

2. The Navajo Contribution to the War Effort

Native Americans fought in all US wars, including not only the Revolution and War of 1812, but also the Civil War and World War I. Their contributions to World War II have received more attention, however, because in that conflict they played a crucial role. In the Pacific theater, the armed forces found that the Japanese could intercept almost any message. Many of them spoke English, and so they could even impersonate American officers and send wrong information by radio and field telephone. The problem was solved only when Navajos were recruited as Marines and assigned the task of developing and using a special code. They themselves came up with the idea of spelling many words, using animal names to convey letters. (A was wol-la-chee, meaning "ant"; B was shush, meaning "bear"; C was moasi, meaning "cat", etc.) They also developed expressive ways of translating into their own language certain high-frequency military terms that they did not want to have to spell out on every occasion. In the midst of battles they were able to talk to each other by field telephone and radio, conveying essential information with the kind of clarifying give-and-take that only a genuine conversation can provide. Several white men tried to learn to use the code to join the war effort, but none of them were ever able to pass the test and go to the field. The Navajo were required to refrain from discussing their contribution for 25 years, until 1969. Since then, the former Marines have spoken openly about their pride in their contribution to the war effort.

Sample vocabulary lists

Airplanes

Dive bomber	<i>gini</i>	chicken hawk
Torpedo plane	<i>tas-chizzie</i>	swallow
Observation plane	<i>ne-as-jah</i>	owl
Fighter plane	<i>da-he-tih-hi</i>	hummingbird
Bomber	<i>jay-sho</i>	buzzard
Patrol plane	<i>ga-gih</i>	crow
Transport plane	<i>atsab</i>	eagle

General vocabulary

Action	<i>ah-ha-tinh</i>	action
Advance	<i>nas-say</i>	ahead
Airdrome	<i>nilchi-began</i>	air house

Alert	<i>ha-ih-des-ee</i>	watchful
Allies	<i>nih-bi-cho</i>	friends
Along	<i>wol-la-chee-suez</i>	long ant
Amphibious	<i>chal</i>	frog
Army	<i>lei-cha-ih-yil-knee-bi</i>	dog faces

Sample messages relayed on Iwo Jima, at Motoyama

Than-zie a-kha: Hash-kay-gi-na-tab

Bi-tsan-dehn: Ah-jad D-ab taa n-kih tsotsid Tababa

*Dibeh ah-jah a-chin be ah-deel-tahi deh-nah-as tso-si d-ab tlo-chin klesh
dzeh tse-nihl ah-jad ta-atah tsa-ond naz-pas-tkin-tsah-jeha gab-ghil-keid-
klesh do lin-daa-tsaa hastaa n-kih shush*

To: Commanding Officer

From: LT 327 Regiment

Send demolition team to seal all caves and surrounding ridges and Hill 362B.

D-ab a-wob: ashdla be-al-doh-tso-lani

Bi-tsan-dehn: Ah-jad D-ab taa n-kih tsotsid Tababa

*Jo-kayed-gob be-al-doh-tso-lani besh-be-wa-chind n-kih a-la-ih tseebii
shush ah-di jad-ho-loni us-dzoh taa ashdla d-ab a-kha shi-da gab d-ab tlo-
chin ba-ah-hot-gli cha-gee al-tab-je-jay ne-ahs-jah tsab lin-daa-tsaa taa
hastaa n-kih shush*

To: 5th Artillery Battalion

From: LT 327 Regiment

Request artillery barrage 218B at K minus (-) 35 to K hour to support the attack on Hill 362B.

Source and study: Sally McClain, *Navajo Weapon* (Rio Nuevo, 1994). The appendices in this book contain numerous important memos related to the project, as well as the complete dictionary developed by the “code talkers,” as they styled themselves.

Further exploration: Some people have argued that life on the reservation destroyed the warrior pride that had sustained native men for many generations. Others, however, argue that knowledge of the warrior heritage remained very much alive and would manifest itself when the opportunity arose. See, for example, L. James Dempsey, *Blackfoot War Art: Pictographs of the Reservation Period, 1880-2000* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2007).