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The Navajo Code Talkers of World War II: The First Twenty-Nine

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**THE NAVAJO CODE TALKERS OF WORLD WAR II:
THE FIRST TWENTY-NINE**

by

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B. A., UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA, 1992

M.A., UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO, 2014

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my parents. My father, Carl Nelson Gorman, was a member of the original group of Navajo Code Talkers. He taught me the beauty and dignity of being Diné and instilled a fierce pride in the accomplishments of this first group of men, the “first twenty-nine.” My mother, Mary Excie Gorman, was the personification of commitment and service to others, and in her own right, a historian par excellence. She devoted nearly thirty years of her forty-two-year marriage to support, advocate, promote, and assist directly the Navajo Code Talkers in their many endeavors and was often the quiet, strong organizing force behind many of the accolades they received over the years.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank the members of my committee. I offer my sincerest thanks to my Committee Chair, Margaret Connell-Szasz for her encouragement and her helpful dialogues throughout this process. Her support and faith in me never faltered, even when I needed extra nudges to finish. I would also like to extend a thank you to Durwood Ball, whose conversations and support about my topic was encouraging. His wealth of knowledge on U.S. military history proved very helpful in guiding me to sources I otherwise would not have considered. And finally, I want to thank Cathleen Cahill, whose cheerfulness and open door always greeted me when I needed specific advice, or just great conversation.

A large portion of new material I used in this thesis would not have been available without the 2013 regional residency fellowship awarded to me by the National Archives. The staff at the National Personnel Records Center in St Louis was extremely helpful during my two visits to the archives. I would especially like to express a heartfelt thank you to the archivists, Ashley Mattingly and Theresa Fitzgerald, who found everything I requested and more. Also a special thank you to Eric Kilgore, Research Room supervisor, and his staff for their knowledge and assistance. Doris Sander, too, was helpful in accessing materials for me in the nonarchival research room. And finally, a special thank you to Bryan McGraw, the director for the National Archives at St Louis, for his cordiality, enthusiasm, and sincere love for his work that was truly inspiring.

I also want to thank my sons, Anthony and Christopher, for their love and encouragement. Their help, from research assistant at the archives to fixing computer

glitches, assisted me in innumerable ways. A special thank you goes to my oldest son, Michael, who unselfishly took on the task of reading my drafts and offering very concrete and valuable suggestions. I also would like to thank John and Jenny Crouch of Silver Cloud Video Productions for their assistance in collecting the interviews with members of the “first twenty-nine,” and with Frank Shinn, during my undergraduate studies at the University of Arizona. I also want to extend a sincere thank you to Donna Monette, a diligent researcher in her own right, who loves these men and their story almost as much as I do. And lastly, I give a special and heartfelt hug to my partner, Ellis Tanner. Without his love and support and unwavering faith in me, I would not have started – or finished – this journey.

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ABSTRACT

The Navajo code is considered to be one of the only U.S. military codes never broken by an enemy combatant. Its use in the Pacific campaigns during World War II and the now famous men, the Navajo Code Talkers, owe their success to the original group – the “first twenty-nine” - who volunteered in the spring of 1942 to join the U. S. Marine Corps for a “special assignment.” Unbeknownst to them at the time of their enlistment, they would serve as a pilot to develop a code in their native language and test its feasibility for combat communications. Very few details have been available about this initial phase of the first group, even though it was vital in establishing the program. This thesis on the “first twenty-nine” broadens and reinterprets the traditional historical narrative, employing newly discovered material and several undisclosed interviews with both members of the original group as well as former Marines who were involved in this decisive phase.

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Figure 1 Members of the "first twenty-nine" group shot on May 4, 19423

Introduction

On a clear, crisp spring morning in 1942, a group of young men clustered together for a photo opportunity. There were no particular physical characteristics that identified them as unique, or that they even belonged together as group. They ranged widely in age. Some were in their early to mid-thirties, but most were in their late teens and early twenties. Some knew one another, classmates from a couple of the larger federal Indian boarding schools located in and around Navajo country. The majority, however, were strangers. On this particular day, they had come together at Fort Wingate, New Mexico, to be sworn in to the United States Marine Corps.

They formed four tight, neat rows - two rows standing, and two rows kneeling - and waited for their picture to be taken. My father, Carl Nelson Gorman, dressed in a suit jacket and turtleneck, stood in one of the back rows. His gaze looks out, and he is slightly turned from the camera, as if something, or someone, to his left had caught his attention just moments before the shutter clicked. Another young man on the far end of the same row, Wilsie Bitsie, has a broad smile on his face, and he, too, looks in the same direction as my father. The others steadfastly stare ahead toward the camera. In all, there are twenty-four men in the photograph. A twenty-fifth, who stands to my father's left, is only half in the frame. These men, who would ultimately number twenty-nine, were part of the initial pilot group who volunteered for a "special assignment" in the United States Marine Corps in the spring of 1942. Unbeknownst to them, this "special assignment" was to create in their native language a voice code that they, and later, some 350 more Navajo Marines would

effectively utilize to send and receive vital combat messages in the Pacific theatre during World War II, thus greatly assisting in the Allied victory over Japan.

The original of this image is a small, crumpled snapshot that was taken by a family member of one of the men in the photograph, and years later it was given to my father. Dad had it copied and enlarged, and like many other photographs of the Navajo Code Talkers, it became part of the growing collection in the family photo albums. Most of these other images were a hodgepodge of historic combat correspondence photographs taken somewhere in the Pacific and housed at the National Archives. And, as the Navajo Code Talkers gained recognition over the years, a plethora of photos taken at numerous award ceremonies in their honor, parades they marched in, and banquets for various celebrations filled more albums. But despite all these images, it was always this small snapshot that intrigued me most: What happened just off camera to distract my dad and Bitsie? Why are there only twenty-five men in the photograph and not twenty-nine? Why was one of the men only half in the frame? And, who took the picture in the first place? These, and other questions, captivated me.

The ambiguities within the photograph itself, as well as the mysteries occurring outside its frame, for me, metaphorically symbolize the knowns and the unknowns, the evidence and the conjecture, the realities and the myths, that have obscured current narratives about the initial phase of the Navajo Code Talker program.



Figure 1 Twenty-five members of the original twenty-nine Navajo Code Talkers, 4 May 1942.

Left to Right:

Back row, standing: Alfred Frank Leonard, Oscar B. Ilthma, George H. Dennison, James Dixon, Harry Tsosie, unidentified, Samuel H. Begay

Second row, standing: Eugene Roanhorse Crawford, Wilsie Henry Bitsie, Cozy Stanley Brown, John Chee (misidentified as C. Begay), Lloyd Oliver, Jack Nez, Carl Nelson Gorman, unidentified (half frame)

Third row, kneeling: John Ashi Benally, John Brown, Jr., Roy L. Begay, Charlie Y. Begay, Nelson S. Thompson

Fourth row, kneeling: Bill Dene Yazzie, Frank Denny Pete, Chester Nez, Benjamin H. Cleveland, Allen Dale June

Carl Gorman family collection¹

The first seven months, from the presentation of the idea to the Marine Corps in February of 1942, through to the actual creation of the Navajo code by the “first twenty-nine” in July and August, was the most critical phase in the development of

¹ Not Shown or identified: Lowell S. Damon, William McCabe, John Willie, Jr., Balmer Slowtalker, Johnny R. Manuelito, and David Curley

Another one of the ambiguities of this photograph is the fact that some of the men in it are misidentified. Based on notes made on the back of an enlarged copy of this image in my family collection, the man in the second row with “C. Begay” written across his chest is actually John Chee. Additionally, the man in the third row identified in the photograph as Nelson Thompson may actually be Lowell Damon. This is based on comparisons with identified men in some of the Indian Service photographs taken by Milton “Jack” Snow.

the Navajo Code Talker program. If the pilot group had failed in creating a workable code in the Navajo language, the entire project would have been abandoned. As crucial as this period was, it has received little attention overall, due, in part, to the lack of documentation. However, with recent disclosures of first-account interviews with members of the “first twenty-nine,” some of which are first and only interviews, as well as access to a large cache of new archival material, a broader and richer narrative is now possible.

In this thesis, I utilize these new sources to reshape the narrative of the “first twenty-nine,” giving the Navajo men themselves more presence in their own story. I also challenge and reinterpret long-held notions about the origins of the idea, including whose initial concept the Navajo code really was, and how the Marine Corps chose to use it. Additionally, I have greatly expanded and enhanced the narrative to help flesh out and clarify some of the ambiguities and misinterpretations of older and accepted accounts about the “first twenty-nine.” Despite my deep and intimate connection as the daughter of one of the original group of Navajo Code Talkers, I have tried to keep as little of my personal voice out of the narrative and instead, to allow the men themselves to “speak” of their experiences. Little reference to published narratives about the Navajo Code Talkers has been made except to modify convoluted facts and fill in historical gaps.

Until recently most of the primary sources related to the initial phase of the program have been limited. The earliest known interviews with some of the “first twenty-nine” were conducted in 1971 during the first gathering of Navajo Code Talkers in Window Rock, Arizona. Between the Marine Corps Oral History Program

and the Doris Duke American Indian Oral History Program, several Navajo Code Talkers were formally interviewed, and three of these men were members of the original group. Additionally, one interview with Wilsie Bitsie was conducted in 1992 by author Sally McClain and, as a first account, was helpful to my work.

Chester Nez, the last surviving member of the original group, who passed away on June 4, 2014 at the age of ninety-three, had published his memoirs in 2011. Entitled, *Code Talker*, and written with Judith Schiess-Avila, it chronicles his early childhood as well as his exploits as a Navajo Code Talker in World War II. His specific accounts of recruitment, boot camp experience, and the creation of the initial Navajo code offer details that corroborate and supplement several other first-account interviews by members of the original group.²

Besides Chester's memoirs, my father's biography, *Power of a Navajo*, by Henry and Georgia Greenberg, published in 1996, also was a helpful source of information.³ Needless to say, growing up as my father's daughter, I was privy to innumerable conversations over the course of many, many years. Although it was tempting to interject information I recalled from these countless conversations and observations into my writing, I have consciously attempted not to do so.

The largest collection of oral history interviews are those I conducted as an undergraduate at the University of Arizona between 1989 and 1992. My interest in the story of the "first twenty-nine" eventually led me to major in history as an undergraduate at the University of Arizona. While a student, I sought out as many of the original group of men as I could find and conducted individual interviews with

² Chester Nez with Judith Schiess, *Code Talker* (New York: Berkley Caliber, 2011).

³ Henry and Georgia Greenberg, *Power of A Navajo: Carl Gorman; The Man and His Life* (Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 1996).

them over the course of three years. I also conducted the only known group interview with the half-dozen men I was able to find. Those who graciously participated in the interviews were Carl Gorman, Dean Wilson (aka, Bill Dene Yazzie), John Brown, Jr., Eugene Crawford, Chester Nez, and Wilsie Bitsie. I also was fortunate to meet and befriend one of the Marine Corps recruiters, Frank D. Shinn, first lieutenant, USMC (ret.), who was assigned to the Navajo Reservation in the spring of 1942 to assist with recruitment of the “first twenty-nine.” He too, granted me an interview. All of these first accounts have been undisclosed until now.

My initial interviews were recorded on a Nagra reel-to-reel recorder on loan from the Southwest Folklore Center in Tucson, Arizona. These particular interviews are housed at the University of Arizona’s main library. I also video recorded all but one of the men in a second set of interviews with Silver Cloud Video Productions. The original intention was to produce a documentary, which unfortunately, never came to fruition.

In the process of contextualizing this initial phase of the Navajo Code Talker program, I have purposely chosen to utilize as much of the men’s personal voice from these collective interviews as possible. Where original voice recordings are available, I make little or no edits to their speech or grammar. In some cases, the way in which something was said is just as valuable as what was said.

Additional sources include internal Marine Corps memorandums, endorsements, and official government correspondence between the Marine Corps and Bureau of Indian Affairs. Other primary source material utilized for this study included are the California Marine Corps base newspaper, *The Chevron*, the Bureau

of Indian Affairs publication, *Indians at Work*, and several articles published in the 1940s by border-town newspapers adjacent to the Navajo Reservation such as Gallup, New Mexico, and Flagstaff, Arizona.

The largest collection of military documentation accessed for this thesis are the official military personnel files for the “first twenty-nine,” as well as the additional Navajo marines who worked on the creation of the first Navajo code. Also, I accessed the official military personnel files for some of the Marine Corps staff and officers involved in the initial phase of the Navajo Code Talker program. These military personnel records have never been examined in their entirety by any other researcher, or employed as a major source of documentation, until now. Their value to this work is immeasurable.

In addition to the military files, I have also reviewed federal civilian files for a number of Indian Service employees. These were helpful to contextualize some of the individuals who attended a meeting between the Marine Corps and the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C. I have reviewed federal civilian files for a number of “first twenty-nine,” including my father, who were employed by the Indian Service prior to their enlistment in the Marine Corps. These files, too, proved helpful in rounding out the pre-war experiences of each of the “first twenty-nine.”

My thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1, “The Idea,” introduces new archival material and a new protagonist, Robert W. Young, who was an aspiring young linguist specializing in the Navajo language in the 1940s. New documentation definitively illustrates that the concept of using Native American languages in combat, and very specifically Navajo, was not new by World War II. Popular narratives about

the introduction of the idea to the Marine Corps have placed Philip Johnston, the son of a Protestant missionary, as the “expert” who convinced the U.S. military that the Navajo language was ideal for secret communications. In this chapter, I examine Johnston’s pitch to the Marine Corps and refute much of his initial claims. Although influenced by these assertions, the Marine Corps’ decision to move forward with the idea was made after careful deliberations about their very real need for secure communication and their assessment that Navajo potentially offered a feasible solution. The result was to recruit a pilot group of thirty Navajos in the early spring of 1942.

My research has revealed that there were two teams of Marine Corps recruiters sent to the Navajo Reservation. Chapter 2, entitled “The Recruitment,” identifies them and introduces the two officers-in-charge. The first team, headed by then First Sergeant Frank Shinn, was sent directly from the Western Recruiting Division Headquarters in San Francisco, California. During interviews with him in the early 1990s, he shared with me his memories of recruiting my father, Carl Gorman.

The second team was from the Regional Recruitment Office in Phoenix, Arizona. Recently found documentation reveals that the officer-in-charge, then Major Frank Shannon, played a much larger role in the recruitment of the original group than has been previously known. I definitively identify the three federal Indian boarding schools on the reservation that he targeted for recruitment. Additionally, in Chapter Two, I introduce each of the twenty-nine young men, including my father, who ultimately joined the Marine Corps and became the pilot group of Navajo Code Talkers.

Chapter 3, “Swearing-in and Boot Camp,” focuses on one significant date, 4 May 1942, the day the Navajo volunteers were sworn in to the Marine Corps. For the first time, I bring together two disparate sources to piece together the sequence of what occurred that day. An analysis of a series of photographs taken of the recruits by Milton “Jack” Snow, a photographer who worked for the Indian Service, help to establish the order of the events for the day, and are enhanced by the personal recollections that were shared in oral-history interviews with several members of the “first twenty-nine.”

Also in chapter 3, I reveal the name of a man whose existence has been shrouded in mystery for over seven decades. My unexpected discovery of this man occurred while I was at the National Archives at St. Louis reviewing the official military personnel files for the pilot group. I found, in one recruit’s file, a travel order, dated 4 May 1942, that disclosed a list of thirty names, men the Marine Corps obviously expected to swear in that day. With conclusive evidence that a thirtieth man had existed, I theorize about his absence and offer several possible scenarios that may explain why he was not present.

The “first twenty-nine” become Platoon 382 in boot camp, the first all-Indian, all-Navajo platoon in the history of the Marine Corps. This well-documented period is rounded out with several anecdotes by the “first twenty-nine” about their experiences during the seven weeks they were in boot camp.

In Chapter 4, “The Code,” the Navajos are transferred to Camp Elliott for communication training, and here, for the first time, the Marine Corps shared its expectations for the Navajos to create a voice code in their native language. Unlike

popular narratives that focus on the linguistic qualities that made the Navajo language “ideal” for a voice code, chapter 4 turns the lens away from this perspective and instead focuses on what was of utmost concern to the men themselves. To Navajos, whose lives were intimately bound by a set of cultural values different from those of twentieth-century America, the idea of utilizing their language in such a way necessitated serious deliberations on their part. Navajo conceptual values of speech, language, and even words reflect the deeply held belief in causality. One can affect the world and one’s personal health and balance, positively or adversely, by how one thinks and then manifests those thoughts into the world. Some words, too, hold power, and to use them in ways that do not reflect their sacredness are viewed as dangerous. Such a decision then, to create a code for war purposes, was not taken lightly by these men.

I also introduce three, and possibly four, Navajo marines who joined them at Camp Elliott to train in communications and create the code. These men’s participation has never been recognized or credited; so I have attempted to establish their involvement and give them more visibility. Also, a new voice from an unpublished and never-before-used transcript by John Hood, a former communications instructor at Camp Elliott, has helped me to contextualize the general communication training the Navajos received during this time.

This first group of recruits marked the beginning of a remarkable program that contributed immeasurably to the Marine Corps’ defensive and offensive operations across the Pacific during World War II. What pilot group created in 1942, utilizing some two hundred Navajo terms served as the nucleus for a unique voice

code that eventually expanded into nearly seven hundred words. This thesis identifies their role as a critical phase to this unique military program.

Chapter One: The Idea

On 24 September 1940, a fledgling anthropologist who, in his own words, specialized “in Ethnology and Linguistics,” penned an enthusiastic and detailed letter to U.S. Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson. He presented an idea, an ambitious plan to develop a cadre of Indian personnel who would serve as secure communicators for the United States military. He envisioned members of several different Native American tribes, “representing 15-20 (or more) different indigenous languages,” who could be alternated continuously to confuse any eavesdroppers. The enemy, he asserted, would be severely challenged to identify any one language, much less be able to decipher military messages. He also envisioned these native communicators being taught to write in their respective languages. “In written form,” he asserted, “the enemy would find deciphering virtually impossible.” Toward this end, he offered to “quickly perfect a practical alphabetic system for the needs of the particular language of each linguistic group and teach them to read and write in it.”⁴

This young man admitted that he knew “nothing of military strategy,” but he did know that indigenous languages did not “possess the adequate vocabularies for the description of the various material aspects of modern warfare such as ‘bomb,’ ‘propeller,’ ‘submarine,’ etc.”⁵ In lieu of this critical vocabulary for military purposes, he suggested, such terms could be coined. He offered no specific examples, but rather presented models

⁴ Young to Hon. H.L. Stimson, Secretary of War, 24 September 1940, Center for Cryptologic History, Series 4, Folder P.10.

⁵ Ibid.

of coinage from his familiarity with the Navajos, who formulated new terms for Western concepts as well as novel items of Western material culture introduced on the reservation. As an example, he asserted the case of the legal term *claimant*. Navajos translated it as *shiniinii*, which literally means “the one who says ‘it’s mine,’” He also pointed out in the case of new items such as water pipes, innovative Navajo words had to be created to describe these new objects. In this case, *beesh to bighi’ nlinikii*, when translated, means “the metal through which water flows.”⁶

The young man who wrote this letter to the secretary of war was anthropologist/linguist Robert W. Young. Born and raised in Illinois, Young developed an interest in languages at an early age. As a boy, he spent time with families from Mexico that came up into the area to lay tracks and maintain rail lines for the Rock Island Railway. He attended college and graduated from the University of Illinois in 1935, where he furthered his studies in languages. Interested in Nahuatl, the language spoken by the Aztecs, Young wanted to pursue graduate school in Mexico. However, these plans were disrupted when a friend wrote him that his school of choice was closed due to civil unrest and rioting.⁷ Instead, Young studied anthropology at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. This unanticipated event sent him in a new direction, one that shaped his career and focused his passion as a linguist for the rest of his life.⁸

As a graduate student at UNM, he befriended Adolph Dodge Bittany, a Navajo student who had worked with anthropologist Gladys Reichard as an interpreter. Young

⁶ Young to Hon. H.L. Stimson, Secretary of War, 24 September 1940, Center for Cryptologic History, Series 4, Folder P.10. The spelling of the Navajo words is taken directly from Young’s spelling in the letter.

⁷ Peter Iverson. “Speaking Their Language: Robert W. Young and the Navajos,” in *Between Indian and White Worlds*, ed. Margaret Connell-Szasz (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 255-256.

⁸ Young was instrumental in the establishment of the Navajo Language Department at the University of New Mexico. His personal papers are housed at the Center for Southwest Research, Zimmerman Library, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.

and Bittany struck up a friendship and Young began to study the Navajo language under his friend's tutelage. While still a student, he accepted a position as a research associate with the School of American Research. This afforded him the opportunity to study the language, while working alongside Navajo laborers at the archaeological field school at Chaco Canyon. He also befriended and worked with a Navajo hataaʼii,⁹ Tomacito Padilla, and a Navajo translator, Monte Lupe.¹⁰ All these early experiences deepened his interest in the Navajo language.

Young continued his work at the archaeological field school in the summer of 1937. That year he met and befriended John P. Harrington, a prominent yet eccentric linguist. When the Bureau of Indian Affairs hired Harrington to develop a Navajo orthography, who was not as familiar with Navajo as he was with other Athabaskan languages, he turned to Young to carry out much of the work. Subsequently, Young took a day job at the Sheep Breeding Laboratory near Fort Wingate, New Mexico, to be closer to Navajo speakers. There, he was assigned to work with William Morgan, a recent Navajo graduate from Wingate Vocational Indian School. During the day they worked at the laboratory, but in the evenings Morgan began to assist Young with translations of simple textbooks, primers, and other educational materials.¹¹ Morgan's fluency in Navajo and Young's linguistic ear lent itself to a working team that continued for years.

The Bureau's interest in Native American languages was part of a larger movement initiated and expanded by Indian Commissioner John Collier in the 1930s under his Indian New Deal policies. Collier's lifelong interest in social philosophy and

⁹ Hataaʼii, in Navajo means "singer."

¹⁰ David M. Brugge, "Robert W. (Bob) Young: Linguist and Anthropologist" in [Chasing Chaco and the Southwest: Papers in Honor of Joan Mathein]. Archaeological Society of New Mexico 34. 47-55.

¹¹ Peter Iverson, "Speaking Their Language: Robert W. Young and the Navajos," 260.

the ideals of Progressive education helped shape his doctrine for the Indian Office. The ultimate goal of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, however, remained that of assimilation and Collier believed education vital to that process. With this in mind, in 1936 he chose Willard W. Beatty for director of education, a champion of Progressive Education.¹² Beatty enthusiastically embraced the idea to develop Indian orthographies. The purpose, however, was not to assist in the preservation of indigenous languages but rather, the ultimate goal was to utilize Indian languages in the transition of Native American students to English speakers.

By 1940, Beatty, frustrated with Harrington's eccentricities and upon discovering that Harrington had not been completely forthcoming about Young's role in much of the work, offered Young a position.¹³ What prompted Young in the fall of that same year to write a letter to Secretary of War Stimson and offer his services to help develop a unit of Indian communication personnel is not known. The escalation of the war in Europe over the course of 1940, as well as the signing of the Tripartite pact between Germany, Italy, and Japan in September of that year, caused grave concerns for the United States. The passing of the Selective Training and Service Act, also in September of 1940, made America's imminent participation in World War II disturbingly obvious to average Americans.

When Young's letter appeared on Secretary of War Stimson's desk, he passed it on to Major General E. S. Adams, Adjutant General, U.S. Army, who in turn responded to Young. In three short and succinct sentences, Major General Adams acknowledged receipt of the letter, stating it was now a "matter of record for such consideration as

¹² For more on Beatty, see Margaret Connell-Szasz, *Education and the American Indian*, 3rd ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999).

¹³ Peter Iverson, "Speaking Their Language: Robert W. Young and the Navajos," 262.

circumstances may warrant.” He thanked Young for his interest in the country’s national defense.¹⁴

The utilization of indigenous languages for military communication was not new to the U.S. Army. Most notably, in World War I, the first documented use of Indian “code talking” was carried out by Choctaws who were members of the Thirty-sixth Division, 142nd Infantry Regiment. During the Meuse-Argonne campaign at St. Etienne in France in 1918, Choctaws relayed vital reconnaissance about an impending German assault as well as troop movements during the ensuing battle.¹⁵

The Choctaws, however, were not the only tribe utilized by the Army during World War I. William C. Meadows, in his book *Comanche Code Talkers*, identifies six additional tribes used in World War I; Cherokee, Cheyenne, Choctaw, Osage, and Yankton Sioux. Additionally, he identifies sixteen tribal languages and dialects employed by the U.S. Army in World War II.¹⁶ Moreover, in a more recent article, Meadows indicates that ongoing research continues to reveal that the U.S. Army utilized even more tribes in both world wars to provide communications in their native languages.¹⁷

Although most of these uses were small in scale, often with as little as only two speakers of a tribal language sending and receiving messages between them, the Army clearly utilized hundreds of indigenous peoples and dozens of languages for combat communications in both wars. Moreover, when Robert Young wrote his letter to Stimson in 1940, the idea to develop a cadre of Indian communicators who could rotate between

¹⁴ Adams to Robert W. Young from 2 October 1940. Center for Cryptologic History, Series 4, Folder P.10.

¹⁵ William C. Meadows, *The Comanche Code Talkers of World War II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 16-17.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 241-242.

¹⁷ William C. Meadows, “Honoring Native American Code Talkers: The Road to the Code Talkers Recognition Act of 2008 (Public Law 110-420),” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 35;3 (2011):28.

languages to help ensure security from and confusion by the enemy may not have been so far-fetched. During World War II, the Fifth Bomber Command of the U.S. Army Air Corps in the Pacific may have used a radio net made up of sixteen native men who represented at least eight different tribal languages.¹⁸ Whether the Army developed this idea internally as an extension of its World War I experiences with Indian languages, or was influenced by Young's original idea expressed to form a network of several Indian languages, is unclear.

Two years later, in February 1942 a different man, Philip Johnston, approached the United States Marine Corps, a completely separate branch of the armed forces, with a similar idea. Unlike Young's, Johnston's proposal was to utilize one specific tribe, rather than several. Johnston had no linguistic training, but with a rudimentary grasp of the language from his childhood years spent on the Navajo Reservation, he believed Navajo was ideal for military communication.

The son of a Protestant mission worker, Johnston had spent several years as a child on the Navajo Reservation at the turn of the century. His father, Will Johnston, moved his wife and young Philip to a remote region of the Reservation in 1896 to establish a mission. Will Johnston, already in his fifties, was not an ordained minister but felt compelled to dedicate himself to missionary work. First sponsored by the Gospel Union, a YMCA affiliate, he took his family by train to Flagstaff, Arizona. From there they went by wagon north and west of Flagstaff deep into Navajo and Hopi country. Eventually the site of Johnston's mission would become known as Tolchaco.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid, 28.

¹⁹ Bernice Eastman Johnston, *Two Ways in The Desert: A Study of Modern Navajo-Anglo Relations* (Pasadena, CA: Socio-Technical Publications, 1972), 9.

Johnston spent the majority of his childhood on the Navajo Reservation with occasional breaks to attend school, first in Kansas and then in Flagstaff. These were brief educational stints followed by a few years during which he studied under a personal tutor who traveled out to his father's mission.²⁰ Philip then attended a year of high school at the West Jersey Academy in Bridgeport, New Jersey, before he returned to Flagstaff to attend the Northern Arizona Normal School. Upon his graduation in 1915, Philip moved with his parents and siblings to southern California.²¹

Johnston, now twenty-three years old, continued his education and majored in English at Occidental College for two years before he enlisted in the U.S. Army in March 1918. At the end of World War I, he spent a few months in France with his unit, the 319th Engineers.²² One year later in March 1919, he was discharged from the service and returned to southern California, where he recommenced his education at the University of Southern California.²³

By the time Johnston approached the Marine Corps in 1942, he was in his early fifties and employed with the Bureau of Engineering for the City of Los Angeles. At the same time, he continued his interest in writing and was published in various magazines and newspapers, including a number of lengthy articles in the *Los Angeles Times* that appeared in the 1920s and 1930s. He supplemented much of his writing with his own photography.²⁴

²⁰ Philip Johnston, interview by John Sylvester, November 7, 1970, Doris Duke Number 954, transcript, American Indian History Project, Western History Center, University of Utah, 27.

²¹ Ibid, 28.

²² Ibid, 28.

²³ Bernice Eastman Johnston, *Two Ways in the Desert: A Study of Modern Navajo-Anglo Relations* (Pasadena, CA: Socio-Technical Publications, 1972), 255.

²⁴ Philip Johnston, interview by John Sylvester, November 7, 1970, Doris Duke Number 954, transcript, American Indian History project, Western History Center, University of Utah, 32, 33. The first article to appear in the *Los Angeles Times* by Johnston was February 27, 1921, "The Home of a Long Forgotten

Most current narratives written on the Navajo Code Talkers imply that Johnston directly approached the Marine Corps with his idea to use the Navajo language as a code.

Yet, in a 1970 interview, he asserted that he first approached the U.S. Navy. He stated:

I, first, went to the Naval Office in Los Angeles and told them the story. And they thought it had possibilities. They asked me to go to San Diego, which I did, to the headquarters of the Eleventh Naval District. And I just told (sic) about communication in an Indian language, and they thought, ‘Well, if it can be done, it would just be a marvelous thing, but, we use another – we use cipher.’ Now whatever that is, I don’t know what cipher is. I’ve never investigated it. But, the Marine Corps would certainly be the place for this thing to be tried out. So they sent me out to Camp Elliott.²⁵

Subsequently, Johnston met with Major James E. Jones at Camp Elliott in southern California and presented his idea. According to Doris Paul in *The Navajo Code Talkers*, Jones expressed interest in seeing a more formal demonstration. In a follow-up letter to Jones dated 18 February 1942, Johnston summarized his efforts to find Navajos living in the Los Angeles area whom he could employ for such a demonstration. He informed Jones that immediately following their meeting, he approached the Sherman Institute, a federal Indian boarding school located in Riverside, California.²⁶ He met with the superintendent and inquired about Navajo students who might be able to carry out such a demonstration. The superintendent informed Johnston that the school no longer had Navajo students in attendance at Sherman. They were now sent to either Phoenix or Albuquerque Indian schools, facilities closer to their reservation in the Southwest. He suggested, however, that Johnston visit the Indian Placement Bureau in Los Angeles. Its

Race.” It was followed by series of articles with the last appearing in the June 18, 1933 edition of the Los Angeles Times entitled “The Bravest Man I Ever Knew.”

²⁵ Philip Johnston, interview by John Sylvester, November 7, 1970, Doris Duke Number 954, transcript, American Indian History project, Western History Center, University of Utah, 43.

²⁶ For more on Sherman Institute, see *The Indian School on Magnolia Avenue: Voices and Images from Sherman Institute* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2012). Generally, for the history of federal Indian boarding schools, see footnote 187.

staff might be able to refer Navajos who lived in the area and who could help his project. Johnston reported to Jones that a Miss Warren at the Placement Bureau did indeed furnish him with “names and addresses of several Navajos.”²⁷

Four Navajos were ultimately employed for the demonstration. (Unfortunately, no written record of these individuals has survived.) The Navajos arrived on Friday evening, the twenty-seventh of February, and the demonstration was performed on Saturday morning. Johnston encouraged Major Jones to invite “as many officers as possible, connected to Communication, Intelligence, or other branches of the service, who would be interested and qualified to evaluate this project.”²⁸ He also offered to entertain the base with his full lecture about the Navajo Indians, or if time did not permit, he suggested instead “a brief showing of the lantern slides on Friday evening.”²⁹ As mentioned previously, Johnston dabbled in photography and along with his writing for newspapers and magazines, he had also developed lecture presentations. One of these was on mining, but his more popular performance was a one-hour “illustrated lecture” he entitled, “My Friends, the Navajos.”³⁰ It is not known whether the base took him up on his offer.

The demonstration was conducted as planned and in attendance was Major General Clayton B. Vogel, commanding general of the Amphibious Corps, Pacific Fleet at Camp Elliott, and his staff.³¹ The four Navajos engaged for the presentation were

²⁷ Johnston to Major James E. Jones, 18 February 1942, MS 136-I-15a-b, Philip Johnston Collection, Museum of Northern Arizona, Flagstaff.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Johnston to Major James E. Jones, 21 February 1942, MS 136-I-18, Philip Johnston Collection, Museum of Northern Arizona, Flagstaff.

³⁰ Flyer, “My Friends the Navajos” an Illustrated Lecture by Philip Johnston, MS 136-I-30, Philip Johnston collection, Museum of Northern Arizona, undated. There are two versions of this flyer in the Philip Johnston collection. In the post-World War II version “1966-1969 season,” Johnston advertised his lecture to include the topic of the Navajo Code. In this post-WW II flyer, Johnston is represented by the Henry Brazilay Bureau.

³¹ Vogel to The Commandant, U.S. Marine Corps, memorandum, 6 March 1942, National Archives (College Park), RG127, Entry 18A, Box 600, Folder 13, National Archives at College Park.

divided into pairs and were placed in “distant offices in the same building,” that had previously been wired with telephone equipment for the demonstration.³² One week later, Vogel described the process in a two-page memorandum to General Thomas Holcomb, commandant of the Marine Corps. He deemed the demonstration “interesting and successful.” He continued.

