

UNBREAK

The incredible true story of the Navajo code talkers, the top-secret heroes of World War II BY TOD OLSON

Chester Nez was scared. He was nearly 7,000 miles from home. It was pouring rain. Bullets flew over his head. Bombs shook the ground.



Chester Nez

Welcome to Guadalcanal. It's an island in the Pacific Ocean. And on November 5, 1942, it was the most important place on Earth. The U.S. Marines were fighting the Japanese in World War II (1939-1945). And Nez had a job to do.



Nez and his partner, Roy Begay, set up their radio. They were members of the Navajo Nation, a Native American tribe in the

WORD WARRIORS

Navajo soldiers created a secret code. They based it on their native language.



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Southwestern United States. They had made a secret code from their **native** language. Finally, they were using it.

Nez was nervous. He had to call in the location of some Japanese troops. One mistake could be deadly. The American guns might fire at the wrong location. They could miss the enemy and kill their own soldiers.

Nez got ready to **transmit**.



PAUSE AND THINK: Who was Chester Nez? Why was he in Guadalcanal?

Joining the Fight

Seven months earlier, Nez was finishing high school in Arizona. World War II—the deadliest war in history—was spreading around the globe. For the United States, the news was not good. Japanese troops had taken over much of the Pacific Ocean. American troops were fighting to win it back.

Nez wanted to help. In April 1942, he got his chance. The Marines wanted 30 Navajo

VOCABULARY

native: belonging to a person because of his or her place of birth

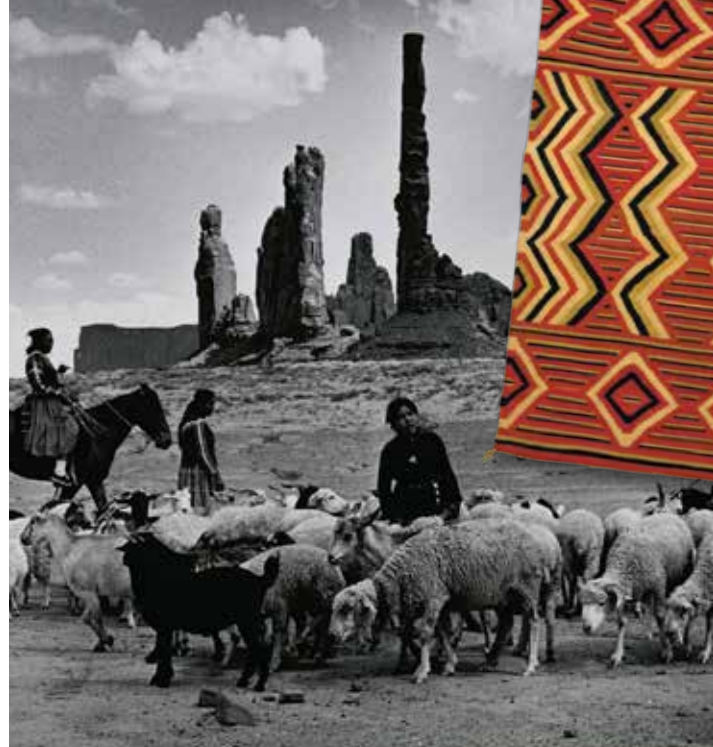
transmit: to send information to someone else (often by using electric signals, like radio waves)

ancestors: people who were in someone's family in the past

confined to: forced to stay in a particular place

decoding: changing secret messages into words you can understand

allies: countries on the same side in a war



IMPORTANT TRADITIONS For centuries, the Navajo have lived on land near where the corners of Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado meet. They began herding sheep in the 1600s. They're known for weaving beautiful wool blankets.

men for a secret project. Dozens applied for the job. Soon Nez was headed for boot camp.



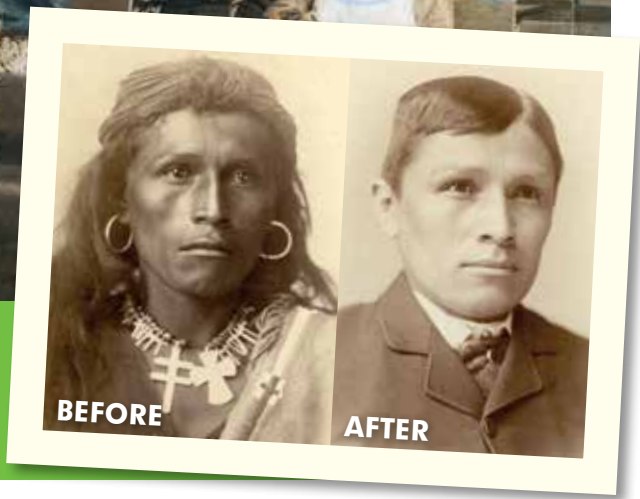
PAUSE AND THINK: What was happening in the Pacific Ocean in 1942?

Cruel History

Nez was proud to be a Marine. But he was also proud to be Navajo—or Diné [dih-NEH] in his native language. This made serving in the military complicated. His people had a history of conflict with the U.S. government.

For centuries, the Diné herded sheep and goats in the Southwest. But in the 1860s, U.S. troops forced them off their land. Nez's **ancestors** were **confined to** a strip of land in New Mexico. There were no trees for firewood. Crops wouldn't grow. Many people died.

Four years later, the Diné got their



PAINFUL HISTORY Navajo kids were sent to boarding schools run by the U.S. government. These schools tried to make Native Americans more like White people. (The photos to the right show a Navajo student when he entered—and three years later.)

homeland back. But they weren't truly free. Even in 1942, they couldn't vote in the states where they lived. Many kids had to go to boarding schools run by the U.S. government. At those schools, students couldn't use their Diné names. Their hair was cut short. They couldn't speak their native languages.

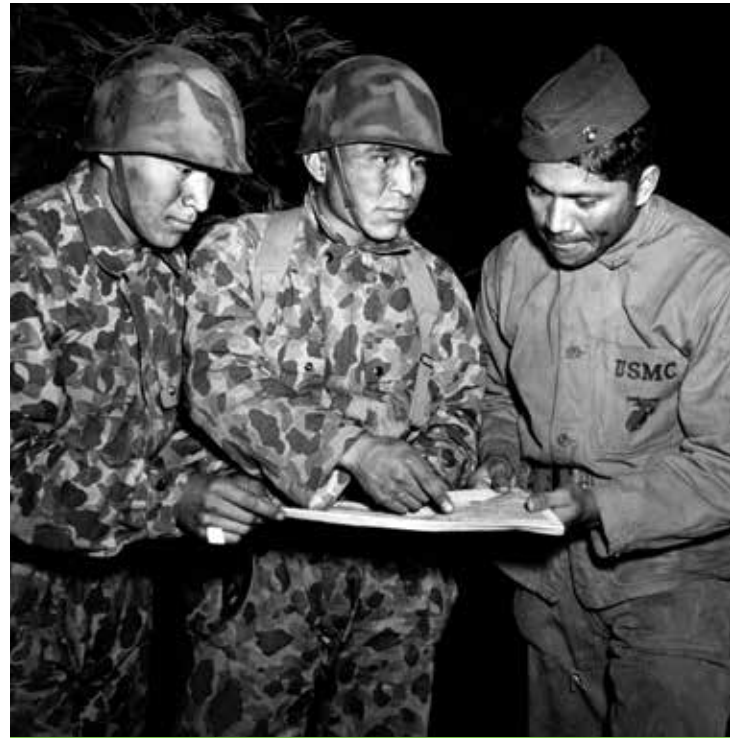


PAUSE AND THINK: How has the U.S. government treated Nez's people?

Secret Mission

In spite of this ugly history, Nez wanted to help fight the war. At boot camp, he and the other Diné trained hard for weeks. Finally, they learned their mission: They would make a code based on the Diné language.

Really? Nez wondered. The same language he had not been allowed to speak in school? →



REPORTING FOR DUTY The U.S. Marines asked Navajo men to join a special project during World War II (1939-1945). Their job was to create a secret code from their native language.

SARIN IMAGES/THE GRANGER COLLECTION (BOARDING SCHOOL); IMAGE COURTESY OF THE RICHARD HENRY PRATT PAPERS, BEINECKE RARE BOOK & MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY (BEFORE & AFTER); THE GRANGER COLLECTION (MARINES)



THE WAR IN THE PACIFIC The Navajo code talkers helped battle the Japanese during World War II. The U.S. and its allies (other countries that sent troops to help) fought their way north from Guadalcanal to Okinawa.

It made sense. The Marines needed to send messages that the enemy couldn't understand. Few non-Native people spoke Diné. The language had never been fully written down. The code would be hard to break.

PAUSE AND THINK: What did the Marines ask the Diné soldiers to do?

Building the Code









Nez and the others worked to invent the code. It took weeks. First, they picked words that would stand in for letters of the alphabet. "A" was the Diné word for ant: *wol-la-chee*. "B" was the word for bear: *shush*.

Next they chose Diné words for common military terms. A tank became a turtle: *chay-da-gahi*. Battleships were whales: *lo-tso*.

When the code was set, they studied. They quizzed each other. They practiced sending and **decoding** messages. They earned the

THE SECRET CODE

The Navajo code talkers used Diné words to stand for common military terms. Here are some examples.

MILITARY TERM	CODE WORD IN ENGLISH	CODE WORD IN DINÉ
 tank	 turtle	chay-da-gahi
 battleship	 whale	lo-tso
 fighter plane	 hummingbird	da-he-tih-hi
 bombs	 eggs	a-ye-shi

JIM MCMAHON/MAPMAN © (MAP); SHUTTERSTOCK.COM (ALL OTHER IMAGES)

name “code talkers.”

In late September, they were ready. The code talkers went to war.



PAUSE AND THINK: How did the code talkers get ready to go to war?

In the Battlefield

Five weeks later, Nez and Begay were on Guadalcanal. They sent a message: “Enemy machine-gun nest on your right flank. Destroy.”

A minute later, the big guns roared to life. The Japanese machine guns fell silent.

“You see that?” Nez said.

“Sure did,” said Begay.

For a moment, Nez forgot about the rain and bullets. He felt proud. He had done his job.



PAUSE AND THINK: What was Nez’s first message about? How did it help?

Code Talking

For the next two-and-a-half years, American soldiers fought their way north. About 420 code talkers were there to help.

They called for medical help and supplies. They kept track of enemy positions. They warned officers of surprise attacks. The code talkers worked fast. They rarely made a mistake. And the code was never broken.

The war ended in 1945. The U.S. and its **allies** had won.



PAUSE AND THINK: What kinds of messages did the code talkers send?



REMEMBERING A HERO

Chester Nez died in 2014 at 93. He was the last living member of the 29 original code talkers. In 2001, President George W. Bush gave them a special award.



Coming Home

After the war, Nez returned to the U.S. But it took a while for life to return to normal.

Nez had bad dreams about the war. And he couldn’t tell anyone what he had done. The code might be used again. So the code talkers were told to stay silent.

In 1969, the story came out. The Marines honored the code talkers at an event in Chicago.

Nez felt proud. “I had been respected and treated as an equal,” he said. And, like his ancestors before him, he had survived. •



PAUSE AND THINK: Why couldn’t Nez tell anyone about his role in the war?

Special thanks to historian Zonnie Gorman (the daughter of code talker Carl N. Gorman) for her help with this story.