1991): 13-20, Accessed March 9, 2019, https://eds-b-ebscohost-com.proxyse.uits.iu.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=2&sid=29dd2f2d-3e83-4e4e-9df7-cbd72cc5b3ac%40sessionmgr103, 15.

[15] Tohe and Grady, *Code Talker Stories*, 30 & 45.

For Navajo men enlisting for the war effort, including potential code talkers, several barriers limited their ability to join. During the enlistment procedures, there were several problems that reduced the amount of potential recruits. Age restrictions was one of the most common barriers at the time of the war. Doris Atkinson Paul, an associate of several former code talkers, in her book *The Navajo Code Talkers*, shows details about this restrictive issue. According to her analysis, the lowest recruitment age for Navajo to register for selective service was seventeen.[16] Mrs. Gorman added further detail about the restriction of age. According to her research, the age limit sometimes changed depending on wither men were registered for service or enlisted. Men who enlisted were required to be between 18-32 years of age.[17] Further analysis reveals, however, that members of the Navajo lied about their age in order to enlist. Gorman's father, Carl Gorman, was able to enlist because he lied about his age, which was thirty – five years to be exact. Based on interpretation of these facts, while age restrictions limited the number of potential code talkers, members of the Navajo like Gorman were shown have experience in deception in order to find ways around the policies of age restrictions in order to serve in the military.

One other restriction to the enlistment of Navajo Code Talkers was the ability for members to speak English. In the process of delivering and receiving coded messages in the Pacific, it was essential for code talkers to be able to translate the language in English for American communication operators on ships or in communication areas to understand them. However, years of limited contact with the mainstream American society led to low literacy rates in the Navajo reservation. Townsend provided that Native Americans, along with the Navajo,

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[16] Doris Atkinson Paul, *The Navajo Code Talkers* (Dorrance Publishing, Pittsburgh: PA, 1998), Accessed March 9, 2019, Google Books*,* 161.

[17] Gorman, "The Navajo Code Talkers of World War II,"52.

had low literacy rates due primarily to the natives focusing on maintaining tribal values and customs above interacting with white society due to high regards for keeping their culture alive.[18] Because of this issue, many Navajo remained isolated from the society of white people and did learn enough English, except for those that attended boarding school. The Navajo Council, in seeking to remedy a solution to this problem, initiated a plan to overcome illiteracy rates. Additional research from Melton and Smith show that the leaders of the council established English classes on the reservation.[19] In order to accomplish this task, it was likely that the leaders of the group arranged for members of the Navajo people who spoke English to teach other members or they received the assistance of people outside the reservation who also would have acted as teachers. While a language barrier caused the Navajo to have difficulty in enlisting, they were able to overcome it by providing a solution to the problems.

During the War, Many members of the Navajo Nation joined the military. How many that served as code talkers is a puzzling issue. The article "Native Americans in World War II," by retired military operations analysts Thomas D. Morgan, provided an estimation of the number of Navajo who served as code talkers.[20] According to Morgan, around 44,000 Native Americans served during World War II. Out of this large number of indigenous groups, the number of Navajo serving as code talkers is believed to be around 400. While some may think this to be a small amount, it is likely this small due to the issues that Navajo men faced in enlisting for the program. The ability to speak English fluently, as shown before, was likely to be one of the highest reasons for the low output of men willing to serve in the code program. Whatever the

[18] Townsend, "World War II," 68.
[19] Melton and Smith, *Arizona Goes to War, 75.*
[20] Thomas D. Morgan, "Native Americans in World War II," *Army History* no. 35 (Fall 1995), Accessed March 10, 2019, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26304400?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents, 1 and 4.

case, the amount of Navajo who worked as code talkers was still a significant amount of people given their status as the largest group of Native American communication operators that served in the Pacific.