Messages were transmitted and received almost verbatim. In conducting the demonstration messages were written by a member of the staff and handed to the Indian; he would transmit the message in his tribal dialect and the Indian on the other end would write them down in English. The text of messages as written and received are enclosed. The Indians do not have many military terms in their dialect so it was necessary to give them a few minutes, before the demonstration, to improvise words for dive-bombing, anti-tank gun, etc.³³

Vogel saw the potential in the demonstration for a possible means of secure communications, especially between combat units and the naval off-shore support vessels during battles.³⁴ This was evident in the six sample messages the Marine Corps had provided for the demonstration. They resembled tactical combat messages, some similar to ground-to-ground communiqués, but also ship-to-shore and ground-to-air messages.³⁵ It is unfortunate that no recording, or other means of preservation, of the Navajo translations for these demonstration messages has survived for analysis. The way in which the four Navajos chose to coin their terms for the military words, would be an interesting study. Whatever it was they did compose and transmit in their native tongue, however, was enough to impress Vogel. In his two-page memorandum to Commandant

³² Philip Johnston, interview by John Sylvester, November 7, 1970, Doris Duke Number 954, transcript, The American Indian History Project, Western History Center, University of Utah, 44.

³³ Vogel to The Commandant, U.S. Marine Corps, memorandum, 6 March 1942, RG127, Entry 18A, Box 600, Folder 13, National Archives at College Park.

³⁴ David J. Ulbrich. *Preparing for Victory: Thomas Holcomb and the Making of the Modern Marine Corps, 1936-1943* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2011), 121.

³⁵ Enclosure B, “Messages used in Demonstration,” in Memorandum dated 6 March 1942 from Commanding General Clayton B. Vogel to The Commandant, U.S. Marine Corps, RG127, Entry 18A, Box 600, Folder 13, National Archives at College Park.

Thomas Holcomb, he summarized the demonstration, offered his personal impressions, and shared Johnston's key points that supported Navajo as the best possible native language to consider for military communication. Vogel was so convinced by the demonstration and the information provided to him that he recommended, "an effort be made to enlist 200 Navajo Indians for this force."³⁶

Johnston's "key points" concerning Navajos and their language, however, are worth some scrutiny. On the surface, they argued well for the utilization of the Navajo language, but out of nearly half a dozen arguments that Johnston offered, few are actually based on fact.

First, Johnston stated that the Navajo language was "completely unintelligible to all other tribes and all other people, with the possible exception of as many as 28 Americans who have made a study of the dialect."³⁷ These statements are absolutely inaccurate. Navajo is not a language isolate. It belongs to the Athabaskan language group including tribes from Alaska, Canada, northern California, and the southwestern United States. The southernmost group, known as the Apachean language family, includes the Navajo as well as six Apache tribal groups located in New Mexico and Arizona.³⁸ Not all tribes within a given language group are intelligible to one another. This, according to linguists, is based on the length of separation. Generally speaking, however, the Navajos and Apaches, whose initial separation and physical distance from one another remains negligible, can for the most part, understand each other.

³⁶ Vogel, Clayton B., Commanding General to The Commandant, U.S. Marine Corps, memorandum, 6 March 1942, RG127, Entry 18A, Box 600, Folder 13, National Archives at College Park.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Robert Young, "Apachean Languages," *Handbook of North American Indians: Southwest*, vol.10 Alfonso Ortiz, ed., (Washington: Smithsonian Institute, 1983), 393.

Moreover, for generations Navajos traded regularly with Pueblos, as well as other tribes throughout the Southwest. When they were not at war with conquering forces, i.e. the Spanish, then the Mexicans and later the Euro-Americans, the Navajos would trade with them. These trading relationships required and fostered language exchange. Also, in the federal Indian boarding schools during the American period of Assimilation, children from various tribes were brought together and languages were inevitably exchanged despite efforts to eradicate indigenous languages. Therefore, it is conceivable that young men of other tribes who served in the U.S. military would, if captured, have understood enough of the Navajo language to identify it, even if they were not be able to translate it.

Additionally, Johnston's assertion that there were exactly twenty-eight Americans who had "made a study of the dialect" is an interesting statement. Why such an odd number? Why not twenty-five, or thirty? Why specifically twenty-eight? How did Johnston arrive at such an odd number? And who specifically was he talking about?

Johnston likely guessed at the number of people he deemed knowledgeable of the Navajo language. Among them would have been traders who, more than any other group of non-Navajos on the reservation, spoke with Navajos daily in order to conduct business. Traders maintained one of the closest one-on-one working relationships with Navajos.³⁹

Another group who would have some working knowledge of the Navajo language would have been priests and missionaries affiliated with various churches scattered across the Navajo reservation. As mentioned earlier, Catholics and a few Protestant missionaries had attempted to write Navajo in order to translate scriptures and hymns. In

³⁹ For more information on the trading business on the Navajo Reservation and the trader's relationship to the Navajos, see Frank McNitt, *The Indian Traders* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962); Frances Gilmor and Louisa Wade Wetherill, *Traders to the Navajos: The Wetherills of Kayenta* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1965); Gladwell Richardson, *Navajo Trader* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1986); Kathryn Gabriel, *Marietta Wetherill: Reflections on Life with the Navajos in Chaco Canyon* (Boulder: Johnson Books, 1992).

some cases, such as the Presbyterian Church in Chinle, Arizona, Navajos themselves worked on written translations. Alice Gorman, my own paternal grandmother, was one such individual. During the early years of the twentieth century, she translated over thirty Christian hymns into the Navajo language.⁴⁰

Lastly, Indian Service employees formed the largest pool of non-Navajos working on the reservation. These individuals included office staff in various Indian Office positions, field service workers, administrators and teachers in federal boarding and day schools, as well as Public Health Service employees, who numbered into the hundreds. Some had spouses and children who also lived with them. However, the turnover among government workers on Indian reservations was high, and few, if any, government employees made any real effort to learn indigenous languages. In most cases, the Indian Service employed native speakers to interpret on a regular basis.

The second “key point” Johnston provided Vogel was the number of eligible young Navajos available for military service. Johnston surmised “1,000 - - if that many were needed - - could be found with the necessary qualifications.” This number proved to be optimistic.

The Navajo population in 1940 was 50,000. It would stand to reason that one thousand young men of eligible age and in good physical condition could be recruited. And, indeed, about 3,600 Navajos did serve in all the military branches of the service during World War II.⁴¹ However, for the Code Talker program the Marine Corps sought men who had a high level of bilingual proficiency, a requirement needed to translate and

⁴⁰Henry and Georgia Greenberg, *Power of A Navajo: Carl Gorman; The Man and His Life* (Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 1996), 18.

⁴¹Denis Foster Johnston, *An Analysis of Sources of Information on the Population of the Navaho*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 197 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966), 29.

decode rapidly and successfully messages from Navajo to English and vice versa. During the war years, statistics from the Selective Service registering Navajos on the reservation indicate that out of 4,000 males between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, eighty-eight percent were illiterate.⁴² Additionally, 1942-43 Indian Service educational statistics show that only 1,759 Navajo children between the ages of thirteen and eighteen years were enrolled in school on the reservation.⁴³ Moreover, Indian Service statistics for the same academic year indicate a total of forty-four high school graduates and twenty-one students enrolled in college. By 1945 the annual number had increased only slightly to 49 high school graduates and 31 Navajo students in college.⁴⁴

Finally, Philip Johnston observed that “the Navajo is the largest tribe but lowest in literacy,” and as the above statistics show, this is one of the only “facts” Johnston got right. However, the statistics also indicate a much smaller pool of potential candidates than Johnston had led the Marine Corps to believe. And indeed, as the war progressed, it became increasingly difficult for the Marine Corps to find Navajos sufficiently proficient in English to pass the Navajo Communication School training to become Code Talkers.

In addition to these “facts” he shared with Vogel, Johnston also included another unfounded claim in his follow-up letter to Major Jones. He declared that the Navajo language was unwritten.⁴⁵ As already discussed, the Indian Service in 1937 initiated an effort to develop a standard orthography of Navajo. By the early 1940s, primers and dictionaries, textbooks, and even a newspaper, *Adahooniligii*,

⁴² Ibid, 30.

⁴³ Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton, *The Navaho* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946), 93.

⁴⁴ Robert W. Young, comp. *The Navajo Yearbook, Report No. viii 1951-1961: A Decade of Progress* (Window Rock, AZ: Navajo Agency, 1961), 63.

⁴⁵ Johnston to Major James E. Jones, 18 February 1942, MS 136-I-15a-b, Johnston Collection, Museum of Northern Arizona, Flagstaff.

were regularly published and introduced to Navajo students in a number of federal schools both on and off the Navajo reservation. And, although it was the first large-scale federally sanctioned Navajo orthography, it was by no means the first attempt to write the Navajo language.

Early efforts by Americans to gain knowledge of the Navajo language surfaced in the mid-1800s with the construction of word lists during U.S. Army campaigns and expeditions into Navajo country. As westward expansion increased, so did American interest in the study of indigenous peoples, their cultures, and languages. Scientists and scholars viewed native peoples as members of vanishing cultures, a stance that appeared to justify governmental scientific research.⁴⁶

Then, at the end of the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, another group of Americans set their sights on Navajo country. Missionaries clambered to establish churches and gain a religious foothold. By World War II, Catholics, Mormons, numerous denominations of Protestants, and several non-denominational churches had at least one or more missions operating across the Navajo reservation.⁴⁷ One of the greatest challenges to Christian proselytizing was the language barrier. At the turn of the century, the vast majority of Navajos

⁴⁶ For some notable early ethnographic work conducted by military personnel regarding the Navajos, see James H. Simpson, Frank McNitt, ed., *Navaho Expedition: Journal of a Military Reconnaissance from Santa Fe, New Mexico to the Navaho Country Made in 1849 by Lieutenant James H. Simpson*, Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1964/2003. Also, works by Washington Matthews, *The Night Chant: A Navaho Ceremony*, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1995; *The Mountain Chant: A Navaho Ceremony*, Glorieta, NM: The Rio Grande Press, Inc., 1970; and *Navajo Weavers, Navajo Silversmiths*, Palmer Lake, CO: Filter Press, 1868; et al. For essays about Washington Matthews and his work on the Navajos, see Katherine Spencer Halpern and Susan Brown McGreevy, eds., *Washington Matthews: Studies of Navajo Culture, 1880-1894*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997.

⁴⁷ Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton, *The Navaho* (1946; rev. New York: Doubleday & Co, Inc., 1962), 132.

had little to no exposure to English. A very small number of Navajos who had received some formal western schooling were proficient in English, while the majority of missionaries were completely ignorant of the Navajo language. The Catholics and Protestants, independent of each other, worked out their own written versions of Navajo.

Nevertheless, between the live demonstration, Johnston's declarations, and Vogel's enthusiasm, Commandant Holcomb handed Vogel's memorandum over to Colonel Allen H. Turnage, the director of the Division of Plans & Policies, for review. Turnage responded in a memorandum on 20 March 1942 with several observations about the practicality of utilizing Navajos. Although he agreed "the utilization of Indians to transmit verbal messages would seem to have some advantage," he also carefully pointed out several drawbacks. First, Turnage voiced concern about the sample messages used in the demonstration. Although the messages were sent nearly verbatim, there were minor discrepancies. He indicated that even these slight incongruities could cause critical mistakes in battle. He continued, however, that with sufficient training "the Indians could be taught not to make such mistakes." This training might have to include teaching them "to operate technical communication equipment" that, Turnage pointed out, "imposes a problem that might not readily be solved."⁴⁸ This comment is rather ambiguous, but the implication is clear.

Turnage also pointed out that for such communication to work, it would require Indians on both ends of the radio to send and receive messages. With this in mind, he

⁴⁸ Turnage to The Commandant, memorandum, 20 March 1942, RG127, Entry 18A, Box 600, Folder 13. National Archives at College Park.

postulated that in the event of casualties among the Indian personnel, “a system carefully built up might possibly collapse.”⁴⁹ This would not be acceptable in war.

Moreover, Turnage expressed concern that “the employment of Indian dialect would only serve to slow up communications.” He asserted that, in the rapidity of battle, “plain English” voice transmissions would work better. Turnage assumed that the process of translating between Navajo and English would be slow and cumbersome.

Nonetheless, Turnage concluded that since Vogel, the commanding general of the Pacific Fleet, believed the idea showed merit, he had no objections. He recommended, however, that instead of the suggested two hundred Navajos originally proposed by General Vogel, that “an effort be made to enlist a group of approximately 30 Navaho Indians having the qualifications normally required for enlistment in the Marine Corps and that the linguistics qualifications in English and their tribal dialect which would make them suitable for the use in the transmission of messages by voice.” If approved, then the Navajo enlistees would “be ordered to the Amphibious Corps, Pacific Fleet, for duty upon completion of recruit training.”⁵⁰

Within a fortnight of Turnage’s recommendation from the Division of Plans & Policies, Lieutenant Colonel Wethered Woodworth from the Commandant’s office, met with members of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C. at the office of Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier. Although it appears Collier was not in attendance, four high-ranking Bureau officials met with Woodworth: Fred H. Daiker, acting chief of Welfare; Lucy W. Adams, Chief of Community Service Bureau and

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Education; Dr. L. W. White, assistant director of Health; and J. C. McCaskill, chief of the Planning Division.⁵¹

At this meeting, Woodworth specifically shared the concerns and recommendations expressed in Turnage's report to The Commandant, and sought the opinion of those present. More explicitly, he wanted to know, from the Bureau's perspective, whether they "felt that the enlistment and employment of Navaho Indians was practicable and feasible."⁵² In turn, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, supplied general population figures for the Navajo tribe, numbers of men eligible for military service, and information to date about the number of Navajos who had voluntarily enlisted or were inducted under the Selective Service Act. This information provided assurance that a sufficient number of eligible candidates would be available.⁵³

Raising Turnage's doubts about the intellectual capacity of the Navajos to grasp the operation of the telephone and radio equipment, Woodworth seemingly raised a question that caused the federal officials to respond with assurances that "a large proportion" of "some five of six hundred" young men of eligible age were high school graduates and were "conversant to some extent to communication methods as they have not only used the telephone but in many instances been employed by the general superintendent of the reservation for radio broadcasting which is used to some extent for the dissemination of information on the reservation."⁵⁴

The lieutenant colonel also asked their opinion about whether the Navajo language would be "a fit medium of communication." The Indian Service officials

⁵¹ Woodworth to Director, Division of Recruiting, memorandum, 26 March 1942, RG127, Entry 18A, Box 600, Folder 13. National Archives at College Park.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

responded that they believed the Navajo language would be “ideal” and that no one “other than the Navajos themselves” would be able to understand it. They all agreed that Navajos would be more than capable of sending messages “exceptionally fast” because they could translate immediately and, according to their assessment, this process would “do away with any coding or transcoding of any sort.” These Indian Service officials obviously expected that the recruits would speak in “plain Navajo.” Lucy Adams one of the attendees at the meeting, had spent the previous four years as superintendent of Indian Education and director of Navajo Schools with the Indian Service. Based in Window Rock, Arizona, on the Navajo Reservation and later at Fort Wingate, New Mexico, she had observed and enlisted the services of Navajo interpreters in the course of her job and witnessed firsthand how these men quickly navigated between languages. She proposed that “two or three of the older Indians (40 to 50 years old) who are expert interpreters and who would be invaluable in helping the recruits develop the proper vocabulary” be employed by the Marine Corps.⁵⁵

Additionally, Adams pointed out that the Navajo language had no vocabulary for technical military words, and therefore it would be necessary to “invent new terms.”⁵⁶ If indeed Woodworth’s report directly quoted Adams, she understood enough about the Navajo language to know, as Young had specified to Secretary of War Stimson some two years earlier, Navajos coined new terms in a unique way. It was not a matter of substitution, but rather an invention of new words or phrases to represent a new physical item or concept permanently.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Ibid.

Consequently, the Indian Service did follow through on its offer to the Marine Corps to supply some of their older expert Indian interpreters. A letter dated 25 April 1942 from the officer in charge of the Phoenix recruiting district to the commandant of the Marine Corps offered the services of two Navajo interpreters: Howard Gorman, forty-three, and Henry Gatewood, thirty-seven. According to the Bureau, they would serve as “instructor-interpreters” once the new recruits were in training in San Diego. Additionally, the Indian Service offered to “detail these men for this duty for a period of thirty days and pay them their regular salary.”⁵⁷

The commandant referred the letter to the commanding general of the Marine Corps Base in San Diego. A response from the Commanding General’s Office to the commandant on 4 May 1942 indicated that the men would be “quartered and messed at the Recruit Depot,” but that transportation to the base was their responsibility.⁵⁸ The letter also reminded the Commandant that the training period for Navajo recruits would be the regular seven weeks. No evidence suggests that the Navajo interpreters made the trip to the base or that they participated in the creation of the Navajo code.

