



Code Talkers Corporal Henry Bake, Jr., and PFC George H. Kirk  
dispatch messages in Navajo from the front lines to their CP

# Indian War Call

The "hidden" language of the Navajos  
provided the Marine Corps with  
a foolproof code to foul up the Japs

— by Vernon Langille

A STRANGE sight met the eye of Indian Reservation Superintendent E. M. Fryer when he looked out of his office at Window Rock, Ariz., that December 7th morning. Immediately outside, several score Navajo youths, their faces set in grim lines, were gathering in a large cleared space. Some carried their big red polka-dotted bandannas tied at the corners and loaded down with what appeared to be personal effects. Pockets of blue denim work breeches bulged with what obviously was ammunition. All were armed. When the perplexed superintendent asked the cause of the gathering, they answered:

"We're going to fight."

Hours later the youths were prevailed on to return to their hogans and await the official call to arms that inevitably would follow. Little did anyone realize that a short time later the United States and

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specifically the Marine Corps — would eagerly seek out these same stalwart sons of the desert for a special function.

Navajos are short, stocky, and built for fighting. Their nomadic desert life and aptitude for handling weapons naturally fitted them for infantry line duty rather than for any of the other highly specialized auxiliary arms of combat warfare.

Their ancestors were the old Athabascans who had come southward from Alaska and Canada, down the mountain chains and desert valleys. They preferred pillage and plunder to the more sedentary lives of the Pueblos, Mayans and Aztecs. Their Spartan lives, which included bathing in snow, had hardened them to such a degree that they were regarded by other tribes as the "toughest people on earth." It was eminently true that the Navajo was a fighting man from way back.

But it was another side of the Navajo that enlisted the interest of the Marine Corps. For many centuries, probably since man first went to war against his fellow man, military experts had sought a fool-proof, unbreakable code for communications. The Navajo language, for which no written vocabulary or symbols exist, proved to be the closest to this ultimate.

The Navajo is by nature quiet, clannish and enigmatic. He very seldom talks. When he was chosen to "talk" the Marine Corps out of a tough situation at Guadalcanal, some persons called it the great paradox.

Actually, for the Corps, it was a military dream come true.

Many thousands of miles away, on Guadalcanal, the First Marine Division was grinding out a slow and arduous victory. A scarce month after the battle curtain had lifted in August, 1942, the need for a swift and secret code of communications had been many times demonstrated. When the fighting became confined to a small area, everything had to move on a split-second schedule. There was not time for the enciphering and deciphering which ordinary code requires. At such times, The King's English became a last resort — the profaner the better.

In one instance a battalion CO asked his company commander for the position of a patrol on reconnaissance along the Lunga River. The company commander reported the position in grid coordinates.

"Thank you," a third voice cut in, "our patrol will be there too."

The Japanese developed an uncanny facility for



Indians from remote areas on Arizona reservations lost no time reaching the nearest induction center. These three braves appeared in full regalia. Some came armed and ready to do battle

wire-tapping. Such breaks in security were much too serious to be overlooked.

Back in the States, at Camp Elliott, Calif., studies to perfect a "voice code" for the Marine Corps were under way. An off-the-record demonstration by Navajos was arranged for Major General Clayton B. Vogel, then commanding general of the Amphibious Corps, Pacific Fleet, by his signal officer, Colonel James E. Jones. Gen. Vogel reported favorably on the experiment to Plans and Policies Division, Marine Corps Headquarters. While official Washington weighed the suggestion pro and con, Col. Jones kept the idea alive on the West Coast.

The stock question in the minds of high ranking military men was whether the Navajo communicators could be relied upon for accuracy. The slight-

est error in either transmission or translation of a supersecret combat message could easily result in annihilation of any number of troops. Visions of a "hard luck" battalion commander trying to explain off a military debacle by saying his Indian code talker had told him to attack instead of withdraw, haunted the officers.

But before the war with Japan ended, the Marine Corps had not only learned to respect its Indian communicators, it had also learned to depend upon them. The Third Amphibious Corps reported that the use of Navajos during the Guam and Peleliu operations "was considered indispensable for the rapid transmission of classified dispatches. Enciphering and deciphering time would have prevented vital operational information from being dispatched



As successive drafts arrived at Camp Pendleton, men were given quarters and instructions began

or delivered to staff sections with any degree of speed."

At Iwo Jima, code talkers transmitted messages from the beach to divisions and corps commands afloat from early D-Day on. After division commands came ashore, they provided the contact between divisions ashore and corps afloat.

Their voice code transmissions of operational orders laid the groundwork for our advances from the Solomons straight through Okinawa.

The swarthy, black-haired Indian, huddled over portable radio or field telephone in regimental, division or corps command posts, became a familiar sight around the Pacific battle zones. They translated English-written messages into Navajo and transmitted these to buddy-Navajos at radio receivers miles away.

