

Lost language: The last of the Navajo Code Talkers

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During WWII, and also when America was entangled in conflict with Korea and Vietnam, one strategy that helped achieve military victory was the use of the Navajo Code Talkers.

“Code Talkers” used their native language to encrypt messages and pertinent information. This ensured that they had smooth communication among themselves and that their messages could not be comprehended by the enemy.

Time is taking its toll, however, and these Navajo Code Talkers are passing away. With the death of William Tully Brown at the age of 96, only five Code Talkers remain. This is the third Navajo Code Talker’s death in about a month.

“On behalf of the Navajo people, we offer our thoughts and prayers for the family, loved ones, and community members who had the honor of knowing and sharing the life of Code Talker Brown,” said Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez said in a recent press release.

“The Navajo Nation has lost another great Diné warrior.”

Since their tours of duty, the US dedicates Aug. 14 as the day to celebrate and remember these selfless heroes. They put all their focus and energy towards attaining victory for their country, despite their people’s tumultuous past with its government (and army).

Brown was born on Oct. 30, 1922, in Black Mountain, Arizona. In 1944, he enlisted in the Marine Corps, where he served until honorably discharged in 1946.

According to Peter McDonald, President of the Navajo Code Talkers Association, over 400 people learned the language. This tactic was extremely helpful during the war, as they were able to send signals and communications comfortably. It reduced the fear that messages would fall into the wrong hands and people would die.

Tully dedicated himself to safeguarding that, together with his troop, they not only won the battle but also secured their territory. According to reports, code talkers correctly translated over 808 messages in 48 hours.

His death has not only left the people of Arizona in mourning but that of the entire nation. This is augmented by the fact that we have lost three Navajo code talkers in one month alone.

How they won the war

In the heat of battle, messages must get through to the right people at the right time. It is also highly beneficial for this information to be coded, so the enemy will be unable to understand what is passing along.

In WWI, the US military utilized the Choctaw language in the transmission of tactical and secret signals. This played a critical role in the surprise attacks that defeated Germany.

During WWII, the Marine Corps made use of the Navajo language via messages.

The strategy worked so well that countries like Japan and Germany sent their men to learn the native languages. These men studied the language and cultures of the Choctaw, Cherokee, and Comanche peoples.

Some members of the US military were uneasy about taking the language and using it yet again. They worried that their codes would get deciphered before it got to their allies.

Thus, when the Navajo Code Talkers walked into the military camps, they had no idea what was in store for them. All they knew is that the military was recruiting volunteers for the war effort. It later developed into a program that saved the rest of the world from destruction and contributed to the end of the war.

How it worked

They joined up with other Navajo troops to study the secret and unbreakable coding language. This is how the military gained victory over Saipan, Iwo Jima, and some of the most significant battles in the Pacific Theatre.

Philip Johnson developed the plan to use Navajo. Johnson's parents were missionaries, so he spent plenty of time on the reservation prior to his deployment.

In a declassified CIA report, Johnson was recruited to the Navajo delegation and went to Washington as an interpreter for Indian rights.

When he heard the military needed a language to communicate safely, he suggested Navajo. Despite concerns regarding secure communications, they went forth with the effort, which ended up being hugely successful.

The Navajo language is tricky for non-natives because of the linguistics and syntaxes in the language. In 1942, 29 Navajos were recruited and trained, creating more than 200 unique words for the military.



Privates Earl Johnny, Kee Etsicitty, John V. Goodluck, and Private First Class David Jordan. Back row Privates Jack C. Morgan, George H. Kirk, Tom H. Jones, and Corporal Henry Bake, Jr. (PhotoQuest via Getty Images).

Most admit to having studied the words at night and memorizing them — their pronunciations, spellings — and how to employ them. Using the language was much better than operating encrypting machines, as it was faster and much more accessible.

For every battle, the military set up two communication networks. In WWII, one was in English and this channel was for essential messages.

The other dealt strictly in Navajo communications and was highly confidential. In the heat of battle, Code Talkers worked in teams of two. Sometimes, these teams would work for more than 24 hours straight. Their operating base? Shallow foxholes.

When the enemy struck the camps, the courageous code talkers sent messages for ammunition, supplies, and communications strategies. They did not run and hide in a shelter and wait; however, they were moved to more secure locations. Were it not for the code talkers, the military would not have had victory over Iwo Jima.

Why the language is becoming extinct

A language is likely to become extinct when one culture dominates another culture with the dominating culture's language prevailing. For example, cultural dominance occurs during intermarriages between different communities.

In Africa, when a woman from one tribe marries a man from another tribe, she must learn her husband's culture and language. She also has to teach it to their children. In such a scenario, the woman may be able to teach her children, her language, but they will never be able to become fluent speakers. Often, the woman is not allowed to teach the children her language or speak it at all.

When there is a dominant language that is common in a group, it outshines the smaller languages. The minority tribes feel the pressure to learn and take up the dominant language. Thus, with time, the less spoken language disappears.

This happens in nations with fewer native languages. When a higher percentage of the population speaks a particular language, the rest feels the need to learn the language, especially if they want to socialize with their friends from that tribe.

Christianity and colonization are also cultures that brought about the disappearance of languages. Expansion led to the loss of Native American languages because the colonialists introduced other languages that the natives learned.

For instance, a country that was colonized by Britain, British English was taught in schools, and workers were required to know how to speak in English.

Of the 29 original code talkers, only 15 joined the Marines during combat. However, by the end of the war, over 400 people had learned the language. The sad part is that none of the 29 are alive today, and those who learned the language during this time are slowly dying.

Soon, this language will die. William Tully Brown is yet another blow to a group of courageous men.

"We will always honor and remember the sacrifices he made at Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima in the protection of freedom and liberty," said Seth Damon, Navajo Nation speaker. "Mr. Brown's contributions to the Tselani/Cottonwood community and the Navajo Nation will always be cherished."

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