

Essay on navajo code talkers

[Countries](#), [United States](#)



Introduction There is an unresolved debate among scholars and historians as to whether the Navajo Code Talkers represent a group of American Indians who were exploited by the United States military. Alternatively, whether the Navajo Code Talkers represent a moment in United States history when Native American men came forward to help defend the country against a great evil. Before the Navajo Code Talkers, the United States had employed Native Americans in various military capacities. During the colonial period, Native Americans had been hired by the military to act as scouts and sometimes as fighters. During the United States Civil War, Native Americans had been hired to help with the push West. They acted as American Indian scouts and again as fighters, in this case they helped in military campaigns against hostile Indian tribes. The United States military openly admitted and even admired what they consider the “ primitiveness” if Native American fighting techniques (Riesman 2012, 12). In 1886, General George Crook explained his rationale for hiring Native Americans, “ The first difficulty was in overcoming the prejudices of army officers to commands of this character and securing men properly qualified for such duty. The officers secured, I selected Indians for enlistment. There are negative characters among Indians as among white men, and the nearer an Indian approaches to the savage state the more likely he will prove valuable as a soldier. I therefore selected, preferable, the wildest I could get” (Military Service Institution of the United States 1886, 263). The impression that American Indians were savages and therefore made good military men was not the only reason these Indians were chosen. Indians were valued as fighters because they understood Indian fighting strategies and because tribes were often at wars

with each other. In 1894, Major E. P. Ewers, 9th U. S. Infantry wrote an article in favor of hiring American Indians grounded the use of American Indian scouts within the history of their success. He wrote in 1894: " Many years of my army service have been spent on duty with Indians, at times as acting Indian agent, commanding them as captives or as prisoners of war, using them as enlisted scouts and guides even when our safety actually depended upon their loyalty. To me, therefore, this subject is one of interest, my one regret being that I do not feel competent to do it justice- a literary role being one of the most foreign to me - but I shall endeavor to record a few facts which may help to prove that all Indians are not bad ones, nor the only good Indian a dead one" (Military Service Institution of the United States 1894, 1186). There is a huge difference in the tone of the article by Ewers when compared to statements by General Crook. Ewers believes that despite everything that has been perpetrated against Native Americans they are still loyal to the cause. Crook's statements are more crude and self-serving.

World War I and World War II Military service and issues of citizenship and the military draft were complicated when it came to American Indians. The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 and the Selective Service Act of 1940 combined to make some believe that all Native American males aged twenty-one to forty-four were eligible to enlist or to be conscripted. There was a great debate at the time because others believe that American Indians were either not eligible to enlist or could not be drafted or bother because of their unique status in American law and due to various US-Indian treaties. In 1940 the issue was somewhat settled as Congress passed the Nationality Act making all on Native Americans naturalized citizens. This issue was also

debated, however, as various tribes and Indian agencies claimed that it violated tribal sovereignty. In any case, American Indian men were allowed to join the U. S. military. (Meadows 2002, 76). In fact, they had been joining the US military since the 19th century. During World War I, there was an artillery unit in which the Choctaw soldiers communicated with each other in Native American languages in order to thwart the German military from breaking American messages sent in code. The Choctaw of this regiment spoke twenty-six different dialects, most of which were strictly oral with no written counterpart. The Germans could not translate these obscure dialects and so the Choctaw transmitting military messages via telephone. Two of the American Indians in the regiment were officers and spoke multiple American Indian dialects (Aaseng 1992, 16). These Choctaw tribe members were very successful and so they were used specifically for code transmissions. The United States was not the only country to use Native languages. The Canadian military employed North American Tribal people to transmit military messages. According to author William Meadows, Comanche were employed by European military men as Code Talkers during World War I. He estimates that approximate six different Native American tribes worked as Code Talkers in the military during World War I and World War II (Meadows 2002, 61). Multiple Indian tribes had men who participated as Code Talkers during World War II however the Navajo are the best remembered. According to Noah Riseman, beside the Navajos, “ Choctaws, Chippewa-Oneidas, Comanche, Hopis, Meskwakis, and Creeks” all worked for the military as Code Talkers in World War II. The Navajo Code Talker program was the largest basically by virtue of the fact the more Navajo tribal people enlisted