In military boot camps, Navajo recruits showed different opinions about the training process. Platoon 382, consisting of the original twenty – nine code talkers, went through a seven-week training period involving basic training such as marching and instruction in firearms.[21] This length of training was the standard period of time that later recruits also followed, except for times when urgent deployment was needed. Often during this length of training, recruits dealt with negative and positive thoughts about the military routine. In an interview with Dan Akee, the former code talker described how he often had to deal with the strict behavior of several instructors and the orderly fashion that they expected him and other Navajo to follow. Unfamiliar with this type of discipline, he held negative views about training, but later changed his thoughts after learning the importance of the discipline that he went through. At other times, Navajo men quickly accepted the rigid routine of marches and aggressive instructors. This acceptance was based on the difficult lives they lived on the arid land of the reservation, or "Spartan way of life," that hardened them physically, enabling them to endure more than white men under bad conditions such as standing straight on a hot day while the former could fall from the heat.[22] Thus, Navajo that went through training showed different perspectives about life in boot camp, with some who saw it as being harsh while others saw it as an extension of the harsh life they had on the reservation.

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[21] Dan Akee, interview by Carol Fleming and Warren C. Salomon, NA, Video - Oral history interview, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Accessed10 March 2019, http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/bib/loc.natlib.afc2001001.52555.

[22] Paul, *The Navajo Code Talkers,* 18.

Life for Navajo recruits in boot camps did not only include them having different opinions about the training method. Analysis of the life of the code talkers during their training revealed that sometimes the military officers in charge of training the group would mistreat them. Accounts by code talkers reveal that some officers would use physical force against them when they did not meet personal standards. According to one account by an anonymous code talker, one officer went out of line of military procedure and hit him and members of his group one day. The officer was a former boxer who was upset at the group for performing poorly during boxing lessons. Angry at the recruits, he ordered to stand in a line and began hitting them with his fist. To the code talkers that went through this event, it must have been terrible, as the one that gave the account stated "We were falling all over the place."[23] The issue finally subsided when one of the Navajo who knew how to box retaliated against the officer and hit him back, which led to the end of the boxing lessons. For the code talkers, this event clearly shows that even in base camps, they were still discriminated by other people.

While Navajo training to become code talkers were mistreated by some people during their training, others actually complemented them for their skills. One such skill that the code talkers received praise for the most was during their training was their use of firearms. On the reservation, the Navajo survived by using rifles to hunt in the arid area that they lived, practicing their marksmanship. When they arrived at the gun ranges, they quickly demonstrated their ability to use the rifle. When he was given a M1 to practice on the gun range, code talker James achieved a score of 298 points, which he was complimented for by his instructor.[24] Groups also received positive remarks for their gunmanship. During the training of the original twenty - nine code talkers at Camp Calvin B. Mathews, Colonel James L. Underhill, the base commanding

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[23] Riseman. *Defending Whose Country*?, 179.
[24] Tohe and Grady, *Code Talker Stories*, 67.

officer, praised the group for being "one of the outstanding platoons in the history of this recruit Depot," upon their achievement of getting a firing record of 93.1.[25] For the code talkers, receiving praise for their ability to use firearms well meant that although negative behavior was shown sometimes toward them in their training, positive behavior was also shown to them.

During the earliest part of their training in the code program, some of the Navajo found ways to relax from the stress of training to become communication operators. One method of doing so was drinking with friends. Based on accounts by Chester Nez, when the Navajo in charge of creating the code needed to relax after working, they would sometimes venture off of the military base in San Diego, CA to socialize with their comrades. On weekends, Nez and his comrades would clean themselves up, put on their uniforms, and visit one of the bars nearest to the base. Their decision to eat off base was probably due to them getting tired of eating the same food at the cafeteria. A remark from Nez may have proven that the code talkers did not enjoy eating at the cafeteria every day, preferring to instead eat at a more refined place, so that they "could have a meal and a drink or two without getting sloppy."[26] By meaning of sloppy, he must have meant messes that would have occurred during meal time. For Nez and his comrades, having a drink together was a popular way for them to deepen their connections with each other. It was also a way to remove unwanted stress, which at the time was common for them because of the pressure that they felt from being depended on to make a code that would save lives. While there may have been other ways to alleviate their stress, the experience of drinking and having a merry time with friends was the most obvious choice for code talkers like Nez.

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[25] Gorman, "The Navajo Code Talkers of World War II," 83.
[26] Chester Nez and Judith Schiess Avila. "Unbreakable: the Japanese cracked every American combat code until an elite team of marines joined the fight. One veteran tells the story of creating the Navajo code and proving its worth on Guadalcanal." World War II, January-February 2012, 52+, Military and Intelligence Database Collection, Accessed March 10, 2019, https://link-galegroup-com.proxyse.uits.iu.edu/apps/doc/A274113590/PPMI?u=iulib_se&sid=PPMI&xid=eb5678f5.

