STOP AND JOT: WORD WARRIORS

(1) On June 6, 1944, the day that came to be known as D-Day, over 300,000 American, British, and Canadian troops stormed the beaches in Normandy by land, air, and sea, risking their lives to free France from German control. This invasion led to the conclusion of World War II a year later. Later that morning, with the Allied invasion well under way, Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., realized the infantry division he was commanding had landed over a mile away from their intended target on Utah Beach. He knew that if he sent a message back to the command ship in English, German soldiers would likely intercept the message, translate it, and attack his division. So instead, he turned to Larry Saupitty, a radio operator who was assisting him, and asked him to send a message which was heard moments later on the command ship.	What was D-Day? Why is D-Day considered important by historians?
(2) "Tsaaku̲ nu̲nnuwee. Atahtu nu̲nnuwee." Saupitty, an Oklahoman and a member of the Comanche Nation, was speaking in a code based on the Comanche language. His fellow soldiers heard him loud and clear: "We made a good landing. We landed at the wrong place." While the American soldiers quickly translated the message, any German listening in would have been unable to understand the message. Without knowledge of their location, the Germans were unable to unleash an attack on Roosevelt and his soldiers.	Why was it important for the American soldiers to make certain that the Germans did not understand the message they had sent?

(3) During both world wars, the United States military had recognized the importance of relying on American Indian soldiers to use their tribal languages to prevent enemy soldiers from intercepting and translating messages. The American Indians who sent messages in their tribal languages are known as "code talkers." While many people know about the Navajo code talkers who bravely served in the Pacific theater during WWII, not as many people know of the code talkers from the Comanche, Choctaw, Seminole, Pawnee, Cherokee, Kiowa, Muscogee (Creek), Ponca, Kaw, and Osage tribal nations of Oklahoma whose actions in both world wars saved many lives. Although the exact number of soldiers from Oklahoma who served as code talkers is not known, we know that the Oklahoma code talkers were outnumbered by the more than 400 Navajo code talkers recruited by the U.S. Marine Corps.

Why do you think people might not know as much about the Oklahoma code talkers as they do about the Navajo code talkers?

(4) Many of the code talkers had attended boarding schools across the United States. Between the 1870s and 1930s, children from American Indian tribes from all around the country were sent to government-run and religious boarding schools, where they were forced to assimilate. Assimilation from their traditional American Indian cultures to White American culture required them to abandon the traditions their ancestors had passed down to them and adopt customs of White Americans. While living away from their families for a few years, students at these schools were not allowed to wear their traditional clothing. They were required to cut their hair and stop practicing the religious

What does it mean to "assimilate?" Why did Stoneroad know it was important to resist the school's effort to make him assimilate?

customs of their tribes. They had to take on English names. Since their native languages were a key part of their culture, they were no longer permitted to speak what was familiar to them. They were   punished if they were caught speaking their tribal languages. Code talker Henry Stoneroad, Sr., recalled, "We were punished for speaking our Pawnee language. Many times, I found myself eating a government bar of soap for speaking Pawnee. But my mother and grandmother always told me to never forget my Pawnee language. They said someday you will need to use that language to save lives. They were right."

(5) While we do not know the very first instance in which code talking was used, there were a few occasions near the end of World War I when the U.S. Army relied on American Indian code talkers to send messages. Nineteen men from the Choctaw Nation are believed to have been the first code talkers to create a code based on their tribal language. This process is referred to as **Type 1 code talking**. It involved their creating new words or phrases to describe things they did not have words for in the Choctaw language. For instance, the phrase they used for machine gun was "little gun shoot fast." Members of other tribal nations from Oklahoma, including the Cherokee, Comanche, and Osage, served as **Type 2 code talkers**. Type 2 code talkers translated English words and sentences into their primary language without creating new words and phrases. The tribal members spoke into telephones completely in their tribal

How did code talking work? What types of code talking were there?

languages to confuse the German soldiers who spied on them.

(6) Ironically, the American Indians who had served as code talkers in WWI were not considered citizens until the U.S. government passed the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, six years after the war ended. Even after President Calvin Coolidge signed this act into law, American Indians who lived in certain states had to wait over thirty years before they could even vote.

