Navajo code talkers essay

Navajo Code Talkers National security of every country highly depends on secrecy maintainance, especially during wartime. Secrecy is an important element of victory. However, it is important not only to code messages but also to break enemy codes in order to gain military advantages. During the Second World War it was very important for the United States to send and receive codes without any risk of being deciphered. For this reason the language of American indigenous population of the Navajo was chosen by the U. S. Marine Corps. This paper focuses on contributions made by the Navajo Code Talkers during the Second World War.

The military enemies of the United States did not manage to break the code. One of the reasons why the Navajo language was chosen was that it appeared to be not a written language and was of no interest either for the Germans or for the Japanese. During the Second World War there were several prerequisites for the use of the Navajo language as the code. First of all, there were groups of English-speaking soldiers in Japan that were used by the Japanese military to track military radio messages by the United States (Jevec and Potter 2001, 263).

The Japanese were eager to learn details about the American military, defenses, and troop dislocation. Secondly, the United States had to develop codes to make them more difficult in order to prevent secret information from decoding. However, codes were deciphered by enemies and needed improvement. As a result, some codes became overcomplicated and required hours for translation (Kawano 1990, 34). If a message contained some urgent information, the military just could not react in time. Therefore,

the American military was searching for the code which could be both simple and unbreakable.

The person who presented the idea of using the Navajo language as the code language was Philip Johnston (Santella 2004, 65). Johnston was not a Navajo himself, but he was a son of a missionary and grew up in the Navajo Reservation. There he managed to learn the language and became familiar with the people. Moreover, Johnston had military experience and was a veteran of the First World War. Thus, he knew the military desire to develop an unbreakable code. In February 1942, Johnston proposed a plan to use the Navajo language for encoded radio transmissions (Santella 2004, 66).

According to his explanations, the Navajos spoke their language differently from any other Indians. Moreover, only a few anthropologists studied the language. Even Germans who visited Indian communities in the 1930s paid no attention to the Navajo language. Additionally, logic of the language was difficult enough. Each syllable of the language carries its own meaning. In order to avoid misunderstanding, each syllable should be pronounced correctly. Also, the speaker should mind the tone of the voice to be correctly understood.

The meaning of the whole sentence can be altered in case of the slightest mistake either in tone or pronunciation. As a result, there were enough rational reasons to employ the Navajo language as a safe tool for coding secret messages. In order to improve the code, Johnston proposed to use not the Navajo language itself, but a code based on the language. In 1942, the population of the Navajos was estimated to be over 50, 000 (Townsend

2000, 145). Thus, the U. S. Marines Corps believed there were enough Navajos to recruit. Initially, recruited Native Americans did not know that they were going to become Code Talkers.

This information was unveiled to them only after they had proven the ability to speak and write English perfectly and had gone through boot camp. The initial group of recruits consisted of 29 Navajos, and all of them passed primary tests. After the camp, the recruits were deployed to Camp Elliott, California. They improved their knowledge of radio communications and electronics there (Kawano 1990, 73). They had trainings in message transmission, pole claiming, and wire-laying. Only after they had successfully completed the training, they learned that they were going to become code talkers.

However, they were sworn to secrecy and did not share the information even with their families. Indians were admitted to the construction of the code only after the training. The initial problem was that the Navajo language did not contain equivalents for English military terms and phrases. That is why it was a difficult task to transfer military terminology into the Navajo language. However, it was recognized that the code should have been both unbreakable and simple, because under combat conditions rapid transmission and translation of messages was of high importance. Long phrases might appear ineffective and inefficient.

The Navajos decided to choose words that had direct association with nature, birds, and common Navajo life in order to avoid perplexity (Townsend 2000, 146). Generally, there were two methods of communication. According

to Townsend (2000, 147), the first method concerned a " words for alphabet" system. This method was used to code some terms that could not easily be replaced with a specific word. It was ineffective to affix an Indian word to any random Pacific island. According to the alphabet method, each letter of the English alphabet was replaced by with an Indian word.

For example, Tarawa Island was coded as " turkey-ant-rabbit-ant-weasel-ant". In Navajo, this would be pronounced as " Than-zie, wol-la-chee, gah, wol-lo-chee, gloe-ih, wol-la-chee". Some English letters were represented by diverse terms in order to increase the security of the code and avoid repetition. As a result, code talkers created 44 words for English letters. Consonants and vowels that were repeated most often received diverse variations. The second method dealt with prearranged terms that represented some geographic locations, military terms, or special commands (Townsend 2000, 148).

