Navajo Code Talkers

Learning Objectives

• Students will explore the role of American Indians in World War II
• Students will explore the Navajo language

Essential Questions

• How are codes useful in communication?
• What role did the American Indian play in World War II?

Background

During war sending and receiving messages is an extremely important part of military planning and action. If messages fall into enemy hands, however, the plans could be at risk. Military groups in World War II used codes to communicate with each other and many of the codes were broken by the enemy. The United States started using Navajo and Comanche code talkers to communicate in 1942. They began in the Pacific and continued with Allied troops in Germany. The codes were based on the oral Navajo language which was not written down anywhere. The complexities of the language made the code difficult for the enemy to break. Even though the Navajo code talkers played a crucial role in the war, they were not honored for their service until 2001.

Here is a sample of the words used by the Navajo Code Talkers. See the additional resources listed below for more.

• America NE-HE-MAH
• Battleship LO-TSO
• Bomb A-YE-SHI
• Bomber Plane DA-HE-TIH-HI
• Britain TOH-TA
• Capture YIS-NAH
• Evacuate HA-NA
• Germany BESH-BE-CHA-HE
• Grenade NI-MA-SI
• Island SEIS-KEYAH
• Land KAY-YAH
• Major General SO-NA-KIH
• Retreat JI-DIN-NES-CHANH
• Sniper OH-BEHI
• Squad DEBEH-LI-ZINI
• Submarine BESH-LO
• Tank CHAY-DA-GAHI
• Torpedo LO-BE-CA

Materials

• Carl Gorman Biography
• Navajo Code Talker worksheet (1 copy per student)
• Access to the webpages mentioned in the additional resource section of this lesson

Activity

1. Discuss role of Native Americans in World War II including the Navajo from Arizona.
2. Read the biography of Carl Gorman.
3. View the interactive exhibit *Native Words, Native Warriors* from the National Museum of the American Indian (see link below).
4. Have students explore coded words using online Navajo code dictionary (see link below).
5. Complete worksheet.

**Additional Resources**

- View the interactive online exhibit at [http://nmai.si.edu/education/codetalkers/](http://nmai.si.edu/education/codetalkers/)

**Arizona State Social Studies Standards**

- Grade 4, Strand 1, Concept 8, PO 3
- Grade 4, Strand 1, Concept 7, PO 5
- Grade 8, Strand 1, Concept 8, PO 5
Carl Gorman
World War II Veteran, Navajo Code Talker, Artist
October 5, 1907 - January 29, 1998

You are born with your culture. My culture is Navajo. That’s what you live with. Family, heritage—the roots are deep. —Carl Gorman, Navajo Code Talker (Power of a Navajo: Carl Gorman, the Man and His Life by Henry and Georgia Greenberg, 1996)

Carl Gorman was born in 1907 in Chinle, Arizona, on the Navajo Reservation. He joined the United States Marine Corps in 1942 and was one of the original 29 Navajos who developed the Navajo code to be used in communication during World War II. Carl explained that because the Navajo grew up with oral tradition passed down from grandfather to father to children, they developed listening skills that helped them quickly memorize complex codes during the war. Carl served on the front lines in four important Pacific battles: Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Tinian, and Saipan. With a radio in his hands, Carl used the Navajo code to communicate messages for the U.S. military.

After the war, Carl Gorman returned home to Arizona for a short time but went on to study arts at the Otis Art Institute in California. Afterwards, he drew technical illustrations for an aircraft company, painted scenes of his Navajo homeland, and eventually became a college professor at the University of California at Davis. He returned to the Navajo Reservation and worked as an administrator at the Navajo Community College (now Diné College). Carl encouraged students there to be proud of their heritage and to find the right path for their lives.

Carl Gorman received much recognition during his life—for his service as a Code Talker and for his work as a painter, teacher, and someone who strived for many years to preserve the traditional Navajo culture and history. Carl passed away in 1998, a few years before the Navajo Code Talker’s service was officially recognized and they were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, but his wife, Mary, and other family members accepted the award on his behalf in 2001.

From National Museum of the American Indian online exhibit Native Words, Native Warriors. Top image from the National Archives.
Navajo Code Talkers

Code talkers had to memorize seventeen pages of code during their training. They used two different types of codes to communicate. Read the descriptions below and try your skills at decoding both types of Navajo code.

**Type One Codes**
These codes used Navajo words to stand for each letter of the English alphabet. When the word was translated, the first letter of that word in English was the letter used for the coded message. Here’s an example: DIBEH means Sheep and the first letter of Sheep is S so DIBEH stands for the letter S.

**Try it- Use the chart to decode the following message. Each Navajo word stands for one English letter.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Navajo word</th>
<th>English word</th>
<th>Letter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MOASI</td>
<td>Cat</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LHA-CHA-EH</td>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DZEH</td>
<td>Elk</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TKIN</td>
<td>Ice</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Navajo: MOASI NE-AHS-JAH LHA-CHA-EH DZEH
English: __________________________

Navajo: GAH DZEH MOASI DZEH TKIN A-KEH-DI-GLINI DZEH LHA-CHA-EH
English: __________________________

**Type Two Codes**
These codes used Navajo words that could be translated directly to English words.

**Try it- Search Navajo Code dictionaries online to write the code for the following phrase.**

English: Intense battleship attack! Request reinforcements now!

Navajo: