Social Studies

Social Studies

THE CODE TALKERS

Genre	Comprehension Skills and Strategy	Text Features
Expository nonfiction	• Graphic Sources • Author's Purpose • Ask Questions	• Captions • Chart • Heads • Glossary

Scott Foresman Reading Street 4.4.4

NAVAJO CODE TALKERS · BY ACT OF CONGRESS 2000

BY GRETCHEN MCBRIDE

THE CODE TALKERS

BY GRETCHEN MCBRIDE

Their Story

For many years the story of the Code Talkers could not be told. Their extraordinary service to the United States during a time of war remained a secret.

The Code Talkers were a special group of soldiers who served our country during World War II. Until 1968 our government kept the mission of the Code Talkers top secret. The people who served as Code Talkers could not tell anyone—not even their families—about the work they did in the war, but now their story can be told. It begins with the Diné people.

The Diné now live primarily in the southwestern part of the United States. The language of the Diné is somewhat like the languages of other Native American groups living in the northwestern part of the United States and Canada. However, very few people speak these Native American languages.

A Diné man (1904) and woman with child (1930s)

Monument Valley, in Arizona and Utah, is part of the Diné homeland.

Diné: The People

The name *Diné* means "The People." The Diné are also known as the Navajo, a name given to the nation by outsiders. Some **scholars** believe *Navajo* comes from a Native American language and means "large area of cultivated land." No matter how others refer to them, the Diné maintain a strong sense of their own identity.

The land the Diné have lived on for centuries in what we know today as Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Arizona is sacred to them. As settlers moved from the eastern United States to the west in the middle of the nineteenth century, the Diné and other Native American people had to struggle to keep their traditional homelands.

The Diné faced a difficult time in 1864. They were forced by the United States government to walk three hundred miles to Fort Sumner in New Mexico. At Fort Sumner the Diné people were held against their will until 1868. For people who were so attached to a land they believed to be their natural and sacred homeland, this was a terrible hardship.

Finally, in 1868, a treaty was signed that allowed the Diné to return to their land. Because of the bad treatment they received at the hand of the government, many Diné remained distrustful of the United States government for many years. In spite of this, the Diné came to the defense of the United States during World War I and World War II. They fought for the United States and for their own Diné people.

Traditional Ways

Many people or groups of people have traditions that are special to them and make them unique. The Diné are no different. They are a deeply spiritual people, practicing their **ancient** religious traditions along with other religious traditions brought to them by missionaries.

Just as the land they call their home is special and sacred to them, so are the **ceremonies** that the Diné practice. These ceremonies make up their culture and are a way of life for them. The sacred ceremonies of the Diné teach them about their history, about human responsibilities, or about the world around them. Ceremonies also are used to bless a new home, care for the sick, or bring goodwill to the community.

Some ceremonies involve drypainting, which is made with grains of colored sand. The images created are often symbols of strength for Diné people in need. The drypainting is swept away to end the ceremony.

The Blessing Way is an ancient and sacred ceremony of the Diné. During this ceremony, the people may sing special songs, have a ritual bath, and say prayers. The ceremony is meant to protect the people at a time of change and challenges. The Blessing Way would be important for many of the Diné Code Talkers upon entering World War II.

A Diné creates a drypainting on the floor (top). A close-up of a drypainting shows color and delicate details (bottom).

World War II

When the United States entered World War II in 1941, many Diné men enlisted in the armed services. Diné women also volunteered and became part of the Women's Army Corps. For many of these men and women, it would be the first time they would leave the Diné **reservation.** Although life in the military was strange to them, the Diné soldiers excelled in tests of physical endurance. An outdoor life in a harsh environment had prepared them well for this new challenge.

By the end of the war, thirty-six hundred Diné would serve in the armed forces. Of these, more than four hundred would come to be called Code Talkers. They would perform an extraordinary service for their country and their people.

U.S. Marine Code Talkers relay a message with a field radio.

Japan used secret codes before attacking Pearl Harbor.

One of the challenges in any war is communication. Military headquarters must be able to get messages to the soldiers fighting in the field, and the soldiers must be able to report back to headquarters. If an army is to be successful, it is crucial that these communications be kept secret from the other side.

During World War I, the United States set up its first office especially for **cryptography,** the art or process of creating or figuring out secret codes. Even when the nation was not officially at war, this office worked to break the secret codes being used by foreign nations. They were usually successful, but on December 4, 1941, the code that the Japanese had been using suddenly changed. The United States code readers could no longer **decipher** it. This may be one reason the United States Navy was not ready for the attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Clearly, cryptography would be vitally important in World War II.
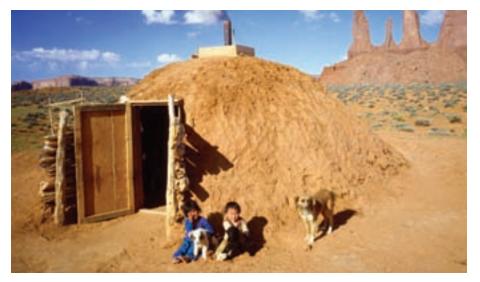
The Language of the Diné

World War I veteran Philip Johnston knew that being able to send secret messages in an unbreakable code would be important for the United States to win World War II. He also knew that American Indian languages had been used with some success for communications during World War I.