At the meeting, the Indian Service employees also recommended that the Marine Corps specifically contact E. R. Fryer, general superintendent of the Navajo Agency, in order to “perfect the principles under which the program is to be carried out.”⁵⁹

Woodworth stated, “There are certain factors that should be given consideration in the building up of an Indian force and that these should be discussed at length with the

⁵⁷ D. M. Randall to the Commandant, memorandum, 25 April 1942, RG 127, Entry 18A, Box 600, Folder 13, National Archives at College Park.

⁵⁸ Commanding Officer to the Commandant, memorandum, 2nd Endorsement, 4 May 1942, RG127, Entry 18A, Box 600, Folder 13, National Archives at College Park.

⁵⁹ Woodworth to Director, Division of Recruiting, memorandum, 26 March 1942, Rg127, Entry 18A, Box 600, Folder 13, National Archives at College Park.

General Superintendent and other members of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.”⁶⁰ What specifically these “certain factors” were and why they needed to “be discussed at length with the General Superintendent” is not disclosed. Apparently, there was slight tug-of-war going on between the Marine Corps and the Bureau of Indian Affairs as they attempted to work out the best way to recruit and train the Navajos. The suggestions made by the Bureau of Indian Affairs recorded in Woodworth’s report indicate the Indian Service’s belief that it would have a hand in the recruitment and training of the Navajos, even so far as to assume that some, if not all, of the training would occur on the Navajo Reservation.⁶¹

Woodworth’s lengthy report was addressed to Colonel Frank Halford, the director of recruiting. Halford responded in a brief memorandum he sent to the Division of Plans and Policies in which he referred to Woodworth’s report as “most comprehensive.”⁶² Halford took particular interest in Woodworth’s recommendation that the Navajos receive Class V designation, observing that it “deserves study.”⁶³ Established in March of 1942, Class V was designated as Specialist Volunteer Marine Corps Reserve and it was “to provide for the appointment or enlistment in the Marine Corps Reserve of officers and men who possess special qualifications which may be utilized in the Marine Corps in time of war or national emergency, but who, due to physical defects, age, or lack of training, are not qualified for general service.”⁶⁴ He stated that the “proposed plan has

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Halford, Frank, Colonel, Director of Recruiting to the Division of Plans and Policies, memorandum, 26 March 1942. RG 127 Entry 18A Box 600 Folder 13, National Archives at College Park.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Kenneth W. Condit, Gerald Diamond, and Edwin T. Turnbladh, *Marine Corps Ground Training in WW II* (Washington, D.C.: Historical Branch Headquarters, G-3 Division, U.S. Marine Corps, 1956), 318.

very little practicable value,”⁶⁵ and pointed out that “action in the field is so fast now that messages sent in the clear usually result in immediate compliance rendering them of no value to the enemy.”⁶⁶ He did not believe that the use of Indians for voice communications had much merit.

The final decision, however, was to be made by Commandant Holcomb. He reviewed the recommendations of the various officers involved in appraising the potential merit of the program. Unlike some of his staff, Commandant Holcomb was a combat veteran with amphibious war experience and, as with many of his choices in those critical first months of the war, he weighed his decisions carefully. He was a commendable strategist who anticipated needs in a variety of areas within the Marine Corps including operational, administrative, and even technological.⁶⁷ Holcomb would have been keenly aware, and probably agreed with his staff, that “plain English” transmissions during ground-to-ground operations were more than efficient. However, Holcomb knew that his communications needs were more intricate and complex than just ground-to-ground transmissions. Since 1935, Commandant Holcomb had initiated annual Fleet Exercises (FLEX), in which simulated amphibious assaults were conducted on islands in either the Caribbean or the West Coast of California.⁶⁸ These simulations offered practical experience and training for the Marine Corps and Navy.

In 1941, during the FLEX 7 joint maneuvers between elements of the Marine Corps, Navy, and the Army, it became obvious that communications between the naval

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ David J Ulbrich, *Preparing For Victory: Thomas Holcomb and the Making of the Modern Marine Corps, 1936-1943* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2011), 187.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 44.

vessels and ground forces were sorely inadequate.⁶⁹ More than anything else this would have likely been foremost in his mind. These same concerns may have plagued the Naval Offices for the Eleventh District in Los Angeles when Philip Johnston first approached them with the idea of utilizing an Indian language for secure communications. The fact that they directed him to the Marine Corps may indicate that they, too, were conscious of the need to develop some system of secure communications that would enable their ground forces to coordinate better with naval support.

Holcomb accepted the recommendation that thirty Navajos be enlisted. However, he did not agree that they be placed in Class V designation. Since there were no restrictions within the Marine Corps about Native Americans serving in the regular ranks, and considering that he was faced with the necessity of building up troops and meeting quotas, if the idea did not work, then these thirty men easily filled quota positions. It is not known specifically what Holcomb believed about Native Americans, but his feelings toward Blacks and other minorities were well known. He did not have any problem in voicing his opinions, both publically and in the company of other officers. For example, in response to Executive Order 8802 that banned discrimination in employment practices in the defense industry, Holcomb responded, "If it were a question of having a Marine Corps of 5,000 whites or 250,000 Negroes, I would rather have the whites."⁷⁰

These similar patterns of white hegemony permeated the Marine Corps and reflected the larger cultural racial hierarchy of American society in general. The Marine Corps' exclusivity was not based solely on its claim as an elite fighting force, but to a large degree on white privileged superiority. According to Heather Pace Marshall, a

⁶⁹ Ibid, 93.

⁷⁰ Melton A. McLaurin, *The Marines of Montford Point: America's First Black Marines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 6.

Marine Corps historian, “the Southern upbringing of 40 percent of all Marine officers in the 1920s exacerbated the feelings of racial superiority that permeated the Corps throughout the first half of the twentieth century.”⁷¹

Although the Marine Corps resisted the enlistment of Blacks, it showed no trepidation about Native Americans serving in their ranks. In fact, throughout U.S. military history, Indians were viewed as stalwart warriors with almost superhuman fighting abilities. Western constructions of what defined Native masculinity were laden with stereotypes of bloodthirsty savagery and wildness. These expanded into perceived abilities of extreme physical prowess, stamina, and fearlessness. In *World War II and the American Indian*, Townsend attests that both the Marine Corps and the Army truly believed that Native Americans possessed these traits and actively sought them out to perform special and often dangerous assignments that called for attributes that Indian were perceived to possess.⁷²

Whether these white notions of Native masculinity influenced the Marine Corps is not known, but upon Commandant Holcomb’s decision to recruit a pilot group of Navajos, Lieutenant Colonel Woodworth sent a letter to Fred H. Daiker, the acting chief of Welfare in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, who had been one of the officials present at the meeting on March 25. He informed Daiker that thirty Navajos would be recruited “for general duty and special assignment to Amphibious Corps, Pacific Fleet.”⁷³ Further, in response to the discussions of whether Navajos should receive special treatment,

⁷¹ David J Ulbrich, *Preparing For Victory: Thomas Holcomb and the Making of the Modern Marine Corps, 1936-1943* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2011), 121. Heather Pace Marshall, “Crucible of Colonial Service: The Warrior Brotherhood and the Mythos of the Modern Marine Corps, 1898-1934,” M.A. thesis, University of Hawaii, 2003.

⁷² Kenneth William Townsend, *World War II and the American Indian* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 135-136.

⁷³ Woodworth to Daiker, Acting Chief of Welfare, Bureau of Indian Affairs 6 April 1942, RG 127, Entry 18A, Box 600, Folder 13, National Archives at College Park.

Woodworth informed Daiker, “This Headquarters has decided that these men will be enlisted in the same way that any other American boy joining the Marine Corps would and will therefore, take the recruit training at the recruit training center, San Diego, California.”⁷⁴

The idea to utilize Native American languages for combat communication by the U.S. military was not a new one. The U.S. Army had successfully utilized several tribes in World War I. For the Marine Corps, however, the idea was a novel concept, and when Philip Johnston presented his proposal in February of 1942 to utilize Navajos as communicators, both General Clayton B. Vogel, commander of the Fleet Marine Force in California, and the Commandant Thomas Holcomb of the Marine Corps recognized its potential. They were also acutely aware of the need to develop some form of secure communication between ground forces and Naval support ships. Holcomb’s personal leadership and openness to innovative ideas, too, played a key role in moving the pilot project forward. It was now just a matter of time to see if it would bear fruit.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Chapter Two: The Recruitment

*And I had a talk with them. There were about three of them. And then they asked me all kinds of questions. Asked me how old I was. I said twenty-nine. And here they're looking (for) boys. Eighteen, nineteen, and twenty. He said I was rather old, but we'll see what we can do.*⁷⁵

Eugene Crawford

It took just three days following the official recruitment orders for Commandant Holcomb to send a detailed memorandum to the officer-in-charge of the Western Recruiting Division in San Francisco. Dated 6 April 1942, it outlined several points regarding the enlistment of the pilot group. First, Navajo recruits should meet the regular requirements of the Marine Corps, “physical and otherwise,” and, in addition, “must have sufficient knowledge of [E]nglish and the Navaho dialect to intelligently transmit combat messages in Navaho.” Second, the progress of these recruits to develop a viable code would help to “ascertain the value of such service,” and if successful, additional Navajos would be recruited. If these recruits were unable to develop a feasible code in their language, they would, according to the commandant’s orders, serve as general duty Marines.⁷⁶

The Western Recruiting Division wasted no time in the implementation of orders. Frank Shannon, a captain at the time, and the officer in charge of Marine Corps recruiting in Phoenix, Arizona, received his instructions on 13 April to travel to Window Rock,

⁷⁵ Eugene Crawford, interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, 1990-1992.

⁷⁶ Commandant to Officer in Charge, Western Recruiting Division, memorandum, 6 April 1942, RG127, Entry 18A, Box 600, Folder 13, National Archives at College Park.

Arizona on the Navajo reservation for temporary recruiting duty. He was to confer with E. R. Fryer, the general superintendent, and with “tribal leaders of the Navaho Indians.”⁷⁷

It is probable that the Marine Corps considered Major Shannon an appropriate choice for the Navajo recruitment. In civilian life, Shannon had worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs and was affiliated with several Indian schools in the Southwest. His first federal position was the director of agriculture at the Albuquerque Indian School in 1929. He also attended the University of New Mexico as a part-time graduate student, studying Educational Administration and Psychology. In 1933, he was transferred to Phoenix Indian School, where he continued as director of agriculture. For a brief period he also served as principal, initially on the Mescalero Apache Reservation, and later, on the Pima Reservation. Originally from Washington, Shannon had attended Washington State College, where he graduated in 1917 with a Bachelor’s degree in Agriculture and Animal Husbandry. He had a wife and two children. Both his wife and his daughter suffered from tuberculosis, and throughout the 1940s they were in and out of hospitals and tubercular sanitariums.⁷⁸

Shannon’s military career had begun at Washington State College. He participated in the Reserve Officer Training Corps beginning in 1914, and by 1917, he was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps Reserves. By 1940, he had attained the rank of major, and in January 1942, with the outbreak of war in the Pacific, he was assigned to active duty as the officer in charge of the Marine Corps Recruiting Station in Phoenix, Arizona.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Shannon, Orders to Temporary Duty, 13 April 1942, official military personnel file, National Archives at St Louis.

⁷⁸ Frank L. Shannon, official federal civilian personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

His first recruitment visit to the Navajo reservation was during April 20-24. As his orders stipulated, Shannon likely met with Superintendent Fryer, but whether he formally met with the tribal council, or with any of its members individually is not known.⁸⁰ Shannon's primary concern, of course, was the recruitment of thirty male Navajos, and as a former teacher and administrator in a number of federal Indian boarding schools, Shannon likely sought potential candidates at some of these facilities.

In 1942, there were several federal boarding schools operating on the reservation. Most of these offered education up to the sixth or eighth grades, with only a handful that included what would be considered upper-level high school curricula. Just outside the reservation, along its southern boundary in New Mexico, was Wingate Industrial School, the newest school in the area that served mostly Navajos, but other tribes as well. Navajo students also attended other federal boarding schools farther off the reservation in places like Phoenix, Arizona; Albuquerque and Santa Fe, New Mexico; and Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas, among others.

Those schools located on the reservation were scattered across a twenty-four thousand square mile landscape with topography that varied from low sandy desert to pine studded mountain passes. Virtually no roads ran through the interior of the reservation with the exception of a few poorly graded ones and several wagon tracks. The only paved roads in the 1940s skirted the edges of the reservation. U.S. Highway 66 cut along the southern boundary through Arizona and New Mexico, while to the east, a paved road extended from Gallup to Farmington, New Mexico. On the western edge of the

⁸⁰ Shannon, Orders to Temporary Duty, 13 April 1942, official military personnel file, National Archives at St Louis.

reservation another road ran north from Flagstaff toward the Utah border.⁸¹ Weather, too, was unpredictable particularly in the early spring. Rain showers, or even a late snowstorm, were not uncommon. Either could leave roads impassible, paved or not, muddy or snow covered, sometimes for days.

There were also a few mission schools on or close to the Navajo Reservation. Farmington, New Mexico, was the site of Navajo Methodist Mission School. High school level courses were added there in 1935 and its first graduating class was in 1939. A Presbyterian mission school located in the interior of the reservation in Ganado, Arizona, added a high school curriculum in 1930. The Catholics had founded St. Michaels Indian School near Window Rock, Arizona, in 1902, and Rehoboth Mission School, established in 1903 by the Dutch Reformed Church, was located just off the reservation east of Gallup, New Mexico. The schools did not open high schools until 1946.⁸²

In the 1930s and early 1940s, these boarding schools were one of the few outside influences that penetrated Navajo country. Although they had far reaching and devastating effects on the Navajos, and other tribes, in many ways, they also helped shape the Navajos for the major changes that World War II brought to the people and the reservation. For nearly three quarters of a century, between 1868 and the return of the Navajos from their incarceration at Bosque Redondo to the early 1940s, Navajo country remained somewhat sheltered and removed from outside intrusions. People were scattered across remote regions in Navajo country and, for the most part, were left to live their lives in a manner followed for generations. The new experiences that World War II brought to the people, such as military service and jobs off the reservation, marked a

⁸¹ Robert W. Young, comp., *The Navajo Yearbook, Report No. viii, 1951-1961; A Decade of Progress* (Window Rock, AZ: Navajo Agency, 1961),133.

⁸² *Ibid*, 48-49.

major shift in all aspects of their daily lives and served as a turning point in Navajo Reservation economy and exposure to world influences.⁸³

Considering the variety of schools operating on or near the Navajo Reservation, Major Shannon focused his recruitment efforts at three federal boarding schools located in Shiprock, New Mexico, on the northern edge of the reservation; Tuba City, Arizona on the far western boundary north of Flagstaff; and Wingate Industrial School just east of Gallup, New Mexico, along U.S. Highway 66.⁸⁴

Cozy Stanly Brown, originally from Chinle, Arizona, was a twelfth-grade student at the federal Indian school in Shiprock, New Mexico, when Pearl Harbor was bombed.⁸⁵ He had attended boarding school in Shiprock throughout his entire years of education. He played basketball, football, and softball. He also had a job at the school teaching general agricultural topics.⁸⁶ In an interview published in 1977, Brown shared his memories:

When I reached the 12th grade and it was close to my graduation, I heard that the Japanese and the United States had gotten into a war. It was December 7, 1941. At that time I was old enough to qualify for the military service; so I thought about it. As our parents used to say, “You have to think about things before you get into them.”

Later, it was announced that some Navajos would be needed to go into training. They told us that we would learn some things pertaining to the war. They gave us two weeks to think about it. I did my own thinking, and I didn’t inquire of my parents; and I decided to go ahead and enter the service.

⁸³ For more information on the life and history of the Navajo people in the first half of the twentieth century, see Peter Iverson, *Diné: A History of the Navajos* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2002). For personal life accounts of individuals during these decades, see Robert W. Young and William Morgan, *Navajo Historical Selections* (Phoenix: Phoenix Indian School Print Shop, 1954); Broderick Johnson, ed., *Stories of Traditional Navajo Life and Culture* (Tsaile: Navajo Community College Press, 1977); and the biographical works by Charlotte J. Frisbie, ed., *Navajo Blessingway Singer: The Autobiography of Frank Mitchell, 1881-1967* (Tucson: University of Arizona press, 1978) and *Tall Woman: The Life Story of Rose Mitchell; A Navajo Woman, c.1874-1977* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001).

⁸⁴ This assertion is based on information analyzed from two sources, oral history interviews with members of the original group who were recruited directly out of certain boarding schools, and data collected and compiled from official military personnel files for all “first twenty-nine” original Navajo Code Talkers.

⁸⁵ Broderick Johnson, ed., *Navajos and World War II* (Tsaile: Navajo Community College, 1977), 53.

⁸⁶ Cozy Stanley Brown, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

Six of us signed up for the training. I can't recall all of the men. I do remember Raymond Nakai and former Judge William Dean Wilson, because we were in the same class at school.

They told us to go home for a week which we did; and we were told to return to Window Rock, Arizona, for a physical examination. Navy doctors examined us, and we were physically all right. Raymond, who later became our Tribal Chairman for some years, did not qualify for the service at that time because he had high blood pressure. However, he went with the Navy later.⁸⁷

William Dean Wilson⁸⁸ who, following the war would become a judge, had been Brown's classmate. He remembered in a separate interview a decade later that there were about three, and possibly four recruiters who had visited their school in Shiprock. Several students, he recalled, were initially interested, but only six or seven, including him, were finally accepted by the Marine Corps.⁸⁹

In the spring of 1942, Wilson was just shy of sixteen years of age. He was a self-proclaimed rabble-rouser, full of antics that he claimed often landed him in trouble. He remembered that a female teacher had "volunteered" him so as "not to put up with my nonsense."⁹⁰ Because Wilson was underage, he needed his parent's consent, which they did not grant, but he managed to get into the Marine Corps anyway. He tells how he did it:

When the recruiters were out to lunch that last day we're just mingling around and this one office they used for their office. They had a stack of brown envelopes at this one corner of the desk. Way over on the other side there was another envelope and on it, it had a little tag. Here it was mine. It so happened I was kind of looking around in there and on it. It says "Parents won't consent." So I looked around and slipped that thing off and I put it under the big stack. That's how I got in. I was only fifteen

⁸⁷ Broderick Johnson, ed., *Navajos and World War II* (Tsaile: Navajo Community College, 1977), 53, 54. Raymond Nakai did not become a Navajo Code Talker. He later served in the United States Navy.

⁸⁸ William Dean Yazzie formally changed his name to William Dean Wilson in 1968. His official military personnel file lists him a Bill Dene Yazzie during World War II. Growing up, I knew him as Dean Wilson.

⁸⁹ Dean Wilson, interview by Zonnie Gorman, April 21, 1990, Oral History Collection, University of Arizona library.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

years old and I guess that's the reason the parents, they wanted the parent to consent.⁹¹

Wilson also remembered that there were several students from the Shiprock boarding school who were transported several times to the Fort Defiance hospital for their physical examinations.⁹² Like Brown, he remembered that some of his classmates did not pass their military physicals. One student, he remembered, had a defective eardrum and another had "something wrong with his eyes."⁹³ It is likely the boy suffered from trachoma, an eye malady that impaired vision and often led to blindness. Tuberculosis and trachoma, respectively, were the top two diseases that plagued the Navajo people in the first half of the twentieth century. According to historian Robert A. Trennert, the lingering effect of trachoma was a major obstacle to enlistment for young men on the reservation who attempted to join the military during World War II.⁹⁴ For Wilson, he was relieved when he heard his name among those who had been accepted: "They had a general session in the auditorium and they called our names. We all lined up in front there and they tell the students that we were the ones going. I don't know how many of us from there, about six or seven."⁹⁵

Alfred Leonard was one of those students. He was nineteen years old and was in the ninth grade at Shiprock where he played football and basketball. He was originally from Lukachukai, Arizona.⁹⁶ Another nineteen-year-old student at Shiprock was Charlie

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Robert A. Trennert, *White Man's Medicine: Government Doctors and the Navajo, 1863-1955* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 202.

⁹⁵ Dean Wilson, interview by Zonnie Gorman, April 21, 1990, Oral History Collection, University of Arizona library.

⁹⁶ Alfred Leonard, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

Y. Begay. He was originally from Tocito, New Mexico. He played football and boxed.⁹⁷ John Chee was also nineteen years old and originally from Tocito. He was in his second year of high school when he was recruited. He played football, baseball, softball, and basketball, and he also boxed. Originally from Fruitland, New Mexico, Lloyd Oliver, who was nineteen years of age, played football, and was in his second year of high school at Shiprock.⁹⁸ Sam Hosteeneg Begay had just begun his high school curriculum at Shiprock when he enlisted. His academic emphasis was drafting. He was an all-round athlete, played football, baseball, softball, basketball, tennis, and track, and also boxed. He was from the community of Toadlena, New Mexico. He was nineteen years old.⁹⁹

Major Shannon and his team also visited and recruited several students from the federal boarding school at Tuba City, Arizona. Chester Nez, from Chichiltah, New Mexico, was nineteen years old and was attending school in Tuba City. His athletic accomplishments included football, basketball, boxing, and swimming.¹⁰⁰ Years later, he recalled that out of five young men who had applied, only three were accepted: Roy Begay, Allen Dale June, and himself.¹⁰¹ Roy Begay was originally from Chinle, Arizona; he was eighteen years old, and played basketball at the Tuba City school. He had experience as a carpenter and helped his father with odd jobs like furniture painting.¹⁰² Allen Dale June, on the other hand, was on the varsity football team, hunted, and played the clarinet. He was originally from Kaibito, Arizona, and had attended the boarding school at Tuba City since grammar school.¹⁰³

⁹⁷ Charlie Y. Begay, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

⁹⁸ Lloyd Oliver, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

⁹⁹ Samuel Hosteeneg Begay, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

¹⁰⁰ Chester Nez, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

¹⁰¹ Chester Nez with Judith Schiess Avila, *Code Talker*, (New York: Berkley Caliber, 2011) 88-89.

¹⁰² Roy L. Begay, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

¹⁰³ Allen Dale June, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

Chester Nez remembered three students, but there was an instructor at Tuba City who also joined. John Benally taught students silversmithing, metal work, and woodwork. Benally remembered that there had been an announcement among the government employees: “I was working for the Bureau of Indian Affairs at that time, the education department, and the announcement was made that they needed some Navajos to go into special training. At the time I didn’t know exactly what the special training was, but of course later on when we were recruited, we were notified of this special program.”¹⁰⁴

Benally was twenty-five years old, married, and had a toddler son in 1942. He had attended the Santa Fe Indian School for both his elementary and high school education and graduated in 1937. He had been an all-round athlete. He played baseball, football, basketball, and track; he engaged in boxing, wrestling, swimming, and even golf. He participated in rodeos, and he also broke horses.¹⁰⁵

Wingate Industrial School was the last institution that Major Shannon and his team visited. Four students were recruited. Frank Denny Pete was twenty-two years old and was finishing the tenth grade in May of 1942. He liked to play basketball and softball and he was studying physics, and typing, and worked in the bakery when he quit school to join the Marine Corps.¹⁰⁶ Johnny Ray Manuelito, originally from Sheep Springs, New Mexico, was twenty years old and in his senior year at Wingate. He had participated in

¹⁰⁴ John Benally, interview by Benis M. Frank, Oral History Transcript, Marine Corps Navajo Code Talkers, History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, Washington, D.C., 1976, July 9-10, 1971 (120,121).

¹⁰⁵ John Ashi Benally, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

¹⁰⁶ Frank Denny Pete, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

track, baseball, football, basketball, softball, wrestling, and swimming. His primary focus was agricultural studies.¹⁰⁷

Another student from Wingate was Harry Tsosie, originally from Rough Rock, Arizona. He was nineteen years old and had just started his first year of high school curriculum. He played football and basketball. He was a silversmith and also worked as a carpenter's assistant while at Wingate.¹⁰⁸ James Dixon was eighteen years old. Originally from Toadlena, New Mexico, he was the oldest of four children (two boys and two girls). His mother had been widowed in the late 1930s. All four of her children had attended school.¹⁰⁹

Major Shannon and his team of recruiters from Phoenix, Arizona, were not the only Marines ordered to the Navajo reservation in support of this project. A mobile recruit unit, new in the spring of 1942, was sent as well. First Sergeant Frank Shinn, who was stationed in San Francisco, California, at the Marine Corps Western Recruiting Division, was placed in charge of one of these units. When I later met Shinn, he lived in Tucson, Arizona, with his wife Shirley. Originally from South Dakota, Shinn was born in 1909 in a sod house and was the son of an itinerant minister for the Methodist Mission Society. With never-enough money in his pocket to support his family as a circuit riding minister, Shinn's father farmed on the side to keep his family alive, and to keep food on the table, the elder Shinn moved his family frequently. Consequently, young Frank spent parts of his childhood years in various states including Arkansas, Nebraska, Colorado,

¹⁰⁷ Johnny Ray Manuelito, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

¹⁰⁸ Harry Tsosie, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

¹⁰⁹ James Dixon, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis. The data card located in each man's official military personnel file is missing for James Dixon. One side of this card was filled out personally by each recruit and included information pertaining to their education, work experience, and other personal data. Information about his residence that was found elsewhere in his file indicates that he was likely a student at Wingate Industrial School and had been there for two years previous to his enlistment.

and Wyoming. His father died when Shinn was eleven years old. His mother remarried when he was twelve, and by fifteen, Shinn had struck out on his own. In 1929, at age twenty, he joined the Marine Corps.¹¹⁰

Shinn had served with the Fourth Marines in Shang-Hai, China, and by the time he was ordered to the Navajo reservation in 1942, he had been on recruiting duty for four years. Previously, he recruited out of Denver, Colorado, and then Seattle, Washington, but by April of 1942, he worked directly out of the Western Recruiting Division headquarters in San Francisco, California. His recruiting duty was supposed to end in 1939, but with the outbreak of war in Europe, the commandant of the Marine Corps froze all recruiters in place. Shinn remembered:

I was selected to be First Sergeant on (the) first day of December 1941 but I couldn't be promoted because there was no vacancies for First Sergeants on recruiting duties. So when the Japanese hit Pearl Harbor on December 7th I was frozen again on recruiting duty as a recruiting sergeant. And I could not get the promotion that was due me. So finally in the spring of '42 they instituted a program of sending a traveling recruiting unit out from San Francisco for a special recruiting duty and I was selected as NCO in charge which gave me my rank of First Sergeant. And our first assignment was to come to the Navajo Reservation...¹¹¹

Shinn's mobile recruiting unit consisted of a truck and a thirty-two foot trailer equipped with a sound system.¹¹² Sergeant Paul C. Anderson was assigned as the driver. Shinn and Anderson knew one another from their days in the Fourth Marines in Shang-Hai. Anderson had been discharged and had gone into the Reserves. He had been working as a driver for the Shell Oil Company when World War II broke out, so he was

¹¹⁰ Frank Shinn, interview by Zonnie Gorman, November 16, 1989, Oral History Collection, University of Arizona library.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Frank Shinn, interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

assigned to the mobile recruiting unit to drive the truck.¹¹³ The two men were assigned to travel around the states under the jurisdiction of the Western Recruiting Division. The Navajo reservation was their first assignment.

According to Shinn, they first went to Phoenix, Arizona, where they reported to the regional recruiting station.¹¹⁴ The officer in charge, of course, was Major Frank Shannon. Shinn and Anderson had some extra time before they were due to report on the Navajo Reservation, located in the far northeastern region of the state. Shinn recalled that the regional recruitment office decided to send them on a “shake down” cruise: “We took a little trip down to Douglas and down through Tombstone and around there and recruited a couple of Apaches in Tombstone, I remember. We visited Fort Huachuca and this was just to make sure that all of our gear was working properly, you know, because we had all new equipment.”¹¹⁵

It was around the third week in April when Shinn and Anderson arrived in Fort Defiance, Arizona, on the Navajo Reservation. The men chose to set up their recruitment trailer in a field across from the new hospital. Built a few years earlier in 1939, the Navajo Medical Center was the largest facility on the massive reservation. It served as both a general hospital and a tuberculosis sanatorium offering the largest and most specialized diagnostic facility on the reservation.¹¹⁶ Shinn was confident that potential candidates would be plentiful, and that the tactics he used to stir a young man’s patriotism would work.

¹¹³ Frank Shinn, interview by Zonnie Gorman, November 16, 1989, Oral History Collection, University of Arizona library.

¹¹⁴ Frank Shinn, interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ John Adair, et al., *The People’s Health: Medicine and Anthropology in a Navajo Community* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 24.

Utilizing the sound system, Shinn and Anderson played Souza marches over the loud speakers, which they positioned up on top of the trailer. From their earlier experience during the “shake down” in southern Arizona, Shinn and Anderson fully expected this stirring music to draw a crowd:

I thought from my previous recruiting experiences that we undoubtedly would have a large number of applicants. But the first day nobody came in. Several Navajos walked by and they listened to the martial music we were playing, “Semper Fidelis” and “Under the Double Eagle” and so forth. And...I thought, “There’s something wrong here!”... because they’d walk by, and they’d look at us and we were in our dress blues and I knew the uniforms attracted them, you know...and the music attracted them. But they wouldn’t stop and ask any questions or talk to us!¹¹⁷

A couple of days passed and no one would give the Marine recruiters more than a passing glance. Baffled by this, Shinn decided to ask some questions. Trudging across the field and up a small rise just south of the hospital to the local trading post, Shinn bought himself a pack of cigarettes. He said he struck up a conversation with the young Navajo man behind the counter:

And I asked him, “Why don’t the Navajos come into the Marine Corps? Why don’t they come in and apply for enlistment?” And he said, “Well, they have the word from the Tribal Council that they are not to talk to any white man coming on to the reservation until and unless he has been approved by the Tribal Council. And the reason for this is they have been cheated so often in the past by white men who came onto the reservation and lie to the people.” So I said, “Well, who’s head of the Tribal Council? And he said, “His name is Chee Dodge.” And I said, “Where do I find him?” He said, “Well, I can take you out to the house. I can’t take you out to the house this afternoon, but I can take you out to the house tomorrow afternoon. And he said, “He’s my father.”¹¹⁸

Accounts of the elder Dodge’s personality characterize him as a charismatic, determined man with superb negotiation skills. These attributes assisted Chee in securing

¹¹⁷ Frank Shinn, interview by Zonnie Gorman, November 16, 1989, Oral History Collection, University of Arizona library.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

a place in early Navajo political history. He served as chairman of the first Navajo Tribal Council between 1923 and 1928.¹¹⁹ Even when not in office, Chee was considered a leader and continued to exert influence on Navajo politics. When the Marine Corps recruiters arrived in late April 1942, Chee, then in his early eighties, had just been re-elected chairman.¹²⁰

The child of a Navajo mother and most likely a Mexican father, as a young boy Dodge had been orphaned early. According to family history, he befriended an elderly Navajo man and his granddaughter who were captured and taken on the Navajo Long Walk. While at Bosque Redondo, the teenage Dodge quickly picked up the English language and was utilized as an interpreter at the fort.¹²¹ With the signing of the treaty in 1868, and the Navajos' return to their traditional homelands in the Four Corners region of the Southwest, Dodge continued his work as an interpreter for William Army, the Fort Defiance agency superintendent. Army, who believed that Chee Dodge was the illegitimate son of the earlier agent Henry Dodge, took it upon himself to care for the boy. He enrolled Dodge in the school at Fort Defiance where he advanced his English-language proficiency. By 1882, Chee Dodge was an official interpreter for the agency.¹²²

Whether it was Tom Dodge or another relative whom Shinn encountered that day in the trading post may never be known, but the seasoned Marine recruiter heeded the man's council. The next afternoon, according to Shinn, the young man took him out to Chee Dodge's home. Shinn recalled:

¹¹⁹ David E. Wilkins, *The Navajo Political Experience* (Tsaile, AZ: Dine College Press, 1999), 221.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹²¹ Raymond Friday Locke, *The Book of the Navajo*, 5th ed. (Los Angeles: Mankind Publishing Company, 1992), 396.

¹²² Peter Iverson, *Dine: A History of the Navajo* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 88.

We got out there late in the afternoon and Chee Dodge acted as though he couldn't understand English, and had his son doing all the translating for us. Once he found out we weren't recruiting Navajos to act as suicide squads or cannon fodder or something like that. Then he found out that the Navajo communicators would be serving one with a platoon leader, another one with a Company Commander, another one with Battalion Commander, and so on. In other words, I told him the whole story of how these Code Talkers would operate. I didn't tell all the Navajos, all the applicants that, although I was authorized to do so. The project itself was classified as top secret....But once Chee Dodge understood what the program was and what we were doing, why he approved of it wholeheartedly and then he started at the same time...he started speaking English to me! And his English was good or better than mine!¹²³

Dodge promised Shinn that he would send out word across the Navajo Reservation about their recruitment efforts. The means of rapid communication on the reservation in 1942 was via short wave radio. When word needed to be transmitted to the general populous, it would be sent out in this fashion. Trading posts scattered throughout the reservation, many in remote regions, passed on messages to their clientele. Then, it would pass on by word of mouth to outlying areas. Chee Dodge authorized that word be sent out that the Marine Corps recruiters were in Fort Defiance looking for Navajo volunteers for a special duty.