in the service. All told, there were approximately six-hundred North American Indians who worked as Code Talkers in either World War I or World War II (Riseman 2012, 45). Navajo Code Talkers did not work radios and decode messages only. They served in active combat. Records from the 1942 Battle of Guadalcanal show that Code Talkers operated behind enemy lines in regular combat along with their white counterparts. Navajos impressed their colleagues with knowledge of hunting wild and domestic animals. In Okinawa, American Indians would scout around at night and capture stray animals such as goats or horses owned by the Japanese and butcher them. They also acted as scouts and participated in guerilla warfare (Riseman 2012, 198). There are many reports that support the positive relationships between Navajos and whites. According to Noah Riseman, “The Code Talker refers to white soldiers as “white brothers,” suggesting genuine affection between the different races. Moreover, the acceptance the white soldiers show toward the Navajos — even after being duped into eating horse — reveals respect for Navajos’ abilities, particularly as they were providers in this situation” (2012, 200). This demonstrates that on an individual basis the role of Code Talkers to other enlisted men was one of reciprocity and respect. There may have been larger philosophical arguments taking place back in the United States about colonialism. However, on duty these men relied on each other for support and survival. During training exercises in the Hawaiian Islands, Navajo Code Talkers were in direct competition with white servicemen. All individuals were operating at that time as equals. Some Navajos excelled and some went on to become officers. After the success of the Code Talker operation at Guadalcanal, more

Code Talkers were dispersed to various Marine Corps' divisions in the Pacific. The codes that these men created during the war relied on some familiar phrases and words, " Geronimo, Hiawatha, Arizona, or New Mexico" are a few examples (Riseman 2012, 200). Additional to their encoding and decoding of messages, American Indian service men used skills they had learned on the reservation such as scouting, trades, crafts and other expertise.

Modern Perspectives During the Vietnam War, Code Talkers were again employed in military operations. This modern war had much different results than the World Wars in American history. There were military proposals to expand the role of Code Talkers. There were also proposals from the Indian Association of America, which hoped to organize Code Talkers during peacetime as well as during war. Military reserve training units were proposed that would employ World War II veterans to teach younger American Indians the languages that had been used (Riseman 2012, 208). Once at war again, young Code Talkers would perform tactical battlefield communication for the military. However, most Code Talker proposals were rejected. This was in part due to the demands that all 1500 American Indian languages should be taught, which was perceived as impractical, and the advent of more advanced technology that could be used for encryption (Riseman 2012, 209). The Code Talkers have been glorified in many military histories as well as in film and literature. Some Native American scholars complain that this glorification, especially as it has emerged in pop culture, detracts from the plight of the average Navajo who did not join the service and remained marginalized in the United States (Riseman 2012, 208). Some

historians, for example Doris Paul, have written about the Navajo Code Talker episode in American History as some of cooperation and reconciliation against a common enemy. World War II caused many American Indians to join the military and the result was that their personal lives changed a great deal. Paul points to Pearl Harbor as the event that inspired Navajos and others to join, just as it inspired men and women from throughout the ranks of civilians to join no matter their race or ethnicity (Paul 1973, 25). The American public and American military continue to honor the Code Talkers as do many Native American tribes. This year at the Crow Agency in Montana, four Native American Code Talkers were honored and their families received medals awarded posthumously to the men for their service in World War II. They are now Congressional Gold Medal owners whose military service included preventing enemy forces from intercepting and analyzing messages. The celebration of the awards was complete in military style with flyovers performed by Blackhawk Helicopters and a B-1 Bomber (Smith 2015). The military service of Navajos and other Code Talkers is complicated by the two side of the colonialism debate who did not want to reconcile their condemnation of the American military or their praise of the American military. No doubt, many ancestors of Code Talkers are still proud of the work their ancestor did during World War II. Navajo and other tribal people participated more fully in mainstream America, which is either a good thing or a bad thing depending on perspective. Code Talkers networked extensively with non-Indians during the two World Wars and to a lesser extent during Vietnam. However, their experiences are conceivably understood in a more personal context. They maintained their uniqueness

and individuality as American Indians, yet they gained the respect and the praise of their non-Indian peers.

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