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World War II Marine Code Talkers Bill Toledo, standing, and Sidney Bedoni, seated at the head of the table, tell the Marines of MWCS-48 about the classified communication procedures during the war.

# Voices of Our Ancestors

## The Navajo Code Talkers' Story

Story and photos by LCpl William Waterstreet

A few Marines fortunate enough to be in the right place at the right time witnessed an amazing piece of history come alive. On July 2, for the first time in more than 60 years, the Marine Corps' Navajo code from World War II again was transmitted via radio.

Former Private First Class Bill Toledo, who served as a Navajo Code Talker with 3d Battalion, Ninth Marine Regiment, sent the code. A native of Laguna, N.M., Toledo was visiting the men and women of Marine Wing Communications Squadron (MWCS) 48, Marine Corps Air Station Yuma, Ariz., during Exercise Javelin Thrust (see page 38) to commemorate 70 years

since the Code-Talker program was founded in 1942.

In spite of triple-digit temperatures, gusting winds and clouds of dust at the Air Station, Bill Toledo and fellow Code Talker Sidney Bedoni insisted on visiting Marines out in the field to see how modern radio Marines live and work. A native of White Cone, Ariz., Bedoni served as a private first class with Second, Fourth and Fifth Marine divisions.

After reviewing a static display of modern radio communications equipment, Toledo discussed his experiences as a Code Talker in the Second World War. During his story, Toledo keyed the handset of a

nearby PRC-150, the advanced military HF radio available today, performed a brief radio check and then re-enacted a coded message. He simulated calling for fire on a Japanese-held hill before the awestruck Marines.

"We are in the presence of greatness and true American heroes," stated Master Sergeant John Roberts, the MWCS-48 communications chief and a native of Cleveland, who was assigned as an honorary Code-Talker liaison for the duration of the event.

Toledo and Bedoni visited the Marines and told the story they lived almost 70 years ago. Their visit began with video interviews

conducted by the Marine Corps History Division for the sake of posterity, including a recording of “The Marines’ Hymn” in Navajo. Following those interviews, the Code Talkers ate chow with several junior Marines and noncommissioned officers.

Later, active and Reserve Marines, Marine Corps League members and local civilians gathered in the chapel to hear their tale firsthand. The day ended with a banquet in their honor.

The Code Talkers’ storied history began in early 1942, when Philip Johnston, a white Protestant missionary’s son, presented the idea of using the Navajo language to create a code the Japanese couldn’t break. Johnston recruited 29 young Navajos to become Marines, not informing them about the plan for the code. Once the Navajo Marines graduated from boot camp and combat training, they were instructed to create a code based on their native language.

The code was tested first on Guadalcanal by six Marine Code Talkers who landed with 1stMarDiv. Four weeks after the landing, then-Major General Alexander A. Vandegrift, the division commander, reported back to headquarters in Washington, D.C.: “The enemy doesn’t know what they’re saying. We don’t know what they’re saying, but it works.”

The code was based on the language of the Navajo people, but not everyone could understand it. Each Navajo Marine had to go through a school to learn how to speak the code. The code was based on words which were familiar to the Navajo people. For example, the word for “potato” meant “hand grenade” and the word for “turtle” meant “tank.”

In order to test the code, the government had Navajo elders try to decipher it. When they couldn’t, the government knew they found something special.

Another code was used by the Marine Corps at that time, but it was extremely complicated and could take 10 times longer to send a message than with the Navajo code. Because of this, the Navajo code began to grow larger and more widespread, ultimately being used in every major offensive of the war in the Pacific. Throughout the course of the war, there were 420 Navajos who served as Code Talkers. Thirteen didn’t return.

“Today, we have thousands of dollars of cryptologic equipment to encode messages,” said Sergeant Karl Lipovsek, an MWCS-48 electronic maintenance technician and a native of Elm Grove, Wis. “The Code Talkers did it by themselves with almost nothing and won a war.”

Bill Toledo enlisted in the Marine Corps after finishing eighth grade at the age of 18. He was convinced to join because of another young Navajo Marine who re-

turned to the reservation and spoke about the Corps. Toledo then traveled 50 miles to see a recruiter.

Before leaving for boot camp, the Navajo Marines were not told what they would be doing in the war. They were all signing up to be Marines, not knowing the Code Talkers existed.

When Toledo reached his unit, the other Marines at first thought he was the Japanese interpreter.

“Once the other Marines found out what I was doing in the war, they turned around and had a lot of respect for me,” said Toledo.

He then traveled throughout the Pacific,

seeing combat on Bougainville, Guam and Iwo Jima while transmitting messages in the code he had memorized. Writing anything down was not allowed because of the risk of capture.

Each Code Talker had a white bodyguard. The bodyguards were necessary to keep the Code Talkers safe, not only from the enemy but also from Americans, as they were commonly mistaken for Japanese soldiers masquerading as Marines. Toledo still corresponds with the man who fought by his side.