I got back kind of late and was trying to sleep in the next morning, and just at the crack of dawn, I woke up and could hear this noise as though there were a multitude of people surrounding me. And I could hear the murmuring of their talk. And so I opened the door and stuck my head out and the baseball diamond was filled with Navajos. They were moving around and many of them had their weapons. They had brought their shotguns and their old .22 rifles and things like that. And many of them were too old, but they were willing to go.¹²⁴

Shinn and Anderson hastily dressed and prepared to accept applicants. As they began the interview process, men returned to the field and passed the word that they were

¹²³ Frank Shinn, interview by Zonnie Gorman, November 16, 1989, Oral History Collection, University of Arizona library.

¹²⁴ Frank Shinn, interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

only looking for men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-two. They would not take anyone younger or older. As the word spread through the crowd people began to disperse. Many of the older men, and those who were too young, left.

My father was not standing in that crowd outside Shinn's trailer that morning, but he arrived later. As a man well over the accepted age, he either ignored the talk, or perhaps because of it, planned his strategy. My father, plain and simple, lied. He was born in 1907 in a small stone house along what is known today as the "old Nazlini road" outside Chinle, Arizona. Unlike many Navajos of the time, he knew his birth date because his mother recorded the family births and deaths in her bible. Shinn stated:

I remember your dad because he was quite a remarkable individual, you know. He came in with two other Navajos, I think about the second or third day that I was actually getting people to come in. Why he shows up and I looked at him and I thought, "Well, he's about my age." And the age limit was thirty-two, and I was thirty-three, and I thought, "Well, he's too old. He's just come in with these two guys, probably his nephews to see them go into the service, you know. So he just stood there and I gave the applications to the other two guys and they started to sit down and started to fill them out, and he says, "How about me?" And I said, "Well, I said, "you know the age limit is thirty-two." "Oh yes," he said. "I'm under that." And so I said, "You have to be unmarried and have no children." "Oh yes," he said. "I qualify there."...and so I gave him an application. He filled it out and I still thought he was probably pretty close to my age, but you couldn't get any birth certificates on the Navajo reservation. I didn't even attempt that, which would be normal procedure if I were operating in Denver or Phoenix, or some place like that. So I took a good look at him and he was in good health and his eyesight was good, and he was a handsome young man, and I thought, "Well, he'll make out okay. He'll make it okay regardless of what his age is." And so I went ahead and accepted him, sent him on in.¹²⁵

My father was the oldest of the enlistees, and at the time, he was married to a woman named Adelle. Their marriage was a rocky one, but they had a son, Rudolph Carl Gorman, or little Rudy, as most called him. They lived in Chinle, Arizona, where my

¹²⁵ Ibid.

father was originally from. Jobs, however, were difficult to find on the reservation, particularly during the lean years of the Depression, and my father had to be away from home often. He began working for the Soil Conservation Service in 1934, first in construction and clerical positions in Piñon, Arizona, and then as a Field Checker with the Works Progress Administration. In this position, he served as an interpreter. By 1936 he was listed as an under clerk. Less than a year before he volunteered for service in the Marine Corps, he was transferred to the position of range rider and was stationed in Kaibito, Arizona.¹²⁶ The Range Riders were employees of the very unpopular U.S. government program, the Navajo Stock Reduction. Many of them were not Navajos, but former white cowboys from states east of Navajo country affected by the dust bowl.¹²⁷

The Stock Reduction was an emotionally devastating, economically destructive program forced on the Navajo people by the U.S. Government in an attempt to rectify soil erosion caused by drought and severely overgrazed lands. First initiated in 1933 on a voluntary basis, by 1937 the reservation had been divided into eighteen land-management districts, meticulously analyzed for each district's grazing capacity, and those grazers who did not comply with the stringent regulations to reduce their stock were jailed.¹²⁸ The large-scale federal intrusion caused mass confusion as Navajos attempted to understand the myriad bits of scientific data the government officials used to explain a bewildering program. Moreover, with the new mandatory regulations, the Navajo people could do little else but helplessly watch their beloved herds slaughtered or sold off reservation to white ranchers. In 1930, on the eve of the Stock Reduction program, the

¹²⁶ Carl N. Gorman, official federal civilian file, National Archives at St. Louis.

¹²⁷ Donald L. Parman, *The Navajos and the New Deal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 114.

¹²⁸ Roessel, Ruth and Broderick Johnson, eds. *Navajo Livestock Reduction: A National Disgrace* (Tsaile, AZ: Navajo Community College Press, 1972), 222.

bureau census reported 1,111,589 animals. By 1952, when the program was officially ended, the Navajos had about thirty-six percent of their total stock counted in 1930.¹²⁹

With the start of the war, the U.S. government cut back its employees with the Stock Reduction and laid off many Navajos, including my father. Now without a job, estranged from his wife, and looking for something to do, my father, at age thirty-four, enlisted in the marines.

Besides my father, there were several other older men who were either married, working, or both. Eugene Crawford was twenty-nine years old in 1942. He was married to Bertha Crawford, and they had a young son, Eugene, Jr. Eugene, Sr., too, had completed high school and graduated from Albuquerque Indian School in 1933. He then attended the University of Arizona and, in 1935, earned a degree in range management.¹³⁰ In his interview, he remembered that he happened to be in Window Rock, Arizona, on some business when he heard about Marine recruiters looking for Navajos to do a special project. This was something new and intriguing, Eugene admitted, and he was curious. When the recruiters found out he was married, they informed him he needed to get a waiver signed by his wife. Bertha was not pleased about him going into the Marine Corps, and she initially refused to sign. Eventually she agreed, and he returned to Window Rock with his waiver in hand. Crawford claimed in his interview that he was the first of the original Code Talkers to sign up.¹³¹

Oscar B. Ilthma, according to his official military personnel file, was thirty-two years old when he enlisted. Originally from Lupton, Arizona, he had graduated from Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas, in 1932. As a student he was an all-round athlete,

¹²⁹ Ibid, 221-222.

¹³⁰ Eugene Crawford, Sr., Obituary, *The Independent*, Gallup, NM, November 13, 1993, p3.

¹³¹ Eugene Crawford, interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

playing football, baseball, and basketball. He had also been in the school band and played the clarinet and saxophone. At the time of his enlistment, he was working as a carpenter in Fort Defiance, Arizona. He was married to Helen who had two sons, Timothy Brown, eleven, and Robert Brown, thirteen; Ilthma raised these boys as his own.¹³²

John Brown, Jr., on the other hand, was a recent graduate who, as he fondly remembered, had enjoyed school. He had first attended the federal school in Chinle, Arizona, and upon completion of the seventh grade, he transferred to Albuquerque Indian School to finish his education. He graduated in 1941, whereupon he returned home. At the age of nineteen, he took one of the few jobs that he could find on the reservation - a janitorial position at the new hospital in Fort Defiance.¹³³ His workload entailed more than just pushing a broom, however. He “carried meals to patients, kept rooms clean and acted as a runner for doctors in emergencies.”¹³⁴ The Navajo Medical Center in Fort Defiance was built by the federal government in 1939 and was the largest health facility on the Navajo Reservation.¹³⁵ Prior to its opening, a few small mission-run hospitals operated around the reservation; the most notable was Sage Memorial Hospital located in Ganado on the grounds of the Presbyterian Church.

Brown remembered that he heard about the Marine recruiters while he was working at the hospital. They were “looking particularly for Navajo Indians who had graduated from high school.”¹³⁶ He remembered meeting and talking to the recruiter, who joked with him and a group of other young Navajos “that they would see the world and

¹³² Oscar B. Ilthma, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

¹³³ John Brown, Jr., interview by Zonnie Gorman, August 6, 1991, Oral History Collection, University of Arizona library.

¹³⁴ John Brown, Jr., official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

¹³⁵ Robert W. Young, compiled by, *The Navajo Yearbook, Report No. viii 1951-1961 A Decade of Progress* (Window Rock, AZ: Navajo Agency, 1961), 89.

¹³⁶ John Brown, Jr., interview by Zonnie Gorman, August 6, 1991, Oral History Collection, University of Arizona library.

ride on a ship, see foreign countries, and especially get to meet girls.”¹³⁷ Brown said that he took a few days to consider whether he wanted to enlist, but then, remembering what the recruiter had said, he decided to join up.

Another interested candidate was David Curley. In 1942, he was twenty-four years old and worked in Window Rock, Arizona, as a finger printer and clerk for the Navajo police force. He had married two years earlier. He, too, was a graduate of Albuquerque Indian School. Like Ilthma, he played the saxophone.¹³⁸

Benjamin Cleveland, who was originally from the Fort Defiance area, was seventeen years old, and in 1942, he was working as an assistant cook at the hospital in Fort Defiance, where he “helped prepare meals for hospital patients, cooked vegetables, plain foods, and meats.” He also “baked pies, bread, and cakes.”¹³⁹ The previous year he had completed the eighth grade at the federal boarding school in Fort Defiance. He was very athletic and also played the harmonica.¹⁴⁰

Wilsie Bitsie who claimed that he was twenty, was doing various jobs around the Window Rock area. At the time the recruiters arrived, he was an assistant with the registration process for the Selective Service. A friend of his, a teacher at Shiprock, told him about the recruitment and thought that he would be a good candidate since he spoke Navajo and English. He remembered: “So I came down and went to the administration building in Window Rock. From Window Rock they sent me to Fort Defiance and I just signed up at Fort Defiance for the first twenty-nine that they were to recruit for.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ David Curly, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

¹³⁹ Benjamin Herman Cleveland, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Wilsie Bitsie, interviewed by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions [1990-1992].

Jack Nez was from Canyon del Muerto, a part of the Canyon de Chelly complex. Located in the very heart of Navajo country, it is a profoundly sacred area to the Navajo people. In 1931, the canyons were placed under the National Park Service. Nez had attended the Fort Defiance federal boarding school and was completing the eighth grade when he enlisted in 1942. He was eighteen years old. He played a variety of sports including football, basketball, baseball, and boxing. He also worked as a general housepainter doing both interior and exterior work.¹⁴²

Before the enlistment, three volunteers, George Dennison, Balmer Slowtalker, and John Willie, Jr., had all worked for the Indian Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), created under the New Deal. In 1933, appropriations were designated for the Indian CCC program that would include seventy-two camps located on thirty-three Indian reservations. Out of forty-three Indian CCC camps in Arizona and New Mexico, twenty-five of these were on the Navajo reservation.¹⁴³

George Dennison was twenty-seven years old and married with four children when he enlisted. He worked as a truck driver for the Indian CCC for a number of years, “hauling building materials for government projects.”¹⁴⁴ He also had served as a Navajo policeman for a year. His hobbies were shooting rifles and pistols, painting and drawing, and training dogs to do tricks. He had no formal education.¹⁴⁵

Balmer Slowtalker, twenty-two years old and originally from Luepp, Arizona, also had been employed as a truck driver for the Indian CCC before he enlisted.¹⁴⁶ He

¹⁴² Jack Nez, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

¹⁴³ Donald L. Parman, *The Navajos and the New Deal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976) 32-33.

¹⁴⁴ George Dennison, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Balmer Slowtalker, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

had attended the Albuquerque Indian School for only two years, but while he was there he had participated in track, baseball, and basketball.¹⁴⁷

John Willie, Jr., from Shonto, Arizona, was twenty-two years old. He had attended the Indian school at Luepp and completed the eighth grade in 1937. He, too, had worked for the Indian CCC for three years prior to his enlistment.¹⁴⁸

Lowell Damon was from Fort Defiance, Arizona; he was nineteen years old. He had completed the eighth grade at the Indian school in Fort Defiance and then had attended one year of high school. He was working as a carpenter at the Indian school in Fort Defiance when he enlisted. As hobbies he enjoyed sign painting and woodcarving.¹⁴⁹

William McCabe was twenty-seven years old and was from Ganado, Arizona. He had graduated from Wingate Industrial School in 1935 and had stayed on there to study pre-engineering through the Soil Conservation Service. He then went to Santa Fe for school, and when he enlisted, he was attending Fort Lewis College in Colorado. According to an interview conducted in 1971, McCabe had registered for the draft, and had been called up several times, but because he was in school, he was able to defer his induction. However, when the opportunity arose to volunteer in the Marine Corps, McCabe took it.¹⁵⁰

Nelson Thompson was twenty-seven years old and single. He was an instructor in silversmithing, carpentry and plasterwork at the Indian school in Luepp, Arizona, which

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ John Willie, Jr., official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

¹⁴⁹ Lowell Smith Damon, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis. The data card is missing from Lowell Damon's official military personnel file. Elsewhere in his file, is information about his education, but it does not name the high school that had he attended for one year.

¹⁵⁰ William McCabe, interview by John D. Sylvester and Benjamin Lee, July 10, 1971 (American Indian History Project, Western History Center, University of Utah, Doris Duke Number 1171).

was also his home community. He had attended Albuquerque Indian School throughout his educational studies, played football and basketball, and graduated in 1937.¹⁵¹

All these Navajo recruits, after receiving a “once over” by the recruiters, were sent to the Navajo Medical Center in Fort Defiance, where they endured a complete physical examination. Bitsie recalled that they received their physicals in the early afternoon on the day they left for the Recruit Depot: “So it was about one-thirty in the afternoon when all of us gathered there and we were all marched over to the hospital there and given a physical examination by a couple of Navy doctors there who had been assigned down there for those medicals.”¹⁵²

John Brown, Jr., too, remembered his physical. He was afraid he would not be accepted: “I was praying to myself how embarrassing it would be if I failed my physical examination. So I prayed hard. I was kind of afraid that I might have a flat foot. But then everything came out all right. I passed all the physical examination and then we hung around there for, I think three or four days was all they gave us.”¹⁵³

Whether they left immediately following their physical examinations, or whether they had a few days in between, they all ruminated that it was not enough time to visit family members and say goodbye. Travel was difficult on the reservation in the 1940s, and those men who lived any distance away from Fort Defiance did not want to chance leaving, even if it was the last time they would see family. John Brown remembered:

They didn't give us much time. And here my parents was down in Chinle. I didn't even have time to notify them. In them days all the roads around the reservation was dirt roads, like that gravel. Transportation was hard to get. And, can't even hitch hike in them days, so... I didn't have a chance

¹⁵¹ Nelson Stewart Thompson, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

¹⁵² Wilsie Bitise, interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

¹⁵³ John Brown, Jr., interview by Zonnie Gorman, August 6, 1991, Oral History Collection, University of Arizona library.

to tell them, except I had some closely related people working around the area. I told them to notify my folks – my mother and my father - that I...I'm gonna join the Marines.¹⁵⁴

By the opening days of May 1942, twenty-nine Navajo volunteers had stepped forward for enlistment in the United States Marine Corps. These young men ranged in age from their mid-teens to their mid-thirties and originally came from several communities throughout the Navajo Reservation. The Marine Corps had targeted three federal Indian boarding schools with a large Navajo student population as areas to focus their recruitment efforts, and indeed, about a dozen young men, mostly students, but also a few who were employed as teachers, were recruited. The majority of volunteers, however, were high school graduates. Most of them were working in various federal government jobs, and several were married with children. With little time allotted to get their affairs in order, they were instructed to meet as a group on May 4, 1942, on the grounds of the federal Indian boarding school at Fort Wingate, New Mexico.

¹⁵⁴ John Brown, Jr., interview by Carl and Mary Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992]

Chapter Three: Swearing-in & Boot Camp

As I remember I believe there was at least thirty-one or thirty-two marine applicants in them days. And, at least two of them failed the physical examination. I don't remember who they were. So they went ahead and put us on a B.I.A. bus, and then they hauled us to a place called Fort Wingate. And over there they sworn us in... you know while we were still in civilian clothes.¹⁵⁵

John Brown, Jr.