After Bougainville, the Naval Air Force ran into stiff Japanese resistance around the Bismarck Archipelago. The enemy was intercepting messages sent over our air control net and knew in advance about our aerial missions. "Dead End," the pilots' name for Rabaul, became the graveyard of many an airman who attempted to make the perilous run over the landlocked harbor. Alerted anti-aircraft guns from the surrounding hills would pour devastating ack-ack at our bombers as they winged through "The Slot" in the circular ridge of mountains.

The 11 code talkers who manned the Navy's air net took the sting of death out of this Dead End. In addition, Nipponese sneak raids on our long bomber flights fell off sharply.

The Marine Corps selected Navajo for a code language because it had many points in its favor. Before the war it was regarded as a "hidden" language, being known to only 28 outsiders, all of whom were missionaries, students of Navajo culture and people who had been born and reared in Indian country. Through years of study and association with the Navajo people, they had mastered its difficult dialects. Navajo had been confined to its native area because of the Indians' clannish reservation life. While most codes are based on common languages familiar to the enemy, Navajo was a select tongue known to practically no one.

Navajo was selected in preference to the variety of Indian tongues used by the AEF in World War I, because the Navajo people were the only Indian group in the United States whose land had not been overrun with German "students" 20 years prior to 1941. Germans had studied American Indian tribal dialects in the name of science, anthropology and religion. Foreign diplomats did a big business with the Bureau of Indian Affairs in purchase of publications dealing with Indian tribes.

Compilation of Navajo dictionaries and grammars was begun before Pearl Harbor by the Interior Department's Indian Affairs Bureau, working in cooperation with missionaries on the reservation. It was hoped to reduce the language to phonetics and preserve it in writing. However, supporters of the Marine Corps' proposed Navajo program were not alarmed. They were sure that fluency in the language could be acquired only by persons who had made a lengthy study of spoken Navajo. This automatically ruled out both the Japanese and Germans.

Furthermore, even to be able to speak Navajo fluently would not necessarily mean that the code had been broken. The Navajo dictionary does not list specialized and technical terms such as words

for "jeep," "battery," "aircraft," "flank," etc. Furthermore, when the code talkers worked together in the field, it was very often necessary to improvise on the spot. Place names such as Suribachi, Iwo Jima, Shuri, Tulagi and Solomons were spelt out letter for letter in a Navajo phonetic alphabet.

Once the Navajo program was investigated and approved, it became high priority on the Marine Corps' wartime calendar. Representatives were immediately sent to get the consent and backing of the Navajo Tribal Council. To assure an even flow of likely code talker candidates, on-the-reservation recruiting was set up. Authorization for the induction of the Indians was given to the Western Procurement Division by the Commandant of the Marine Corps on October 2, 1943.

Enlistment orders specified that recruits meet full Marine Corps physical standards. A sufficient knowledge of English and Navajo to transmit combat messages was the second prerequisite. Of a total of 540 Navajos taken into the Corps, 420 made the grade as code talkers.

The first class of Indian talkers was trained in the

Fleet Marine Force Training Center by Major Hubert C. Lattimer, at that time a lieutenant. The course lasted four weeks and covered all the basic communications knowledge necessary to supplement their special language aptitude.

Although all recruits spoke the same basic language, certain variations and inflections changed word meanings. (In Navajo, a word spoken with four different inflections has four different meanings.) Inequality in the intelligence of members of each group covered a wide range and slowed down instruction. The Navajo's innate imperturbability had non-Indian teachers tearing their hair. But by encouraging the men to work with their buddies and by following a "laissez-faire" policy, problems in the first school worked themselves out.

The original group of trained communicators were distributed among the First Marine Division at Guadalcanal and regiments in the Second. Later, they went to the Raider battalions and the Third Division.

PFC Wilsie H. Bitsie, whose father supervised the Mexican Springs, N. Mex., Navajo District, was



Corporal Lloyd Oliver, Ship Rock, N. M., operated a field radio for a Marine artillery outfit. Imperturbable in battle, the communicators handled supersecret stuff with speed and accuracy

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## INDIAN WAR CALL (cont.)

an instructor at Camp Elliott before he joined the Raiders. At New Georgia, his code talking enabled his battalion to maintain secret contact with the Army command at Munda while Marines knocked out Japanese outposts in the jungle to the north.

Corporal Leonard Webber, Fort Hall, Idaho, received the Silver Star Medal for gallantry while fighting with the Second Marine Division against the Japanese at Tarawa. When his radio had been knocked out, he performed duties as runner between the tank battalion command post, tanks and infantry front line positions. He later received a further honor, the Bronze Star Medal. PFC Ira Hayes, another Navajo communicator, was one of the six men who raised the flag on the summit of Mt. Suribachi.