Experiences in War

During the course of the Second World War, there were instances where the code talkers of the Navajo found themselves in different roles aside from their main role of transmitting and receiving coded messages on the islands in the Pacific. The Navajo code talkers took part in the battles against the Japanese instead of staying away from combat. Often, one or more code talkers would sometimes find themselves doing more than just shooting to kill the enemy. For instance, during the American campaign on the island of Iwo Jima, Navajo Code Talker Cozy Stanley committed an act that went far beyond than just defending himself from attack. Within the book *Navajos and World War II* by Begay and her associates from the Navajo Community College, an interview with the code talker revealed that he was attacked by an enemy soldier in close combat.[27] Grasping his hands on the Japanese, Stanley managed to kill the man. Although the soldier had already died, Stanley was not done with the body. Follow an ancient Navajo tradition of dealing with fallen enemies, the code talker took out his knife and scalped the head of the dead man. Why Stanley committed this gruesome act may have to do with the ancient custom of Navajo proving themselves to be warriors by taking the scalp of the enemy to prove their status. Further in the interview, Stanly revealed that when he later returned home, a medicine man performed a ceremony to cleanse him of the lingering spirit of the deceased person. Aside from showing a revival of the warrior spirit and a tradition of his people, this code talker showed that the code talkers experienced direct combat with the enemy and fought to stay alive.

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[27] Keats Begay, Broderick H. Johnson et al., *Navajos and World War II* (Navajo Community College Press, Tsaile, 1977), 59 and 60.

Direct combat alone was not the only additional role that code talkers faced when confronted with enemy troops during battle. Sometimes, code talkers found themselves performing acts of heroism. George James Sr., a Navajo Code Talker who also served at Iwo Jima, described in an interview with Tohe on April 2010 that he had saved the life of another man.[28] In the eight allied wave of attack against the enemy on the island, James and another code talker were given word that an American Marine became unconscious near the front line while trying to take cover in a foxhole. Crawling under the noise of mortar fire and bullets of the enemy, James and his comrade managed to get to the man and roll him over to safety which was a difficult task; the man was over two hundred pounds. Despite a major wound to his face, the man was able to be lifted back to one of the Red Cross ships near the island. For a man like James to have risked his own life to save another man was an incredible thing. This act by one code talker alone showed that sometimes people of this group would find themselves becoming heroes during bad situations such as battle.

The Navajo Code talkers also experienced the dangers within the war. For them, one of the direst threats was being captured by the Japanese. In their effort to try and decipher the code, the Japanese military made it the goal of soldiers to capture Navajo Americans and try to force them to translate the code. Early in the conflict, one Navajo soldier named Joe Lee Kieyoomia that was captured in the Philippines was tortured for five months in 1944 by the Japanese in an attempt to learn the code.[29] By luck, he did not know how the code worked, but the danger was great enough that for many of the Navajo, certain measures were taken by the U.S. military to prevent the code falling into the hands of the enemy. In the case of imminent danger, code talkers were sometimes given a gun. If they were in danger of being captured, then they were to

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[28] Tohe and Grady, *Code Talker Stories*, 67 to 68.
[29] Escue, "Coded Contributions,"6.

commit suicide by shooting themselves in the head.[30] Under this type of condition, the code talkers lived under fear every time they were combat, scared of being captured by the enemy or having to kill themselves to protect the code. For them, the experience of trying to keep themselves and the code safe meant that to many people, they were a vital source that was to be destroyed if fallen into the hands of the enemy.

Danger did not only come from the Japanese but also from the American Marines. During the war, White Americans constantly mistook the Navajo code talkers for being Japanese due to their similar appearance. Sometimes, code talkers were under the risk of being shot from behind. In a video interview conducted by Judith Avila with Chester Nez, the code talker revealed that one of his comrades had died from being mistaken for a Japanese soldier.[31] As he recalled, on one of the islands in the Pacific, a fellow code talker who was leaving a foxhole was shot in the back by a Marine who was nearby. Aside from the potential danger of being shot by mistake, code talkers were also arrested. This was the case for William McCabe on the island of Guatemala after the Japanese occupation ended with the American takeover of the island.[32] According to details, he was searching for orange juice to drink at one of the chow dumps that were set up on the beaches when he was prodded with a rifle from behind. Even while he was in uniform and had his identification on him, he was brought before the marshal in charge who, without proper thinking, wanted to have him killed. It was only with a last minute check with his outfit that a lieutenant proved his identity. If not for the help of someone who proved his status as a code talker, McCabe would have been shot like the previous code talker.