It was a Monday morning, May 4, 1942, when the Navajo recruits rode from the reservation community of Fort Defiance, Arizona, to the federal boarding school at Fort Wingate, New Mexico, about forty miles to the southeast. The location of the federal boarding school has a long history. The Navajos called the area *Shash bito'*, or Bear Springs and, for Navajos, its use as a water source has been long standing. European recognition of the spring is documented on a Spanish map dated 1779.¹⁵⁶ The first formal meeting and treaty negotiation between the Navajos and the United States occurred at Bear Springs in 1846, just one month after the United States proclaimed New Mexico as American soil. The original outpost established in that same year was east of Mount Taylor in Seboyeta, but this garrison was moved in 1851 to the newly established Fort Defiance that was deeper in Navajo country, along what is now the New Mexico-Arizona border. Later, in 1860, a post was established at Bear Springs in response to a major attack on Fort Defiance. This new post was named Fort Fauntleroy. Fort Defiance was abandoned and the garrison was moved to Fort Fauntleroy. One year later, the fort was

¹⁵⁵ John Brown, Jr., interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

¹⁵⁶ Laurance D. Linford, *Navajo Places: History, Legend, Landscape* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2000), 209.

renamed Fort Lyon. Three months after this change, it was abandoned in response to the invasion of Confederate troops into New Mexico territory and the garrison was moved to Fort Craig south of Socorro. In 1862, a fort was established at Ojo del Gallo and named Fort Wingate. It was this fort, just south of present day Grants, New Mexico, that the U.S. Army used as a staging area for the Navajo Long Walk.¹⁵⁷

The forced march of Navajos from their traditional homelands in the Four Corners region to Bosque Redondo in eastern New Mexico is often denoted as a single removal in most narratives. Neil W. Ackerly, however, has identified fifty-three separate acts of removal between 1863 and 1866. These range from the single largest forced displacement of twenty-four hundred in 1864 to as little as four in 1866.¹⁵⁸ In 1868, the United States, admitting the failure of the Bosque Redondo Reservation, negotiated a treaty to return the Navajos to their beloved homeland, though the land mass was much smaller in size. The treaty reservation was established in northwestern New Mexico and the fort in the Bear Springs area again became a working fort. It was renamed Fort Wingate. Often referred to as “new,” to distinguish it from the “old” Fort Wingate near Grants, this garrison functioned until 1911, when it was deactivated.¹⁵⁹

In 1925, the Bureau of Indian Affairs acquired possession of the old fort and turned it into a federal Indian boarding school. Originally named the Charles H. Burke Vocational School and Hospital, it was renamed Wingate Vocational High School in 1937. Many of the old army buildings were converted into classrooms, dormitories, and

¹⁵⁷ Harold L. James, “The History of Fort Wingate”, New Mexico Geological Society Fall Field Conference Guidebook 18 (1967): 155.

¹⁵⁸ Neal W. Ackerly, “A Navajo Diaspora: The Long Walk to Hweeldi” (Silver City, NM: Dos Rios Consultants, 1998) Available at: www.members.tripod.com/bloodhound/longwalk.htm.

¹⁵⁹ Harold L. James, “The History of Fort Wingate,” New Mexico Geological Society Fall Field Conference Guidebook 18 (1967): 158.

faculty housing.¹⁶⁰ By 1941, Wingate had a population of about five hundred students, who were mostly Navajos.¹⁶¹

Wingate was one of the federal schools Major Shannon and his team of Marine recruiters had visited during the previous few weeks in their search for qualified young men. On the morning of 4 May 1942, however, Major Shannon planned to swear in the new recruits.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs took particular note of the Marine Corps' special interest in Navajos for the war effort. The recruitment of these young men presented a prime opportunity for the Indian Service to highlight the "successes" of assimilation, and to document the event, the Indian Service office in Window Rock, Arizona, sent its staff photographer, Milton "Jack" Snow. Snow had originally been hired in the 1930s by the Soil Conservation Service to photograph and document the various wide-ranging New Deal construction projects scattered across the Navajo and Hopi reservations. These included the building of dams, roads, hospitals, schools, and tribal government structures. Later, when the various federal agencies that performed services across the reservation were merged, they were placed under the Bureau of Indian Affairs and collectively became the Navajo Agency or, more commonly called, the Navajo Service. Snow became the staff photographer.¹⁶²

Snow's images and their detail offer a valuable photographic catalog of what transpired that spring day in 1942. At the same time, they provide us a rare visual glimpse of the group of Navajo recruits before they formally entered the Marine

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 158.

¹⁶¹ Laurance D. Linford, *Navajo Places: History, Legend, Landscape* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2000), 210.

¹⁶² James C. Faris, *Navajo and Photography: A Critical History of the Representation of an American People* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996; Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2003), 191. Citations are to the University of Utah Press edition.

Corps. Sifting through the two-dozen Snow photographs, examining facial expressions, postures, and attitudes, one perceives a mixture of both excitement and apprehension among the recruits. Most were complete strangers to one another, while some were classmates, or coworkers, or clan relations. Yet, the images reveal a sense of immediate camaraderie. Their expressions, their postures are relaxed - not yet aged by the horrors of battle and bloodshed.¹⁶³

These photographs, along with personal memories captured in interviews with members of the “first twenty-nine,” will allow us to examine in more detail what transpired that day. In the introduction to this thesis I discuss a family snapshot that included only twenty-five of the recruits. For years, it was assumed that this photograph was taken at Fort Wingate. Also, among the members of this group who I have known since my childhood, it was a running joke that several recruits had been late to the swearing-in ceremony. However, this may not be entirely true.

Upon closer inspection of the family snapshot, there appear to be some discrepancies that suggest it was not taken at Fort Wingate, New Mexico, but at Fort Defiance, Arizona. The men stand in tight formation, but behind them is a glimpse of a building and fence line. These elements bear little resemblance to buildings or fences in the two-dozen Snow photographs taken at Fort Wingate. Instead, the fencing resembles what was more typically found in the community of Fort Defiance at the time.¹⁶⁴ Moreover, some members of the “first twenty-nine,” who commented in both the group interview and in some of the independent interviews, raise further questions. These men remembered that they initially met in Fort Defiance and then

¹⁶³ Milton Snow Collection, (NO7112), Navajo Nation Museum, Window Rock, Arizona

¹⁶⁴ Ellen Threinen, *The Navajos and the BIA: A Study of Government Buildings on the Navajo Reservation* (Window Rock, AZ: Bureau of Indian Affairs, September 1981), 45.

traveled in a school bus from Fort Defiance to Fort Wingate. Also, the shadows in the family snap shot are short, near non-existent, while those in Snow's photographs, undoubtedly taken at Fort Wingate, are progressively longer. This suggests that the family snapshot was the first image taken of the group of recruits, and that it precedes the Snow images.

Upon arrival at Fort Wingate, it appears that the recruits were assembled again for a group photograph; this time for federal employee, "Jack" Snow. As in the family snap shot, one Snow image has the same twenty-five men. In a second group photograph in which the recruits are in the same position, at the far right is a twenty-sixth man, dressed in a suit and hat, and appearing as if he had just arrived and joined the end of the line. Additionally, when the shadows are compared in these three images, they all appear to have been taken within a close time frame and earlier in the day than the remaining Snow images. The family snapshot and these two particular Snow photographs appear to be the first images of the recruits as a group. They also readily support the idea that a few recruits arrived late, as some of the men joked about years later. Four recruits apparently joined the group at Fort Wingate.

The main reason for their assembly at Fort Wingate was their swearing in to the Marine Corps. Two Snow photographs in the collection record this event.¹⁶⁵ The twenty-nine recruits stand at the corner of the boys' dormitory – a two-story building that was once the army barracks for the fort. They face Major Frank Shannon, their right hands raised. Also, standing beside Major Shannon, are two Marine recruiters,

¹⁶⁵ The referenced collection is housed at the Navajo Nation Museum. However, the author is aware of one other image of the swearing-in ceremony, probably located in the National Archives at Riverside. Milton "Jack" Snow took thousands of photographs across the Navajo reservation during his employment with the Indian Service. These images can be found in various archives throughout the United States.

two Navy doctors, and two unidentified civilian men and one woman. These last three figures are probably Indian Service employees, either administrators or instructors at Wingate Industrial School, or officials from the main federal offices at Window Rock, Arizona. Their identities have not been fully determined.

Interestingly, it was not the oath of enlistment that the majority of the men I interviewed remembered. There were two, more mundane events that stood out in their memory. While at Wingate Vocational School, they were fed a meal, and all of the men commented on it. Three of Snow's photographs indeed reveal that the recruits ate in the dining hall. Two images focus on the same table. Six recruits - Cozy Stanley Brown, George Dennison, Allen Dale June, Wilsie Bitsie, John Benally, and my father, Carl Gorman - are seated together at one table. They are laughing, obviously very aware of the camera trained on them. The spread of food before them offers a glimpse of a typical federal boarding school meal of the 1940s. It consisted of beans, white bread, milk, and possibly a small bowl of grapes.¹⁶⁶

The second event they vividly remembered was their bus ride from Fort Wingate to the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego, California. This was an all-night trip that took them south through Phoenix, then Yuma, Arizona, and finally to San Diego. Additionally, Chester Nez recalled that the recruits were all given fifty cents for meals during their trip.¹⁶⁷ During the group interview, Eugene Crawford reminisced about something different: "That night, on our way to San Diego, the kids started singing... Navajo songs, you know. We was all alone in there. Just us recruits. They speed up the drum and start... Sing! Sing! Sing! All night long as we

¹⁶⁶ Milton Snow, Photograph, NO7112, Navajo Nation Museum, Window Rock, Arizona.

¹⁶⁷ Chester Nez, group interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Productions [1990-1992].

were on the road to San Diego.”¹⁶⁸ As if to corroborate Eugene’s memory, the other four men in the group interview broke out in Navajo song. This, of course, was followed by a round of laughter.¹⁶⁹

During my research in the late 1980s and early 1990s I conducted an interview with Frank D. Shinn, first lieutenant, retired, whom I introduced in chapter 2. Based on his recollections, I was under the impression that he and his partner, Sergeant Paul Anderson, were the only two Marines involved in the recruitment of the “first twenty-nine.” During my group interview, however, none of the men recognized Shinn from his photograph, which surprised me. However, when they viewed Snow’s photographs and they saw Major Frank Shannon, several men recognized him, some very fondly. Eugene Crawford, for example, recalled when he first saw Shannon at Fort Wingate:

There was Major Shannon!... my former school Civics teacher at Albuquerque Indian School when he taught school. And he remembered when I told him I was so and so. He was my teacher, I told him. He was all dressed up in Marine Corps uniform. He was a Major then, see, Major Shannon.¹⁷⁰

Eugene Crawford, one of the older recruits, graduated from Albuquerque Indian School in 1933, and in 1935, had taken agricultural courses at the University of Arizona.¹⁷¹ A review of Frank Shannon’s federal civilian file indeed corroborated that Shannon had been a teacher at the Albuquerque Indian School between 1929 and 1933, when he was transferred to Phoenix Indian School.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁸ Eugene Crawford, group interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

¹⁶⁹ Eugene Crawford, Chester Nez, Carl Gorman, Dean Wilson, and Wilsie Bitsie, group interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions [1990-1992].

¹⁷⁰ Eugene Crawford, interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions [1990-1992].

¹⁷¹ Eugene Crawford, official military personnel file, National Archives at St Louis.

¹⁷² Frank Shannon official federal civilian personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

A recent discovery of a memorandum entitled “Assignment to Active Duty and Travel Orders” has uncovered two additional facts previously unknown about the Navajo recruits. This memorandum was discovered in a military personnel file that belonged to Oscar “B” Ilthma,¹⁷³ one of the “first twenty-nine.” Dated 4 May 1942 and signed by Major Shannon, it placed Ilthma in charge of his fellow recruits for the overnight bus ride to the Marine Corps Recruit Depot. He was to “take charge of the below named men and proceed this date via Greyhound Bus leaving Window Rock, Arizona, 4 May, 1942, at 6:00 P.M., and proceed to San Diego, California, where upon your arrival at 3:30 P.M., 5 May, 1942, you will report, with the men in your charge, to the Commanding General, Marine Corps Base, for duty.” Evidently there was a change in plans. As evidenced by Snow’s photographs and several independent interviews with members of the “first twenty-nine,” the recruits boarded a Greyhound bus at Fort Wingate, New Mexico, instead. Why this changed occurred is unclear. Additionally, according to the memorandum, Oscar Ilthma was given a per diem for each man of one dollar, fifty cents.¹⁷⁴

Ilthma was one of the older recruits, and this may have played a role in Shannon’s decision to place him in charge of the men. Probably more influential in Shannon’s decision was the fact that Ilthma, unlike the other recruits, had some previous military experience. Between May 1927 and May 1932, he served in the 114th Cavalry Brigade, Troop C, an all-Indian unit of the Kansas National Guard that was attached to the federal Indian school at Lawrence, Kansas. Ilthma attended school at Haskell Institute

¹⁷³ The quotation marks around Ilthma’s middle initial is consistent with how it appears on his Service Record, and throughout his official military personnel file. Oscar “B” Ilthma, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

throughout his high school years and graduated in 1932. He spent an additional two years at Haskell as an instructor in carpentry, and eight years in the same profession working in Fort Defiance, Arizona.¹⁷⁵

This same memorandum that placed Ilthma in charge of the recruits also uncovered the answer to a seventy-year-old mystery. The original orders to enlist these young men called for thirty recruits, but only twenty-nine ultimately were sworn in. For years, three vexing questions have complicated the story of the original group of recruits for the Navajo Code Talker program. Had a thirtieth man been recruited? And if so, who was he? And, what happened to him?

A number of claims and theories have been advanced over the years, and in fact, as I conducted my own research in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I asked this question of members of the “first twenty-nine” as well as of retired First Sergeant Frank Shinn, one of the Marine recruiters. I was particularly hopeful that Shinn, as the recruiter, might be able to put this intriguing mystery to rest. I conducted two formal interviews with him, once in 1991 and again in 1992. In his first interview, he recalled that there had been thirty recruits. Shinn claimed the original group was sent to Phoenix and then on to California. Although they did travel through Phoenix, it was late at night. Additionally, a temporary recruit station had been established on the reservation in Window Rock, Arizona, specifically to handle the special Navajo recruitment. Major Shannon, the officer in charge, and a couple of his staff from the Phoenix regional recruitment office, manned this temporary station. All the pertinent enlistment papers for the Navajo recruits carried Major Shannon’s signature, and all medical examinations were conducted through the Indian Health Service hospital in

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

Fort Defiance. There appears to be no logical reason why the recruits would have needed to stop in Phoenix for any additional examinations or paperwork, especially in the middle of the night.

To Shinn's credit, however, in September 1942, he also recruited the second group of Navajos who entered the program, and perhaps his memories of the two episodes overlapped. Whatever the case, Shinn said in the interview:

There were thirty. One of them got lost in Phoenix. I sent thirty down there and twenty-nine actually got to boot camp. And as near as I can determine from talking to the ones who are left that one was turned down for tuberculosis and it was something that I didn't catch in the preliminary examination because after all, I'm not a doctor. And I sent them to the Indian hospital for their final physical up there on the reservation and the doctors check everything that require a doctor's inspection, you know. And... he wasn't... the T.B. was not caught there. But it was caught evidently at the final inspection in Phoenix. And so, we lost one, and he never returned to the reservation.¹⁷⁶

Among members of the "first twenty-nine," several had their own theories. Some remembered that at least one, and possibly two men, did not make the final cut. Like Shinn, most remembered there was one man who did not make the final physical inspection because he had tuberculosis. However, Shinn's story of the would-be recruit assumed that he went with the "first twenty-nine" to Phoenix. Snow's photographs, however, illustrate that only twenty-nine men were sworn-in and, presumably, only twenty-nine men boarded the bus for California. When Shinn was asked if he might remember the man's name, he did not. However, he did say that he believed the man went on to become "some sort of public official."¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Frank Shinn, interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

This is interesting because Eugene Crawford, one of the “first twenty-nine” remembered that the missing man might have been Raymond Nakai.¹⁷⁸

We had our physical right here - Fort Defiance. And I remember we were in line and Nakai happened to be in back of me. I went out to these Navy doctors, these Chief Petty Officers. He got through with me and he stepped in there. Just then, well, they looked him over for a while and they pushed him back this way. They said, “You get on this side.” This was Raymond Nakai, see. I don’t know what happened to him. He was with the Navy later on I found out.¹⁷⁹

Some of the “first twenty-nine” whom I interviewed remembered one or two potential recruits who, in some way, failed their physicals. As illustrated in the last chapter, men like Dean Wilson remembered that some classmates did not pass their preliminary physical examinations. Marine Corps personnel would have conducted these first assessments, usually onsite, and if potential recruits passed, they were sent on to the hospital at Fort Defiance for a more in-depth physical examination. It is possible that those men who did not make “the cut” were classmates who did not pass the initial examination by the recruiting officers.

