

## Navajo Code Talkers

During World War II, the language of Navajo Indians became a code that the military used to keep its troop movements in the Pacific Ocean secret from the Japanese. American military officials had to develop a code the Japanese couldn't crack so that U.S. ships and troops could move into place for attack throughout the Pacific Theater. A variety of codes had been developed but the Japanese always seemed to figure them out.

Finally, in 1942, Philip Johnston came up with an idea. Johnston, a World War I veteran, wanted to do something to help Marines serving in the Pacific. He knew the Navajo language because he had grown up on a reservation in Arizona where his parents were missionaries. Johnston developed a code that was rooted in Navajo. Part of the code used symbols, such as the symbol for a chicken hawk, which stood for a bomber.

Johnston presented the idea to Marine Corps officials. They adopted the idea, and he trained about two dozen Navajo volunteers as his first group of recruited "code talkers." By 1945, there were more than 400 Navajo Marine code talkers working in the Pacific. The American invasion of Iwo Jima, in the Volcano Islands of Japan, was successfully conducted using the Navajo code.

In the three years the code was used, the Japanese never were able to crack it. The complexity of the Navajo language made it a perfect code, with its difficult-to-imitate sounds and meanings that change, depending on the intonation of words. The Navajo code was kept secret until 1968. That year, the code talkers got special awards from the United States government.

## Unit 8

- When Johnston first made his proposition to the Marines, what do you think their reaction was?
  
- How difficult do you think it was to formulate the code?
  
- Can you think of another language that is difficult to mimic? Tell why you think it is hard to imitate.