Many Code Talkers were right behind front-line troops and were constantly in danger. The Japanese would use the radio



**Above:** MSgt John Roberts, the MWCS-48 communications chief, introduces WW II Code Talkers Bill Toledo, left, and Sidney Bedoni to his communications section at MCAS Yuma, Ariz., during their July visit.



**Above left:** Bill Toledo, a WW II Marine Code Talker, explains each device on his cover to PFC Rachel Wagner, an administration clerk in VMU-4, during lunch at the MCAS Yuma chow hall on July 2.



**Above right:** Sidney Bedoni, a WW II Code Talker, signs a Navajo Code Talker action figure for a Marine at MCAS Yuma on July 2.



**World War II Marine Code Talker Bill Toledo, with the microphone, who served as a Code Talker with 3d Bn, 9th Marines, and Sidney Bedoni, who was a Code Talker with 2d, 4th and 5th Marine divisions, speak about their time as Code Talkers to the MCAS Yuma Marines.**

signal used by the Code Talker to find the range for their mortars and begin shelling the Code Talker's position.

"Through a barrage or an air attack or naval gunfire, you still have to get the message off," said Toledo. "We were taught to ignore the world around us and focus on the message. We saved a lot of lives using the code."

Even when the war was done, the Code Talkers were sworn to secrecy.

"I was told, 'When you go home, keep your mouth shut,'" Toledo added. "We couldn't let anyone know what we did in case [America] needed to use the code again. So we never talked about the war, and our families never asked questions."

In 1968, the code finally was declassified. The Code Talkers then held a large reunion and shortly thereafter established the Navajo Code Talkers Association.

Today, there are fewer than 50 Code Talkers still alive and only one of the original 29 who built the code. They travel the country, spreading the tale of the Code Talkers and raising money for a \$43 million museum being built to commemorate the actions of these brave Marines. The museum is scheduled to be completed by 2014.

"We get a lot of questions about the code, and we try to speak to everyone," Toledo said. "People always want to hear the story of the code."

In addition to the positive effect the Code Talkers have had on the Corps, their actions have enriched the Navajo culture and have been a positive influence on the society.

"We try to tell young Navajos to be kind to all, pray for everyone and stay away from alcohol," said Toledo. "I tell the school kids to carry on our language to the future. We don't want to lose it."

The Code Talkers and even Navajo Marines of today come from a world very different from the one most Marines grew up in.

"Sheep were our lives," Toledo stated. "I started taking care of some of the sheep when I was 6. When it was time for me to start school, I went to one 70 miles away. When I went into the Marine Corps, I saw a lot of change. It was hard to catch on to some things."

"Growing up, we didn't have running water or electricity," said half-Navajo and half-Apache Staff Sergeant Derran Yazzie, a Marine Attack Squadron 513 power-line staff noncommissioned officer and a native of Lupton, Ariz. "This was very common. We didn't get electricity until 1983 and running water until 2000. Many places still don't have running water. Everything is so spread out; your closest neighbor is three miles away."

For many Native Americans, jobs are

difficult to find on the reservation, and with the history of the Code Talkers, some Navajos have turned to the military.

"The Code Talkers were one of the reasons I joined," added Yazzie. "Why live in your ancestors' legends? Why not become a legend of your own? If they can do what they did at the age of 16, why can't I? Being a Marine amplifies our culture and our purpose in life."

Among the Navajo today, the Code Talkers are given the utmost respect and are a cherished part of their culture.

"It's very hard to find role models and mentors on the reservation like the Code Talkers," said Yazzie. "There's a lot of respect for those who go off and join the service. In our culture, you can be proud if you choose to take the warrior's path. To see what they did, it motivates you to get up and do something with your life."

"When I was young, my father told me stories about what my great-grandfather did," said PFC Rachel Wagner, a Marine Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Squadron 4 administration clerk. A native of Chinle, Ariz., she is a descendant of one of the original 29 Code Talkers. "When we see them in parades and public events, everybody claps. They symbolize a lot for us. They left home and sacrificed everything. They did all of this for us."

The saga of the Code Talkers is a timeless epic, one which is unique. It will stand the test of time and continue as a testament to the honor, courage and commitment of a people. What the Navajo Code Talkers accomplished has become part of Marine Corps legacy. By saving the lives of countless Marines, the Navajo have shaped the lives of every man and woman wearing the uniform today.

In 1982, President Ronald Reagan declared Aug. 14 National Navajo Code Talker Day, and all Marines are encouraged to observe the holiday by taking the time to learn more about their brother Marines, the legendary Navajo Code Talkers, and the sacrifices they made for all of us. It falls to us to remember and carry on our history.

*Author's note: More information about the Code Talkers and their association can be found at their website, [www.navajocodetalkers.org](http://www.navajocodetalkers.org).*

*Editor's note: LCpl Waterstreet is a Marine combat correspondent currently assigned to MCAS Yuma, Ariz.*



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