

NAVAJO CODE-TALKERS

By Rick Zollo

When the United States joined the fight in World War II, its leaders knew they would have major problems. They knew their military would need to fight toward Japan. Along the way, they would need to fight on hundreds of islands in the South Pacific. The islands covered many thousands of square miles. How could the military communicate battle plans between ships, planes, and the forces fighting on the islands? And how could the military groups that fought at sea communicate with each other without the Japanese hearing their messages?

A private citizen named Phillip Johnston came up with the solution. Johnston's parents had been missionaries on the Navajo reservations in Arizona and New Mexico. As a child, Johnston had learned to speak Navajo. He knew the language was strictly oral. This meant it had never been written down. He also knew not many people could speak it. At the time, only the Navajo tribe and about 40 others knew Navajo.

The Marines were responsible for the U.S. military efforts at sea. Johnston convinced the Marines to let Navajos act as code-talkers. All messages sent by radio or wire would be given by a Navajo Marine. On the other end of the line, another Navajo Marine would listen. He would then

translate the message into English.

More than 400 Navajo men were recruited into this top-secret project. The men were trained in California and then sent into battle. These men had to create and learn many new words to complete the code. Most of the new words were words for military terms for which there were no words in Navajo. So, even if someone spoke Navajo but didn't know the code, he or she could not understand the messages.

Johnston's plan worked better than expected. Some of the islander-hopping battles are now a part of military history. These battles include Guadalcanal, Saipan, and Iwo Jima. Many lives were lost in these battles with Japanese forces. But America's military saw victory after victory on these islands. The victories were due in part to the Navajo's clever communication system.

Before the war, the Navajo tribe had a bitter history with the U.S. government. Like many other Native American tribes, the Navajos had lost land and were pushed onto reservations by the national government. The government even tried to stop the Navajos from speaking Navajo. "When I was going to boarding school," said one code-talker, "the U.S. government told us not to speak Navajo, but during the war, they *wanted* us to speak it?"

The code-talking patriots served their country. But when they returned home from war, they faced the same unfair treatment Native Americans commonly suffered during that time. The top-secret Navajo code couldn't be revealed to the public until 1969. No one knew how important their role had been in fighting and winning the war. Eventually, the code-talkers were given their place as American heroes. David Patterson of the Fourth Marine Division expressed his pride in this way: "When I was inducted . . . I was willing to die for my country – the U.S., the Navajo Nation, and my family. My language was my weapon."

In 2001, President George W. Bush awarded Congressional Gold and Silver Medals to Navajo code-talkers for their service to their country. "Today," he said, "we give recognition they earned so long ago."