Johnston was the son of missionary parents. While Johnston was growing up, his family lived on a Diné reservation. From the age of four, he had played with the Diné children and had learned to speak their language. The Diné language became almost as familiar to him as the English he spoke with his parents.

As an adult, Philip Johnston realized that the Diné language he had learned as a child was a complicated one, and that not many people outside of the Diné community could speak the language or even understand it when they heard it.

This earthen hogan can be found on a Diné reservation.

Window Rock, in Arizona, is a landmark of the Diné.

Diné is an oral language without a system of writing. Scholars from outside the Diné community who wanted to learn the language tried to write it down the way they heard it, but this was very difficult.

The language of the Diné is not like any of the European languages. The sounds are very different. People who have not grown up speaking it find it difficult to hear the difference between some of the sounds. Like Chinese, Diné is a **tonal** language. This means that making a sound higher or lower in pitch can give the sound a different meaning. The grammar of Diné is also complicated and different from English and other European languages.

Philip Johnston knew that he was one of the few people outside the Diné nation who could speak Diné well. And even he, who had learned the language as a child, could not speak or understand it perfectly. For these reasons, he thought that the Diné language might be a good basis for a secret code.

The Experiment

Philip Johnston thought his idea for a secret code might help his country. Johnston traveled to Camp Elliot in San Diego, where he met with Colonel James E. Jones, the Signal Corps' communications officer for the U.S. Marines. Colonel Jones listened to Johnston speak the Diné language, and he was amazed. He had never heard anything like the sounds Johnston made. Colonel Jones agreed to set up a test of Johnston's idea.

On February 28, 1942, Johnston brought with him to Camp Elliot four Diné who **fluently** spoke both their native language and English. One pair of Diné was given a military message in English. They **translated** the message into Diné and transmitted it by radio to the other pair of Diné in another room. The second pair translated the message back into English. Their work was quick and accurate.

The Marines were impressed and gave Johnston permission to **recruit** Diné men who could speak both Diné and English for the project. The recruits would also have to meet the strict physical requirements for the Marines, and they could be told only that they were to be "specialists." These Diné would come to be known as Code Talkers.
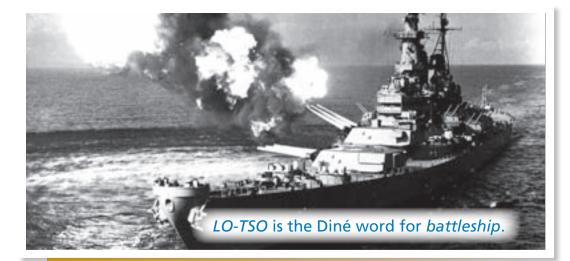
Diné veterans march in a parade.

The Code

It would not be enough to speak Diné over the radio in the field. There were other Diné serving in the military who would understand the language. The military could not risk having those men captured and forced to translate messages.

The Code Talkers first developed a twenty-six-letter alphabet with whole Diné words standing for letters. They would use this to "spell" over the radio. But the vocabulary of the Diné language did not have the words for the military terms that would be used over and over again. For a term such as "tank," the Code Talkers thought of something that reminded them of a tank. They thought of the word "turtle." Other words had some connection to what they stood for; for example, "potato" stood for hand grenade because of the objects' similar shapes.

The Code Talkers started with a simple twenty-six-letter alphabet, but they expanded it to more than four hundred letters to make the code harder to break. If the same word stood for the same letter in every message, an expert could break the code by noticing which words occurred most often in the code. In English, for instance, the letter *e* is the most frequently used letter. It would be easy to figure out which symbol stood for *e*, in a code that used only one symbol for it.

LO-TSO is the Diné word for *battleship.*

Code Talkers' Dictionary

English Term	Diné Word	Literal Translation
America	NE-HE-MAH	our mother
dive bomber	GINI	chicken hawk
fighter plane	DA-HE-TIH-HI	hummingbird
battleship	LO-TSO	whale
destroyer	CA-LO	shark
amphibious	CHAL	frog
anti	WOL-LA-CHEE-TSIN	ant ice
bomb	A-YE-SHI	eggs
bulldozer	DOLA-ALTH-WHOSH	bull sleep
creek	TOH-NIL-TSANH	very little water
farm	MAI-BE-HE-AHGAN	fox arm
not	NI-DAH-THAN-ZIE	no turkey
river	TOH-YIL-KAL	much water

Code Talkers in Battle

The Code Talkers had to memorize the expanded alphabet and long list of code words. They tried to choose code words that would be easy for them to remember. Nothing could be written down in the field, and their transmissions had to be fast and accurate. The lives of American soldiers depended on them.

Philip Johnston's idea proved to be a good one. The Marines continued to recruit Diné who met the requirements for the special program. Code Talkers went through the rigors of basic training with the other recruits and were required to meet strict English and Diné language standards as well. Johnston, although too old to fight in World War II, rejoined the military and trained Code Talkers.