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[30] Riseman, Defending Whose Country?, 205.
[31] Chester Nez, Interview by Judith Avila, April 2, 2014, Video Interview, Accessed February 18, 2019. https://navajocodetalkers.org/chester-nez-real-code-talker-interview.
[32] Melton and Smith, eds. *Arizona Goes to War,* 71 and 72.

Because of this incident and others that took place, the United States Marine Corps issued a new form of regulation to ensure that code talkers would not be harmed or killed by American soldiers. One solution was to attach a bodyguard to code talkers. The primary goal of these bodyguards was to insure that code talkers would not be mistaken for the enemy and to avoid capture by any means necessary. However, according to Code Talker Bill Toledo, some code talkers were not aware that they had someone watching their back, as he was only made aware that one of his non-Navajo companions was his guard years after the end of the war.[33] However, an interview with code talker Jimmy Begay revealed a darker side to the purpose of the bodyguards. Based on evidence gathered from an interview with the code talker, bodyguards assigned to code talkers were to shoot them upon threat of being captured by the Japanese, which Begay had learned from a former bodyguard.[34] Under threat by both the enemy in front and from allies in the back, especially those with orders to kill to avoid capture, the Navajo Code Talkers lived under the fear of not knowing when or who would end them at any given time during the war.

While there have been several mentions of the Navajo Code Talkers going through negative experiences of the war, they were also known to experience positive moments in their service during the war. During the island campaigns, American Marines depended on the code talkers to help them take back the islands from the Japanese. In the allied invasion of Iwo Jima, the code talkers faced the strain of working under pressure to deliver their code back and forth between themselves and other communication operators. According to an article found from the *Navajo Times*, the newspaper of the Navajo Nation, the Navajo managed to transmit around 800 messages that helped Americans locate the enemy and avoid being hit from Navy battleships

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[33] Riseman, Defending Whose Country?, 204.
[34] Tohe and Grady, *Code Talker Stories*, 27.

shooting barrages of heavy shells on the island.[35] For the code talker to have endured flying bullets, explosions, and other dangers on the island in order to maintain their communication required great amount of focus, which would have been difficult for anyone who would have been under the same situation. Granted that they owed their lives to them, officers like Major Howard Conner openly commended them for their help, noting that if "it were not for the Navajos, The Marines would not have taken the island."[36]

For the Navajo Code Talkers, to have been complemented for their task in the war meant more than just receiving praise. Before the war, the pride of the Navajo had fallen because of their mistreatment by white Americans in the past. To the code talkers, their sense of pride in their language was renewed. Code Talker Alfred Peaches, who had served in Guadalcanal, recollected how his service in the war helped him to revive his native pride.[37] According to his accounts, he was able to feel proud for his accomplishment, emphasizing how knowledge of the code as a way to help many people made him feel good in protecting the lives of many people, many which thanked him for being their defender. Not only he, but Carl Gorman also realized how speaking his language helped him feel proud again. In the same campaign in Guadalcanal, Gorman saw the value of his language as contributing greatly to the war effort.[38] Beaten for speaking in his native tongue in the school, he saw how a part of his native culture in a sense of irony was helping his country. Furthermore, he confessed how the warrior spirit of the Navajo was relit, noticing that he was again proud of himself and his culture. Basically, despite past

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[35] "World War II Navajo Code Talkers," *The Navajo Time*, July 8, 1971, Accessed February 20, 2019. http://www.americanindiannewspapers.amdigital.co.uk.proxyse.uits.iu.edu/Documents/Images/SNRC_NAVTM_197107-09_ED002/42

[36] Townsend, *World War II*, 148.

[37] Tohe, *Code Talker Stories,* 127.

[38] Townsend, World War II, 148.

actions taken against the code talker to prevent their language from being spoken, the war and the use of the language within it allowed for native pride to rise again.