The source of the terms were nature, common concepts, or stereotypical notions. States received their coded names on the basis of stereotyped images. Germany was called as " iron hat", Japan was coded as " slant- eye", and the United States was called " our mother". Military terms and directives were represented by symbolic words and phrases. For example, an airplane was represented by the word " bird", a fighter plane became " hummingbird", and fortification was called a " cliff dwelling". However, the creation of the code was not the only challenge for code talkers.

It was a serious challenge for radiomen to apply the code talking in reality. Transmission of the code talking was not understood either by experienced

white radio operators or by untrained Navajos who perceived the phrases as quite nonsensical. The Navajos had to learn the code so that no code-book could become the enemy's possession. Moreover, they had to learn to spread messages rapidly and accurately. The Navajos were admitted to the service only after they could transmit a message of 3 lines in less than 20 seconds (Santella 2004, 87).

Another difficulty with the Navajo language was that it merely relied on tones and expressions rather than words and phrases. Different tribes could pronounce the same word with a different expression and tone. Thus, it was important to teach the Code Talkers to use the same expressions and tones. As a result, messages could be transmitted quickly and without any error. As a matter of fact, the slightest error could endanger troops greatly. Initially, field leaders did not fully trust the Navajo Code Talkers. However, code talkers proved their effectiveness and gained trust of the military, as they were ending error free messages. Normally, code talkers worked in pairs, with one sending and one receiving the message. Between 375 and 420 Navajos were code talkers during the Second World War (Jevec and Potter 2001, 270). According to Santella (2004, 114), the Code Talkers increased the spread of transmission in hundred times. The code machine transmitted the message over four hours. The Navajo Code Talkers increased that time up to three minutes. Generally, the use of the Navajo code showed its effectiveness. The combination of code words and symbolic words improved the situation of the marines in the Pacific.

However, until 1969 Navajo code talkers could not have unveiled their role in the war (Santell 2004, 117). The military of the United States was not quite

sure whether it would need the service of the code talkers in the future. That is why they were kept in secret. Only on December 21, 2000, the act that honors the code talkers was signed into law (Hudson 2001). However, the military of the United States could not spread the system of the code talkers in the whole army. The principal reason for that was an ineffective system for Indian recruitment (Townsend 2000, 150).

Tribes were chosen for recruitment only on the basis of their native language. However, the variety of dialects, the number of population, and levels of acculturation were not taken into account by the army. Moreover, Indians were expected to be trained over and extremely short period of time. The army believed that all Indians could be trained as quickly and easily as the Navajos. Unlike the Marine Corps that employed the Navajos who shared a common culture, concepts, and language, the army mixed Comanches, Cherokees, and Choctaws. As a result of a series of failures, the program was decided to be terminated.

However, the methods of the recruitment that the army employed were not criticized. Indians were blamed for their inability to learn quickly. As a matter of fact, the Navajo code talkers contributed greatly to general American success in the Second World War. The effectiveness of the coders could be explained by close cooperation between the Marine Corps and the Navajos. The Navajos were ideally selected by the Marines on the basis of the common language, population figures, and common culture. Moreover, the Navajos showed patriotism for the United States. Additionally, the Navajo got a chance to become proud of their ethnic identity.

The Navajo language was suitable for creating the code that was both simple and unbreakable. Its main advantage was that it was unwritten. However, there were still some problems with that. First of all, the language did not contain military terms and directives. Secondly, the meaning of the words depended merely on the expression and tone rather than on the word or phrase. The Navajo Code Talkers became successful because much effort was made to choose, train, and develop them. However, the recruitment system used by the Marine Corps was not used by the army.

That is why the Navajo code talkers remained a unique formation of the Second World War. Bibliogaphy: Hudson, Audrey. 2001, July 27. Navajo Code Talkers honored with medals. The Washington Times, July 27. Jevec, Adam, and Lee Ann Potter. 2001. The Navajo Code Talkers. Social Education 65(5): 262-70. Kawano, Kenji. 1990. Warriors: Navajo Code Talkers. Flagstaff, Arizona: Northland Publishing Company. Santella, Andrew. 2004. Navajo Code Talkers. Minneapolis, MN: Compass Point Books. Townsend, Kenneth William. 2000. World War II and the American Indian. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.