



THE NAVAJO NATION

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT & VICE PRESIDENT

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Six Navajo Code Talkers take part in dedication of new Marine Corps Network Operations, Security Command

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – Six Navajo Code Talkers were the honored guests at the dedication of the new Marine Corps Network Operations and Security Command Building in Quantico, Va., last week.

The new building, which broke ground two years ago, was dedicated with a traditional military ceremony Thursday, May 17.

The Code Talkers were asked to be part of the dedication “because our historical records show members of your nation made contributions to the secure communications efforts of the United States military in the 20th Century,” said U.S. Marine Corps. Col. Glenn M Hope, executive assistant to the Director and Chief Information Officer of the Marine Corps.



Among the Code Talkers who traveled to the dedication were Jimmie Begay, Samuel Holiday, Keith Little, Alfred Peaches, Albert Smith, and Samuel Smith.

They were accompanied by Michael Smith, Navajo Nation Supreme Court deputy court clerk, and T.C. Tso, staff assistant to Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr.

“This was truly an honor for the United States Marine Corps to consider naming a building after some of our indigenous soldiers using their native language in a world war era,” Mr. Tso said. “Apparently there were 18 different tribes that contributed to these efforts, during World War I and II. Most noticeable are the Navajo Code Talkers during World War II.”

Navajo Code Talker Albert Smith performed a wonderful blessing of the building, he said. Mr. Tso donated a Navajo Nation flag to the dedication.

“We left instructions that there is a Navajo Nation holiday on August 14 of every year to celebrate the Navajo Code Talker Day, and that the Navajo Nation flag should be displayed

Navajo Code Talkers were welcomed by the U.S. Marine Corps in Quantico, Va., for the dedication of the new Marine Corps Network Operations and Security Command Building. Among the Code Talkers were Jimmie Begay, Samuel Holiday, Keith Little, Alfred Peaches, Albert Smith, and Samuel Smith. They were accompanied by Michael Smith, Navajo Nation Supreme Court deputy court clerk, and T.C. Tso, staff assistant to Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr. T.C. Tso Photo

outdoors during that day and returned indoors at sunset on that day,” Mr. Tso said.

There are currently Navajo Marines stationed at the Quantico Marine Corps Base, such as Sgt. Leander Sage of Blue Gap, Ariz., who will ensure that the orders are carried out, he said.

He said he wanted to thank Brigadier General George Allen and Colonel Rolaf for making the dedication, with the inclusion of the Code Talkers, possible.

Col. Hoppe said that a permanent display case will be maintained near the main entrance that will hold vintage photographs, documents and other memorabilia to honor Navajo Code Talkers.

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U.S. Marines Information on the History of the Navajo Code Talkers

During World War II, the U.S. government needed the Navajos' help. And though they had suffered greatly from this same government, Navajos proudly answered the call to duty. In 1942, Philip Johnston thought of a code he thought unbreakable by the enemy, one based on the Navajo language.

Mr. Johnston spent much of his childhood on the Navajo Nation as the son of a Protestant missionary. He grew up with Navajo children, learning their language and their customs. As an adult, Johnston became an engineer for the city of Los Angeles but also spent a considerable amount of his time lecturing about the Navajos.

One day, Mr. Johnston read the newspaper and noticed a story about an armored division in Louisiana that was attempting to come up with a way to code military communications using Native American personnel. This story sparked an idea. The next day, Mr. Johnston headed to Camp Elliot near San Diego to present his idea for a code to Lt. Col. James E. Jones, the Area Signal Officer.

Lt. Col. Jones was skeptical. Previous attempts at similar codes failed because Native Americans had no words in their language for military terms. However, Mr. Johnston had another idea. Instead of adding the direct term "machine gun" to the Navajo language, they would designate a word or two already in the Navajo language for the military term. For example, the term for "machine gun" became "rapid-fire gun," the term for "battleship" became "whale," and the term for "fighter plane" became "hummingbird."

A demonstration was a success and Major General Vogel sent a letter to the Commandant of the United States Marine Corps recommending that they enlist 200 Navajos for this assignment. In response to the request, they were only given permission to begin a "pilot project" with 30 Navajos.

Recruiters visited the Navajo Nation to select the first 30 Code Talkers. One dropped out, so 29 started the program. Many of these young Navajos had never been off the reservation, making their transition to military life even more difficult. Yet they persevered. They worked night and day helping to create the code and to learn it.

Once the code was created, the Navajo recruits were tested and re-tested. There could be no mistakes in any of the translations. One mistranslated word could lead to the death of thousands. Once the first 29 were trained, two remained behind to become instructors for future Navajo code talkers and the other 27 were sent to Guadalcanal to be the first to use the new code in combat.

Having not gotten to participate in the creation of the code because he was a civilian, Mr. Johnston volunteered to enlist if

he could participate in the program. His offer was accepted and he took over the training aspect of the program.

The program proved successful and soon the U.S. Marine Corps authorized unlimited recruiting for the Navajo Code Talkers program. The entire Navajo Nation then consisted of 50,000 people and by the end of the war 420 Navajo men worked as Code Talkers.

The initial code consisted of translations for 211 English words most frequently used in military conversations. Included in the list were terms for officers, terms for airplanes, terms for months, and an extensive general vocabulary. Also included were Navajo equivalents for the English alphabet so that the code talkers could spell out names or specific places.

However, cryptographer Captain Stilwell suggested that the code be expanded. While monitoring several transmissions, he noticed that since so many words had to be spelled out, the repetition of the Navajo equivalents for each letter could possibly offer the Japanese an opportunity to decipher the code. Upon Captain Stilwell's suggestion, an additional 200 words and additional Navajo equivalents for the 12 most often used letters (A, D, E, I, H, L, N, O, R, S, T, U) were added. The code, now complete, consisted of 411 terms.

On the battlefield, the code was never written down, it was always spoken. In training, they had been repeatedly drilled with all 411 terms. The Navajo code talkers had to be able to send and receive the code as fast as possible. There was no time for hesitation. Trained and now fluent in the code, the Navajo code talkers were ready for battle.

Unfortunately, when the Navajo code was first introduced, military leaders in the field were skeptical. Many of the first recruits had to prove the codes' worth. However, with just a few examples, most commanders were grateful for the speed and accuracy in which messages could be communicated.

From 1942 until 1945, Navajo Code Talkers participated in numerous battles in the Pacific, including Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, Peleliu, and Tarawa. They not only worked in communications but also as regular soldiers, facing the same horrors of war as other soldiers.

However, Navajo code talkers met additional problems in the field. Too often, their own soldiers mistook them for Japanese soldiers. Many were nearly shot because of this. The danger and frequency of misidentification caused some commanders to order a bodyguard for each Navajo Code Talker.

The Navajo Code Talkers played a large role in the Allied success in the Pacific. The Navajos had created a code the enemy was unable to decipher.