Aside from the revival of their warrior pride, the code talkers of the Navajo also resurrected their native traditions. Before the start of the war, the Navajo secluded the practice of their customs to the reservation. During the war, however, many of the code talkers openly expressed their customs and traditions in front of American Marines. One of the most common practices of the Navajo was prayers spoken before battles. According to war correspondent Ernie Pyle, he was given the opportunity to interview a few of the code talkers about their warrior prayer before the Allied invasion of Okinawa. At the Solomon Islands prior to the invasion, the code talkers held a ceremony where they chanted for the weakening of the Japanese to allow for an easy landing. When the landing did occur with ease, Marines were later discomforted with the difficulties of dealing with the enemy, with one marines asking a code talker questioning the ability of the ceremony. Answering the Marine, the code talker replied with a smile that their prayer was for the landing, implying that "We prayed only for a safe landing."[39] Such an experience alone would show that the code talkers had deep trust for the effects of their prayers, which also caused non-Navajo to believe in the prayers as well.

The Navajo Code Talkers were also superstitious in traditions forbidding things conserved taboo. Based on firsthand experience, one group of code talkers experienced the negative effect of going against their culture's taboo of using bad language before combat. On the island of New Guinea, Navajo Code Talker Cozy Brown was in charge of a group of fresh recruits. One of them, lacking disrespect for tradition, commented on himself as being fat and that the enemy could butcher him at any time. Because of his jinx, when the group were dodging

[39] Escue, "Coded Contributions,"19.

bullets from Japanese planes by falling into a foxhole, the one who made the joke did not, which Brown complimented as negative as “the silly guy got killed there.”[40] For the code talkers, speaking the words just like the ones spoken by their member who was killed meant afflicting future problems on themselves. To avoid any horrible effects, negative language was largely ignored by the code talkers during service in battle.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing forms of tradition that members of the code talkers experienced was their reliance on the protection ceremony. This ancient practice, dating back centuries before the war, was performed by the families of code takers before they were sent out to the war. John Kinsel was one code talker who showed the importance of the ceremony. Before leaving his family, he was subjected to the ceremony, also known as the “warrior ceremony.”[41] Corn pollen, a sacred grain of the Navajo, was used on him by a medicine man, who along with his family, chanted words of protection while around him. During the war as well, the ceremony was continued by his family to further protect him. While this practice sounds absurd, the mystifying effect of it was believed to be successful by the code talker, as he mentioned that during his time in the war, no great harm occurred to him by the enemy. Whether the ceremony was successful or not for all code talkers who performed this ceremony, it remains to be seen that the people within the group held deep beliefs of this practice being a strong defense for them against the horrors that they encountered in the length of the war.

Post War Experiences

[40] Ibid, 19.
[41] Tohe and Grady, *Code Talker Stories*, 103.

After the end of the World War II, the Navajo Code Talkers returned to the United States. Unlike the many other American soldiers who returned home on ships to cheering crowds, many of the code talkers did not receive such praise because the secrecy of their work. For them, despite their service overseas, they were not praised for their tasks in the war. Within her report, Dahl presented an account by code talker George Willie Sr., who explained how the returning Navajo were treated the moment they returned from duty. In his account, none of them received a warm welcome when they got off the ships. In his account, Willie Sr. remembered how the he and his fellow code talkers were forbidden from being seen by other people when they arrived in the ports and instead were instructed by government and military officials to be "taken off the other side of the ship on wooden planks and immediately put on buses and sent home on trains."[42] Why no one paid attention to these men was caused by governmental precaution. Because of the high success of the communicators of the code that helped to defeat the Japanese, the Navajo Code talkers had knowledge that the United States government did not want anyone to know except for a few people within the military and government. When he was discharged from service at Camp Pendleton, code talker Keith Little was warned to not let anyone know what he did, not even to his family.[43] For the code talkers, they were prohibited from explaining their important role in the war, which secluded them from the recognition shown to other men, whom they had protected with their code and endured the same difficulties with in the great conflict.

Disrespecting the code talkers by not praising them and forcing them to be silent were not the only problems that they faced when while readjusting to normal life. Upon their return to their homes, many of the code talkers found themselves under the same mistreatment that they

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[42] Dahl, "The Navajo Code Talkers of World War II,"76.