What was the purpose of the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924?

(7) Despite their mistreatment, many American Indians were eager to serve in the military when WWII began. Sometimes, they chose to serve because of patriotism. Many code talkers also grew up strongly believing in what was known as a "warrior tradition." They lived in communities where defending their neighbors and homelands was incredibly important. The words of William T. Snake, a citizen of the Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma, show us his commitment to defending the United States. In 1942, he wrote to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, John Collier, "I am only trying some way to help *defend* OUR COUNTRY and by organizing a PONCA INDIAN SIGNAL CORP, and using the Indian Dialect, I think it will help a little, in *defending* OUR COUNTRY."

According to paragraphs (7) and (8), what were some of the reasons that explain why American Indians decided to serve in the military?

(8) Other code talkers saw that joining the military might make it possible for them to get a full-time job. The U.S. Army recruited 17 Comanche men to serve as code talkers in WWII. Some of these men recalled that the idea of defending their country with their

friends appealed to them. Forrest Kassanavoid explained, "Well my reason for joining was I had finished high school in the middle of the year and I didn't have no money to go to school on. [. . .] So I was going to join the Army anyway, so if I didn't I'd probably be drafted within a year or two [. . .] when I found out I would be in a unit with good friends, it made the decision easier."

(9) Unlike the Comanche code talkers, who were recruited by the Army for the purpose of developing a secret code, many of the other Oklahoma code talkers who served during WWII found themselves taking on their roles through coincidence. Edmond Harjo recalled walking through a French apple orchard and hearing a man singing a church hymn in the Creek language. As a Seminole, Harjo could understand him. He introduced himself to the man, Thomas MacIntosh, and a commanding officer overheard their conversation. Before long, they were both serving as code talkers. Harjo recalled sending a radio message to Macintosh in Creek warning that their infantry needed to move back to avoid a German attack. MacIntosh was able to translate the message and alert the troops. As a result of his warning, they were kept out of danger.

How did Harjo and MacIntosh meet, and how did their actions save lives?

(10) During both world wars, code talkers often risked their lives to keep their fellow soldiers out of harm's way. None of the coded messages they sent were ever broken by enemies of the United States. The code talkers also performed acts of kindness and heroism. Several Comanche code talkers

According to paragraphs (10) and (11), what were some of the honors that the Oklahoma code talkers received? Why do you think it took so long for them to be recognized and receive these honors?

recalled giving food to survivors who had been freed from German concentration camps. While some code talkers received medals such as the Purple Heart and Silver Star for their bravery, they did not discuss often in public the important role that code talking had played in winning both wars. Some of the code talkers had been ordered by the military not to discuss their actions with the public. Much of the work they had done was classified (required to be kept secret). For over forty years, the wartime contributions the code talkers had made were unrecognized. They did not receive the public recognition they were due.

(11) In 1989, the French government presented the Chevalier of the National Order of Merit to the Comanche code talkers. It would, however, take twenty more years before the United States acknowledged their efforts. President George W. Bush signed into law the Code Talkers Recognition Act of 2008, which required that medals be issued to the code talkers who had served in World War I and World War II. In a 2013 ceremony at the U.S. Capitol, the code talkers were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal - the highest honor a citizen can receive from Congress for their accomplishments. Most of the code talkers had passed away, but some of their relatives were present to accept the medals. Edmond Harjo, believed to be the last surviving code talker from Oklahoma, was the only code talker to attend the award ceremony.

Sources:

Jackson, R. (2006, November 11). *Code talkers still await recognition*. The Oklahoman. https://www.oklahoman.com/article/2970252/code-talkers-still-await-recognition

Meadows, W. C. (2003). *The Comanche code talkers of World War II*. University of Texas Press.

Meadows, W. C. (2021). *The first code talkers: Native American communicators in World War I.* University of Oklahoma Press.

National Museum of the American Indian. (2020). *Native words, native warriors*. Smithsonian Institution. https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/code-talkers/

Oklahoma Historical Society Audio Archives. (2020, March 9). *Interview with Edmond Andrew Harjo*. [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3NmP9UKVIM

Rosier, P. C. (2010). *Serving their country: American Indian politics and patriotism in the twentieth century*. Harvard University Press.