



Decoding History

A chance meeting with a genuine Navajo “code talker” helps unlock one of World War II’s best-kept secrets

By Alan Rider

A while back, I had to take my rig in to a dealership to figure out what was up with an illuminated Check Engine light. Turned out that, after the operation’s service-writer read the obscure diagnostic code, it was a problem that was — thankfully — resolved free of charge.

But it got me to thinking. At one time or another we’ve all had experience with codes. Even if they were no more complicated than the ones we got off the back of a cereal box as kids.

While those secret message ciphers from our childhood could have been easily broken, there was one spoken code in history so impossible to crack that it’s been credited with helping the U.S. to win the Battle of Iwo Jima during World War II. It was a novel approach to cryptography that was both elegant in its simplicity and fiendish in its complexity.

I’m talking here about the top-secret tongue created by the “code talkers,” young men plucked from the remote Navajo Nation and thrust into service in the United States Marine Corps beginning in 1942. According to one of the last living code talkers, Peter MacDonald Sr. of Tuba City, Arizona, the system they used to communicate was based on his native tongue, an unwritten language spoken by only a handful of people outside the borders of the 27,000-square-mile reservation.

This little-known chapter of America’s military history (the 2002

movie, *Windtalkers*, was inspired by the program) began with a World War I vet named Philip Johnston who had grown up on the Navajo reservation as the son of missionaries. Johnston, one of the few non-natives to speak the language fluently, suggested to commanders of the Pacific Fleet Amphibious Corps that this convoluted local dialect might make a good way to securely communicate instructions on the battlefield without the time-consuming tasks of encoding and decoding a given message.

When I met MacDonald a few months back, he held his tour group audience spellbound with the story of the 400-plus code talkers who served with the Marines in the Pacific Theater. Collectively, this small band of highly specialized warriors took part in every USMC assault from Guadalcanal to Okinawa.

Beyond the rigors of basic training at Southern California’s Marine Corps Base, Camp Pendleton, the code talkers faced the challenge of memorizing as many as 600 words and phrases that described everything from troop movements to requests for artillery support. Making things more difficult was the fact that the Navajo language lacked words for many of the basic tools of modern warfare, forcing them to simply make them up.

“That’s part of what made the code so effective,” says MacDonald. “Even someone from the reservation would hear a string of Navajo words like ‘sheep, eyes, nose, horse, onion, turkey’ and it would just sound like gibberish.”

Not surprisingly, MacDonald told me, the entire project was considered so important to national security that the code talkers were told not to discuss it with anyone. And they didn’t for nearly a quarter-century until their work was declassified in 1968, which was the first time their contributions to the Allied victory in the South Pacific could be recognized. All of the code talkers, including MacDonald Sr., received the Congressional Medal of Honor in 2001 for their previously unheralded service.

Ultimately, meeting MacDonald Sr. and hearing his stories became the high point of my travels through the Southwest’s Four Corners region, and yet another example of what keeps us all out here trying to decode history along The Road Ahead. **M**

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Code Talkers ↻

From right: Two code talkers relay orders in Navajo on a field radio in 1943. Peter MacDonald Sr. tells his story; all code talkers received the Congressional Medal of Honor in 2001.