The first Code Talkers reported for combat duty to General Alexander Vandegrift's First Marine Division on Guadalcanal in August 1942. With bravery and skill, the Code Talkers played a part in every important battle in the Pacific. By speaking their secretly coded language over radio, they transmitted crucial battlefield information. Their commitment to their job and their diligent work helped America greatly.

U.S. Marine Code Talkers Corporal Henry Bahe, Jr., and Private First Class George H. Kirk in the jungles of New Guinea, December 1943

U.S. Navy Corsair

The Code Talkers were important to many of the operations of the American military in the Pacific, but perhaps the most important battle was the battle of Iwo Jima. During the battle of Iwo Jima, the Code Talkers worked nonstop sending and receiving hundreds of messages. Their work was flawless.

The tiny island of Iwo Jima, barren and lacking drinkable water, was held firmly by the Japanese. The United States wanted the island because of its strategic location. It would serve as a landing strip for disabled planes as they traveled between aircraft carriers and major Japanese cities. It took an entire month to secure the island, and the cost in lives—both American and Japanese—was tragically high. Almost twenty thousand Americans were wounded, and more than sixty-eight hundred were killed. Almost all of the Japanese soldiers on the island died. The American victory, though costly, would prove to be crucial in winning the war.

American Marines raise the U.S. flag over the Pacific island of Iwo Jima.

Returning Home

As many as 420 Diné served as Code Talkers during World War II. These heroes had served their country in an important way, but there could be no special recognition for them when they returned home. The Code Talkers were sworn to secrecy. They could tell no one of the special code they had created, and they upheld their vow of secrecy. The code was such a success in communicating wartime information that it was kept secret for years after the end of World War II.

Like the other returning Diné soldiers, the Code Talkers were honored by their community. Their families performed traditional cleansing ceremonies to help them recover from their experiences in battle. Many veterans would become leaders of their people.

Finally, after the order for secrecy was lifted, the Code Talkers could receive the official honors of their country. In 1982 President Reagan honored them by declaring August 14 to be National Code Talkers Day. In July 2001 President George W. Bush bestowed the Congressional Gold Medal on the twenty-nine original Code Talkers. The other Code Talkers received the Congressional Silver Medal of Honor. The code created by the Code Talkers remains the only code never to be broken by an opponent.

A Diné Code Talker receives the Congressional Gold Medal from President George W. Bush in 2001.

Now Try This

SEND CODED MESSAGES

See if you could be a cryptographer! The Code Talkers used a spoken code and used entire Diné words to stand for single letters. Let's see if you can make up a written code using just a letter, number, or symbol for each letter.

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O
1	Z	Y	X	2	J	V	T	3	B	S	P	W	4	C

Create your own code using letters and numbers.

X	2	Y	C	X	2
D	E	C	O	D	E

Try to break the codes of another team.

1. With a partner, write down our twenty-six-letter alphabet and decide on a symbol—it could be another letter or a number—to stand for each letter.
2. Now, you and your partner can decide what kinds of messages you are likely to send each other. Perhaps you would like to talk about your favorite after-school activities. Come up with a list of words that you are likely to need for your messages. Now decide on the list of code words to use instead. For instance, perhaps your code word for "basketball" could be "sun." (A basketball is round like the Sun.) The alphabet and code word lists will be the two keys you use for decoding messages.
3. Write a four-line message to your partner. If any words in your message have code words, use the code words. Next, use your alphabet list to change your message into code. Then exchange messages with your partner. Using your decoding keys, see how quickly and accurately you can decode your partner's message.
4. Exchange your keys with another team, and see if you can write and decode messages in their secret code.
5. Here is the biggest challenge: Exchange messages with another team without exchanging the code word keys. Can you break their code?

Glossary

ancient *adj.* very old or of times long past.

ceremonies *n.* formal acts or sets of acts performed according to tradition for a special purpose.

cryptography *n.* the art or process of creating or figuring out secret codes.

decipher *v.* to make out the meaning of something that is puzzling or not clear.

fluently *adv.* smoothly; easily.

recruit *v.* to sign up persons, especially for military service.

reservation *n.* land set aside by the government for a special use, especially for the use of a Native American nation.

scholars *n.* people who have much knowledge.

tonal *adj.* of or relating to the high or low pitch of a sound.

translated *v.* changed from one language into another.

Reader Response

1. Look at the Code Talkers' Dictionary on page 15. What is the literal translation for *fighter plane?* Why do you think the Code Talkers used that word? Use a three-column chart similar to the one below to write your response. Add to the chart to answer *Why?* about some other code words.

English Term	Literal Translation	Why?
fighter plane		

2. If you interviewed some Code Talkers, what questions would you ask them? Where can you go to find more information about the Code Talkers?

3. *Cryptography* means "the art or process of creating or figuring out secret codes." The suffix *–graphy* means "the process of recording, writing, or drawing." List three other words with the same suffix and write their definitions.

4. Under what section heading could you find information on an ancient Diné ceremony? Why would it be included there?