[43] Tohe and Grady, *Code Talker Stories"* 118.

had faced before the start of the war. In communities across the states, there were business owners who treated Natives who served overseas the same as animals, putting up biased signs that reading "No dogs or Indians."[44] At other times, on their journey home, there were instances where people would refuse service to code talkers. Code talker Samuel Tso experienced such treatment after a kind man offered him a ride back to his family near Gallup, Arizona. On the way back, when he and the man stopped at a place to eat and drink, the proprietor of the place refused to sell him a drink, only giving in when the other man argued about Tso being a war hero.[45] Under prejudice and hatred to Indians, for the Navajo who faced this terrible behavior, it seemed that it did not matter to some people in the states whether they served and survived the war, as they still bore hatred to Native Americans.

The painful memories of the war were another difficult thing for Navajo Code Talkers to face as they tried to reintegrate into American society as citizens. In the course of the war, many Navajo saw both allies and enemies die in front of them and suffered from wounds. The trauma of encountering these situations was heavy on many code talkers; the guilt of killing others and surviving the ordeal was sometimes too much for them to handle. Sometimes, Code talkers attempted to relieve themselves of their painful memories through unhealthy habits. Dan Akee, a code talker and Sergeant Major, described in interviews with Carol Fleming and Warren C. Salomon how nightmares of the war caused him to turn to drinking.[46] After a ceremony failed to help him recover from the scenes of death, he turned to liquor, which after a while led to him

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[44] Dahl, "The Navajo Code Talkers of World War II, 77.
[45] Tohe and Grady, *Code Talker Stories*, 165.
[46] Dan Akee, Interview with Carol Fleming and Warren C. Salomon, Video Interview. Dan Akee Collection, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Accessed February 18, 2019, http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp-stories/loc.natlib.afc2001001.52555/.

having kidney disease. Upon advice from a doctor, he turned to Christ as way to help him, which changed him for good, allowing him to live through his nightmares as a changed person.

Upon mentioning of ceremonies as way to help forget memories of the war, other code talkers actually took the chance to use traditional methods to help them. According to the beliefs of the Navajo, when members would encounter dead bodies in combat, the spirits of the deceased would linger around Navajo warriors, causing agony and distress to them. One way to experience release from these spirits was through the Enemy Way ceremony, also known as the Squaw Dance. Performed traditionally by a medicine man, this was a dance meant to help warriors return to a state of balance known as "Hozho" in the Navajo language. While this practice seemed abnormal to outsiders, many coder talkers went through it with good results. In the case of John Brown, Jr, when he went through the ceremony at his home in Crystal, he found himself to longer have feel the dreary spirits around him, stating that the memory of blood and death no longer bothered him after the ceremony was completed.[47]

When the code talkers returned to the United States, many expected to find better jobs. Some Navajo did not able to find such jobs. Unemployment and poverty levels were a common occurrence for American Indians before the war, but lack of skills and uncooperative employers made life hard even after the war. For some of the code talkers, traditional jobs held by members of the group such as mining or working on railroads were the only source of work that they could find. This was the case for code talker Tso, who upon finding no available jobs, had to work as a railroad worker until he was able to find a better job. There were also instances, however, in which code talkers were able to find jobs that they could work with the skill they attained working as communication operators. When he returned to the Navajo reservation, Code talker

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[47] "Coming Home," Native Words, Native Warriors, National Museum of the American Indian, Accessed February 18, 2019, https://americanindian.si.edu/education/codetalkers/html/chapter6.html.

Drake Sr. was able to find a job as a teacher at the Diné College in Tsaile, Arizona, where he would teach the Navajo language to children.[48] By these accounts, it seemed that while the opportunity for jobs was low for many of the Navajo Code Talkers, there was some who were able to find work thanks to their experience of speaking in code during the war.

Concurrent to the difficulties that the Navajo Code Talkers were having in finding work, the federal government set out to help ease the tensions of the many returning Americans hungry for work. The GI Bill, otherwise known as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, was a plan by the federal government to provide funds for American soldiers seeking to further their education. According to article writer Ryan Katz, the act was originally planned by the American Legion, who started out by creating a comprehensive package for veterans to cover things from education to low-interest housing and business loans, although the first of these goals was implemented the most out of the three.[49] Why Franklin D. Roosevelt supported the act was to prevent a repeat of the same mistake that former president Hoover had to deal with when veterans of World War I were denied money owed to them by the government during the Great Depression. While available to a majority of people, some groups, like African-Americans, were limited from the benefits of the act. Despite this one negative effect, the act allowed for many veterans to enter schools across the country tuition-free. By 1947, more than half of college students were American veterans, taking classes to further their education to find higher paying jobs.