When the First Division hauled out of Guadalcanal for Australia, it took 50 Navajo code talkers with it. After a short rest and retraining program, the outfit stormed Cape Gloucester beaches. The talkers followed the First almost intact through the subsequent battles of Peleliu and Okinawa, suffering only limited casualties.

One of the earliest concerns of instigators of the Navajo program was that the dark-complexioned communicators might be mistaken for Japanese. In the late days of Guadalcanal, one Army unit did pick up a code talker along the coastal road and messaged to the Marine command:

"We have captured a Jap in Marine uniform with Marine identification tags.

A Marine Corps interrogator quickly identified the "prisoner" as a Navajo. Throughout his capture, the Indian remained nonchalant about his uncertain fate. He was released and sent on his way.

In almost every operation during this war — through the Solomons, in the Marianas, at Peleliu and Iwo Jima — G-2 answered dozens of false calls to listen in on what sounded like Japanese dialect. En route to Iwo aboard the Fifth Division's command ship, a Navy commodore mistook the code talk of two Navajos for Japanese. The communicators had set up with division headquarters on deck and the Navy officer was on the bridge.

"Cut that interference," he shouted into his set. The Navajos continued dispatching without a break.

"If you don't cut that x?!—! interference, I'll come in there myself after you guys."

### VERNON LANGILLE



*Leatherneck's* Canadian-born writer, Vernon Langille, studied at the State University of Iowa before working at a variety of jobs, including coal mining, steel mill work, salesmanship and lumberjacking. Having finally decided on a writing career, he was a correspondent for the United Press, International News Service and several Mid-western newspapers.

At the completion of two years in the Canadian army and one year in the Royal Canadian Air Force as a wireless air gunner, he was discharged from the RCAF and enlisted in the Marines. He took advanced training at Camp Lejeune and did Combat Intelligence duty before he came to *The Leatherneck*.

Since 1945 his interesting articles have been making regular appearances in the magazine. After his recent discharge from the Corps he took over the duties of assistant managing editor.

The Fifth's signal officer never told the Navy commodore that the strange tongue which gurgled in his earphones was Navajo.

To the linguistically-keen ear, Navajo has a trace of Asiatic origin. But by the Marines who worked with the Indian talkers, the language is described as American double-talk mixed with a sound that resembles water being poured from a jug into a bathtub.

No fear was felt that the Japanese would break the code. But to guard against even the remotest chance of that happening, strict care was taken to keep the program absolutely hush-hush. More than once, security agents toured broadcast circuits looking for scripts which might give away useful information. An Arizona trade journal published an article covering Navajo reservation life. Although it turned out to be harmless, the reader in the Office of Public Information who discovered the article read it with clenched teeth and bated breath.

Last April, authority was granted to establish a retraining course for code talkers. Five Navajos were taken from each division for an intensive 21-day course emphasizing plane and ship types, message printing and transmission. These Indians then returned to their outfits to instruct other code talkers.

At war's end, Major General A. F. Howard's "grouse" committee arrived in the Pacific. One Navajo of the Fifth Division plied the committee with questions on rehabilitation. He was assured that benefits of the GI Bill were his for the asking. All available information was laid before him.

"That's just fine," he said. "I was plenty worried about after the war because all I've done in the Marine Corps is talk and a Navajo back home can't make his living talking."

Just what effect service life will have upon rehabilitated Navajos is still an unanswered question in the mind of Assistant Commissioner of Indian Affairs D'Arcy McNickle. The Commissioner's office is working with Marine Corps Rehabilitation Division in an attempt to interest Indians in small businesses and trades. However, if this postwar period follows the pattern of that succeeding the last war, Navajos can be expected to return to the reservation and take up sheep raising and the nomadic life that has characterized them for centuries.

Although tribal rights have been, in part, surrendered, the Navajos still live much as they did in the early days when they were first caught in the web of American and Spanish colonization. Many Indians have already returned to the hogans that are their homes. Boondockers have been swapped for moccasins and barrack caps for bandannas.

Only once during the war did they show any of the idiosyncrasies normally associated with their home life. First Division Navajos put on a ceremonial dance before leaving for Okinawa. They asked the gods to sap the strength of the Japanese in the coming assault. Other Marines looked on with interest and amusement. When the division reached Okinawa, the Navajos pointed out the ease with which the troops had swarmed ashore.

According to a later report, when the First met strong opposition in the south of Okinawa, a Marine turned to the code talker beside him:

"O.K., Yazzey, what about your little ceremony? What do you call this?"

"This is different," the Navajo answered with a smile. "We prayed only for an easy landing." **END**



PFC Carl Gorman, Chinle, Ariz., manned an observation post overlooking Garapan while Marines consolidated on Saipan



Over 400 of the 520 Navajos recruited for communications work became code talkers. Some became scouts and snipers