

Code Talkers

During World War II, the United States military fought the Japanese military in the Pacific Ocean. They communicated their battle plans over the radio. Sometimes their enemies intercepted these radio transmissions. So the Americans used codes.

When the Japanese cracked the American codes, the military searched to find a new code that could not be broken. One soldier, a Navajo man, suggested using the Navajo language. Very few people spoke Navajo, and it was challenging to learn.

The U.S. military agreed this was a good idea. So, starting in 1942, they recruited a group of Navajo men to become marines. These marines were tasked with creating a code based on their language. The military hoped that this code would be unbreakable.

The Navajo marines created and memorized the new code. Sometimes they used whole Navajo words for military terms. The word for “humming bird” meant “jet fighter,” and the word for “turtle” meant “tank.” Sometimes they spelled out words using Navajo words to stand in for English letters. For example, wollachee, which means ant in Navajo, represented the letter A.

The Navajo marines were known as code talkers. Over 400 of them served in the Pacific during the war. They translated important

communications and passed them to other groups of marines fighting in the area. They were very fast at the process. It took only 20 seconds to encode, send, and decode a short message.

During the battle of Iwo Jima, code talkers transmitted over 800 messages in 48 hours. They made no errors. In fact, the code was never cracked throughout the entire war.

After the war, the U.S. military wanted to keep the Navajo code secret. They did not acknowledge the Navajo marines who had served as code talkers. The men were not publically honored for their service. Finally, in 1992, the military released information about the crucial role the code talkers had played in the American victory over Japan. The original code talkers were given Congressional Gold Medals in 2001. At last they got the recognition they deserved.



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NAME: _____ DATE: _____

1. Which of the following was NOT mentioned as a reason that the military decided to use the Navajo language as the basis for their code?
 - a. Because it was challenging to learn
 - b. Because very few people spoke it
 - c. Because they thought it would be unbreakable
 - d. Because there were already a lot of Navajo marines

2. In the code, the Navajo word for humming bird meant _____.
 - a. Ant
 - b. Turtle
 - c. Jet fighter
 - d. Tank

3. How do you think the code talkers felt about not being recognized after the war?
 - a. Relieved
 - b. Offended
 - c. Jealous
 - d. Indifferent

4. In addition to wanting to keep the code a secret, can you think of a reason why the U.S. military did not publically honor the code talkers until long after the war?
 - a. Because they hadn't been very helpful during the war
 - b. Because the U.S. lost the war
 - c. Because of racism towards Native Americans
 - d. Because they weren't really marines

Instructions for teachers:

These questions can be used to assess understanding of the reading passage.

The item in bold is the correct answer for each question.

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