

**WORKSHEET 58****Navajo Code Talkers in World War II**

Read this passage and answer the questions that follow.



Two U.S. Marines transmit messages from a Pacific Island in the Navajo language.

The code words “New Mexico” and “Arizona” crackled across radio wires on the battlefields of the Pacific Islands during World War II. Next came long strings of squeaks, grunts, and growls that no one could understand. No one, that is, except the Navajo code talkers of the U.S. Marines. This group had been specially trained to send and receive top secret military information in Navajo code. They played a key role in the war in the Pacific.

Philip Johnston convinced the Marines of the value of using Navajo for secret code. As the child of missionaries on a Navajo reservation, Johnston was one of the few white people who could speak fluent Navajo. He knew just how hard the language is to learn. Words can be spoken in four different tones, and each tone gives the same word a different meaning. For example, a word might

mean “medicine” in one tone and “mouth” in another. Few outsiders knew this complex language and, at that time, Navajo had never been written down. For these reasons, the language was ideal for code.

In April 1942 the Marines began a project using Navajo recruits. Their task was to develop a Navajo code that could be used to send complex messages from battlefields to military command centers. The code needed to include words not known in the Navajo language such as names of weapons and ammunition.

Fortunately, the Navajo language is very adaptable. Code talkers created a vocabulary of Navajo military terms by putting together existing words or making up new ones. They chose the Navajo word for sparrow hawk to mean dive bombers. Bombs themselves became a-ye-she—Navajo for eggs. When the code was finished, Allied intelligence experts tried without success to break it. One expert joked that they could not even write it down, “much less crack it.”

Next the code had to be memorized. No written version of the code was allowed in the war zone for fear that it might fall into enemy hands. The Navajo code talkers had to make sure they could send and receive messages in Navajo, then translate it into clear English. All this had to be done amid tank fire, smoke, and the terror of war.

The code talkers proved more than equal to the task. They remained calm, listening to their radio headsets as bullets whizzed by. They relayed messages of troop movements, enemy positions, ammunition shortages, and medical needs.

For almost 30 years, the world knew little about the Navajo code talkers. In 1971 their contribution to the war effort was finally recognized. They were awarded a special presidential certificate honoring their “patriotism, resourcefulness, and courage.”

1. Why did the U.S. military need an unbreakable code in the Pacific? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. How did Philip Johnston become interested in the Navajo language for military use?

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3. What features of the Navajo language made it ideal for sending secret messages?

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4. How did the Navajo prepare to become code talkers? Why was this preparation necessary?

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5. What was the most difficult challenge of being a code talker on the battlefield?

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6. **Critical Thinking** Why, do you think, did Navajo men want to join the war effort?

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