In relation to the Navajo Code Talkers, many of them took advantage of the bill. Before the creation of the bill, many code talkers faced difficulty in pursuing higher education. Often at

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[48] "Survival," Native Words, Native Warriors, National Museum of the American Indian, Accessed February 18, 2019, https://americanindian.si.edu/education/codetalkers/html/chapter6.html.
[49] Ryan Katz, "The History of the GI Bill," American Radio Works, updated on September 3, 2015, Accessed February 18, 2019. http://www.americanradioworks.org/segments/the-history-of-the-gi-bill.

times, the highest levels of education that the Navajo could gain was from middle or secondary school level, with rarities in the second of these levels. In the example of Gorman and Tso, these two men pursued an education to further job opportunities. An inspiring artist, Gorman took the opportunity to enroll himself in the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles, California.[50] After four years of education, he found himself working in a technical illustrator's position with Douglas Aircraft. Later, after working as an art professor, Gorman returned to the Navajo reservation to work as an art professor at the Navajo Community College in 1977. Tso, in seeking better work other than the railroad, enrolled himself at Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas.[51] Taking a course in refrigeration and electrical wire, and house wiring, he later became an electrician for a few years and then a teacher at Intermountain School in Utah.[52] From the accounts of these two code talkers alone, it seemed that for them, the GI Bill provided a chance for them to improve themselves and later share their skills with the younger generation.

Many years after the end of the war, after keeping their tasks a secret for so long, the Navajo Code Talkers were able to receive the recognition that they did not receive after the war. In 1992, some of the surviving Navajo Code Talkers were honored with an exhibit at the Pentagon showing their development of the code.[53] During the reveal, the Code talkers demonstrated the use of the code, with Samuel J. Smith leading the group in charge. On July 26, 2001, the 29 original code talkers were honored with Congressional Gold Medals, the highest

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[50] "Carl N. Gorman," In St. James Guide to Native North American Artists, Detroit, MI: Gale, 1998, Biography In Context, Accessed April 10, 2019), https://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/K1637000105/BIC?u=iulib_se&sid=BIC&xid=af548933.

[51] "Survival," Native Words, Native Warriors, National Museum of the American Indian, Accessed February 18, 2019, https://americanindian.si.edu/education/codetalkers/html/chapter6.html.

[52] Tohe and Grady, *Code Talker Stories*, 174.

[53] Special to The New, York Times, (1992, Sep 20), linguistically elite, Navajo corps is reunited, *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Retrieved from http://proxyse.uits.iu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxyse.uits.iu.edu/docview/108902933?accountid=11654.

award for Americans who contribute to society.[54] While only a four survivors of the original code talkers attended the event, family members of the deceased were also there alongside them in Washington D.C. Among those present was code talker John Brown, Jr. who shook hands with President Bush as he was given his medal. In gaining these awards, the code talkers were finally recognized for their hard work, which to them was a heartwarming experience.

Conclusion

Information about the changes that the Navajo went through came from many sources. In several works, there were analytical studies about the code talkers. Some focused on their training, their tasks, as people mistreated, and praise of them by the United States military. Additional details were personal perspectives of members who decided to share and discuss their experiences. In these interviews, they talked about the negative things they saw and did to survive, but also discussed positive things that enabled them to move forward in the war. In journals too, an emphasis was shown about feelings shown by code talkers. From accounts and records of databases, former members like Carl N. Gorman and Chester Nez showed how code talkers benefited from education achieved with the assistance of government aid. Most important was the research that showed how these men were only recognized after years of silence after they were forbidden to speak about their tasks. While their tasks of creating and transmitting the code remain their most obvious accomplishment, now that their other experiences in the war have been revealed, these respectful men are now shown to have done more than just speak in code.

[54] "Speaking the Language of Victory: Congressional Medals Awarded to Navajo Code Talkers," National Public Radio, Last Modified July 28, 2001. Accessed January 22, 2019, https://www.npr.org/programs/wesat/features/2001/navajocodetalkers/280701.navajocodetalkers.html.

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