Years after the war, at least five other men who served later as Navajo Code Talkers claimed to have been the thirtieth man. Again, each had a story that seemed plausible, but never provable.¹⁸⁰ Knowing that contentions existed, I continued to press Shinn during my two formal interviews with him, and in personal conversations over the three years I knew him before his death in 1993. Shinn disclosed his strategy for

¹⁷⁸ Raymond Nakai was Chairman of the Navajo Tribal Council. First elected in 1963, he served two terms, stepping down in 1971, when Peter MacDonald was elected chairman. Nakai was born in 1918 and was from Lukachukai, Arizona. He served in the United States Navy from 1942-1945. (www.azarchivesonline.org)

¹⁷⁹ Eugene Crawford, group interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

¹⁸⁰ This number is derived from personal accounts told or heard by the author either from Navajo Code Talkers, or from sons, daughters, and other individuals with long standing relationships with Navajo Code Talkers.

recruitment with me. He would set a goal to recruit a few more than his orders called for, and as a seasoned recruiting officer, he anticipated one of two possibilities. Inevitably some men would fail their physical examinations, or there would sometimes be a few “no shows,” men who would not show up for the formal oath of enlistment.¹⁸¹

In 2001, the likelihood that a thirtieth man had existed became more concrete, but confirmation was still elusive. During the 106th Congress in 1999-2000, New Mexico senator Jeff Bingaman sponsored a bill, S. 2408, to honor the Navajo Code Talkers with a Congressional Medal. The “first twenty-nine” were singled out to receive the Gold Congressional Medal, while those who qualified as Navajo Code Talkers and followed the original group into service would receive Silver Congressional Medals. Although the members of the original group were well known by this time, a complete and numerical listing of their serial numbers had never been available. Prior to this event, I suspected the serial numbers were in sequential order. As I conducted my own research and collected interviews with members of the “first twenty-nine” in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I also compiled pertinent information on the men. My data included the campaigns they fought in, the divisions and regiments they belonged to, their serial numbers, and dates of discharge from the Marine Corps. I knew my father’s serial number, and as I collected numbers from the other men it became evident that they were indeed in sequential order. It was just a matter of determining where the numbers began and where they ended.

During the preliminary planning for the Gold Congressional Medal ceremony for the “first twenty-nine” Navajo Code Talkers in Washington, D.C., the Marine Corps, for

¹⁸¹ Frank Shinn, interview by Zonnie Gorman, November 16, 1989, Oral History Collection, University of Arizona library. Shinn called the recruits who did not show up for their oath of enlistment “no shows” in several personal conversations.

the first time, provided serial numbers for the original group, and as suspected, they were in numerical order. What was more astonishing, however, was the sequence. It indicated that there had originally been thirty numbers, which meant there was a high probability that thirty men had indeed been recruited. The set of serial numbers began with “358500.” This number was given to the recruit, Benjamin Cleveland. The last number in the sequence, assigned to recruit, David Curley, was “358529.” Each number in between corresponded to a Navajo recruit except for one – “358518.” If this missing number had fallen on either end of the assigned sequence, history would never be the wiser. However, because it fell within the sequence of assigned numbers, it seemed probable that the Marine Corps had intended to recruit thirty men, just as the original orders had called for. But, who was he, and why was he not present on 4 May 1942, the day his would-be comrades-in-arms were sworn-in?

In 2004 Francis Hebert, a retired Lieutenant Colonel in the Air Force, who had taken a deep interest in the Code Talker story, offered one theory. He had written to the National Archives at St. Louis, Missouri, where the personnel files for the United States military are housed. He wanted to know if the missing number had been assigned to anyone at all. Interestingly, a man from Phoenix, Arizona, by the name of Leonard Standish, a non-Navajo, had been allocated the serial number, “358518.” His military record indicated he joined the Marine Corps on 6 May 1942 in Phoenix. Hebert suggested in a letter to me what he believed might have happened:

When the “first twenty-nine” were in processing at Fort Defiance, there could have been more than one line in order to shorten the time before departing for Fort Wingate. And in processing multiple lines, service number 358518 was overlooked or it was thought to be used in one of the other lines. Anyway, after the bus departed for Camp Pendleton, it was

discovered that 358518 had not been issued, and was returned to Phoenix, which I think was the recruitment district headquarters.¹⁸²

Like many of the other theories that had been offered over the years, Hebert's was just as plausible, but yet, still not provable. The recent discovery of the memorandum in Oscar "B" Ilthma's military personnel file, however, has, once and for all, laid to rest two of the three questions. The memorandum in Ilthma's file contained thirty Navajo recruits, listed in order by serial number. Beside "358518" was the name, George Clinton.¹⁸³ Never before had this name appeared on any documents associated with the "first twenty-nine."

Because the Marine Corps assigned Clinton a serial number, it likely expected him, along with the other recruits, to be present on 4 May 1942 for the oath of enlistment. However, he was not. Did Clinton change his mind at the last minute? On the document, his name is clearly crossed out, and one-dollar fifty cents has been deducted from the total amount of cash Ilthma was given for each man's meals. On the surface it appears that Clinton had been a "no show." However, the line through his name and serial number is clearly typed. If he had been a "no show," it would have taken extra effort on behalf of the recruiters to track down a typewriter to cross out his name, considering that the temporary headquarters station for recruitment was in Window Rock, Arizona, approximately thirty miles northeast of Fort Wingate. Moreover, on the second page of the document, the total amount of money, forty-five dollars, is also crossed out, but not with a typewriter. It is distinctly crossed through with an ink pen. Handwritten beside it is forty-three dollars fifty cents – exactly one dollar fifty cents less.

It is possible that Clinton, for whatever reason, decided not to show up that day to complete his enlistment in the Marine Corps, and at the last minute, the recruiters had to

¹⁸² Francis J. Hebert to Zonnie Gorman, August 6, 2006, personal collection.

¹⁸³ Oscar "B" Ilthma, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

remove his name from the official list. However, recent information discovered about Clinton suggests a few other potential explanations for his absence. Surprisingly, five months after the bus carrying only twenty-nine Navajos left Fort Wingate, he joined the U.S. Army. However, documentation indicates that his entrance into the army in September 1942 was by induction. This means that he must have voluntarily registered at some point in the previous two years under the Selective Service Act of 1940. It may be, that under the lottery system, his name had been drawn and he was called up at the same time that he volunteered for the Marine Corps. He could have contacted his local draft board and informed them he was enlisting in the Marine Corps rather than submit to an induction in the Army. Many men throughout the United States believed it was better to volunteer than be drafted, and this was no less true among the Navajos.¹⁸⁴ However, it appears that Clinton chose instead to withdraw from voluntary enlistment in the Marine Corps and wait for Army induction. The reason for this choice may have been simple. Clinton was married, and his young wife, Sarah, was pregnant with their first child. On September 7, 1942, she gave birth to a little girl, Ruth Ann, and ten days later, Clinton was formally accepted into the U. S. Army.

Another possible scenario is that Clinton had a medical condition that was not realized until the last minute. His U.S. Army records show that he had a medical problem that may have disqualified him from the Marine Corps. The Marine Corps had always prided itself on stringent standards of physical and mental fitness of its recruits, and this alone made entrance into the this elite fighting force more challenging than other branches of the service. For example, in 1940 the Marine Corps had rejected 48,609 men

¹⁸⁴ In interviews with Navajo Code Talkers conducted since the declassification of the Navajo code in 1968, my own included, several men mentioned their desire to enlist rather than be drafted.

out of 61,723 who had applied based on its eligibility requirements. Of the 13,144 men who successfully applied, the physical rigors of boot camp often weeded out a few more.¹⁸⁵

Clinton, like the other potential Navajo recruits, submitted to a formal physical examination when he sought enlistment in the Marine Corps. Based on the interviews with individual members of the “first twenty-nine” as well as with the recruiter, Frank Shinn, the potential candidates for enlistment were given two examinations: one preliminary review by the Marine Corps recruiters; and another more-thorough examination by Navy doctors at the Navajo Medical Center in Fort Defiance. It is possible that Clinton’s last examination took place in the final hours of recruitment, and the discovery of his condition forced the Marine Corps to reject him. There is some indication that this scenario may be plausible. In Clinton’s U.S. Army personnel file, a document, the “Report of Physical Examination and Induction,” indicates that in late August of 1942, Clinton was examined by a doctor at the Navajo Medical Hospital in Fort Defiance, and that this was his *second* physical examination. It is probable that the examination Clinton underwent when he applied for the Marine Corps was considered his first examination for military service. The fact that his name was removed from the official list of Marine recruits may indicate that he was disqualified because of some physical impairment that arose from his formal physical examination. Indeed, in his U.S. Army personnel file, there is mention that he suffered from “double pterygium” in his

¹⁸⁵ David J. Ulbrich, *Preparing For Victory: Thomas Holcomb and the Making of the Modern Marine Corps, 1936-1943* (Annapolis: Naval Institute press, 2011), 49.

right eye. Additionally, his U.S. Army records state that he underwent surgery for his eye malady, but unfortunately, there is no date listed for his procedure.¹⁸⁶

Unfortunately, the exact details explaining why Clinton did not take the Marine Corps' oath of enlistment that day at Fort Wingate and ride into history with the other twenty-nine men, may never be known. Clinton himself was killed in action in 1945 at the Battle of the Bulge near Faymonville, Belgium. His wife, Sarah, had died the previous year, one month after giving birth to a second child, George, Jr. The baby died seven months after the death of his mother.¹⁸⁷ This left only his first-born child, Ruth Ann, orphaned at the age of three, to be raised by her maternal grandparents.¹⁸⁸

Whatever may have prevented Clinton from service in the Marine Corps did not stop the twenty-nine recruits. They made the all-night bus ride to San Diego and arrived the next morning at the Marine Corps Recruit Training Depot. My father, Carl Gorman remembered.

They were waiting for us. We were unloading, getting off the bus there. We were laughing and giggling. And this Sergeant he said... he told us to shut our damn mouths. "Don't act like little kids! You're in the Marines now! Act like a Marine!" he said. We all shut up and we... you didn't hear anymore giggling.¹⁸⁹

The Recruit Depot in San Diego was one of two Marine Corps training facilities during World War II. The East Coast depot was located at Parris Island, South Carolina, while San Diego handled training for enlistees in the West. In August of 1942, as a result of Executive Order 8802, the Marine Corps opened Montford Point training facility at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, which served as the segregated training area for African

¹⁸⁶ George Clinton, official military personnel file, National Archives at St Louis.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ruth Ann died in 2001 and is survived by five children.

¹⁸⁹ Carl N. Gorman, interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

Americans. Later, the Marine Corps Women's Reserve training facility was also established at Camp Lejeune.¹⁹⁰

The United States Marine Corps continuously prided itself on the highest military standard for the training of its recruits. Before 1939, the Marine Corps utilized an eight-week training schedule for its recruits. This proved more than adequate to hone men into an elite fighting force. World War II, however, would challenge the Marine Corps to expedite training in order to build a wartime fighting force while struggling to maintain its high standards. With the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939, the Marine Corps reduced its eight-week training to a four-week period. This, however, did not adequately train men to meet Marine Corps standards, so the training schedule was increased to six weeks in January 1940. Concerned that recruits were not being thoroughly trained in combat tactics, the Marine Corps added yet another week. With the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the formal United States declaration of war against Japan in December 1941, President Roosevelt significantly raised the required quotas to meet the needs of war. Therefore, in January 1942, the training schedule was dropped to five-weeks to help meet those needs. In February, it was increased to six weeks, and in March 1942, the initial push to meet the quotas had been met and the training schedule rose to seven weeks.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ For more information on blacks in the Marine Corps during World War II, see Melton A. McLaurin, *The Marines of Montford Point: America's First Black Marines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Ronald K. Culp, *The First Black United States Marines: The Men of Montford Point, 1942-1946* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2007). For information on the United States Women's Marine Corps Reserves see Peter A. Soderbergh, *Women Marines: The World War II Era* Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1992); Mary V. Stremlow, Colonel (Ret.), *Free A Marine to Fight: Women Marines In World War II*, Marines in World War II Commemorative Series, (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2003).

¹⁹¹ Kenneth W. Condit, Gerald Diamond, and Edwin T. Turnbladh, *Marine Corps Ground Training in WW II* (Washington, D.C.: Historical Branch Headquarters, G-3 Division, U.S. Marine Corps, 1956) 158-162. Also see www.ww2gyrene.org for consolidated training charts. In 1944, the Marine Corps returned to an eight-week training schedule.

The Navajo recruits were subjected to the seven-week training schedule. The first three weeks were spent on base, learning basic garrison instruction (62 hours), and field training (57 hours). Along with this training, the schedule also called for 14 hours of physical conditioning. However, beyond these 14 hours, a great deal of time was spent marching, as well as conducting other physical activities that were not listed in the formal training schedule. The recruits then spent the fourth and fifth weeks on the Rifle Range, where the largest number of hours, 138 were devoted to weapons training.¹⁹² The remaining time was spent back at the training depot.

One of the first items on the agenda for the new recruits was the receipt of their uniforms, military gear, and bedding. They were subjected to more physical examinations, inoculations, and blood draws, and suffered the standard and infamous “crew cut.” Like many Marine recruits, these first experiences were often quite memorable. Gorman recalled:

They marched us to where they issued out clothes, Marine Corps clothes... like your shoes. They had a platform there. You step on it and right away it will tell you what size shoe you wear, and what size clothes you have. Your robes, your blankets. Sheets, and all that. They just throw it from behind the counter at you. You have to catch them... and then... they give you a haircut.¹⁹³

The Navajo recruits were assigned to their own barracks. My father remembered: “We went to the barracks and there they assigned different beds to us. “Sacks,” they call it. “This is your sack here.” From there on everything was just Marine talk. Mostly... mostly swearing.”¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Kenneth W. Condit, Gerald Diamond, and Edwin T. Turnbladh, *Marine Corps Ground Training in WW II* (Washington, D.C.: Historical Branch Headquarters, G-3 Division, U.S. Marine Corps, 1956) 163.

¹⁹³ Carl Gorman, interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

The first night in the barracks, John Brown, Jr., remembered how exhausted he was just after the first day. Nevertheless, he was full of excitement, and his last thought before going to sleep was that in the morning, he planned to go check out the town, but he stated “I was mistaken! Six o’clock in the morning, a tough Sergeant comes up and says, ‘*Hit the Deck!*’ By God he scared me!”¹⁹⁵

Another common response by recruits was to second-guess the decision to enlist.

When Chester Nez arrived at boot camp, he questioned why he came:

At first I wasn’t quite sure of myself, you know. I thought back, you know, I should have went on to finish my high school and then go in. And then I... I thought about whether I’m going to make it back or...never come back. I said that’s what I thought about most of the time when we was gone. I guess alot of those other guys thought the same way, you know. Whether we’re going to make it or don’t. And I never told my... my parents that I was going in. I went out... I went in without letting my parents know that I was going in. I left it... All this time I guess they thought I was going to school at Tuba City. (laughs) When we got to San Diego I wrote my dad, you know. And my sister and I told them I was in the Marine Corps. And boy... they uh (shaking his head) they didn’t like it, you know, but... Finally my dad says,...“I guess it’s alright.”...you know.¹⁹⁶

The twenty-nine Navajos were placed together for recruit training and were organized into Platoon 382. Normally, a platoon of Marine recruits averaged between fifty and seventy in number, so this one platoon of 29 was unusual.

Although indigenous peoples had fought both with and against colonial, and later, American military since the 1700s, this was the first time in Marine Corps history that a group of native men had been recruited and enlisted together for a specific reason. As a pilot group, the Marine Corps may have wanted to keep them separate so that their assignment was not divulged to other Marines. However, the singling out of any one

¹⁹⁵ John Brown, Jr., interview by Carl and Mary Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

¹⁹⁶ Chester Nez, interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

person, or group of persons, was contrary to the philosophy for basic training in the Marine Corps. All Marines received the same initial boot camp training. Those who were unable to perform under these time-honored and rigorous conditions were weeded out, while those who “passed the muster” were honed into what the Marine Corps considered the finest fighting force possible.

The question then arises as to whether the Navajos’ separation was based on race. After all, the Marine Corps had remained an exclusively white organization until World War II, and when forced to accept blacks and women into their ranks in 1941, with the signing of Executive Order 8802, Commandant Holcomb made no qualms about voicing his opinion. The Marine Corps, openly defiant to the change, established segregated training facilities for both blacks and women. Yet, historically Native Americans and Hispanics were two minority groups that the Marine Corps had little objection to accepting into its ranks.

The most plausible explanation is that the Marine Corps simply followed the advice the Indian Service offered to them. As already noted in chapter 1, during the March meeting between Lieutenant Colonel Weathered Woodworth and the Bureau of Indian Affairs Washington, D.C., office, the Indian Service employees opined that the Navajos would adapt more readily to military life if they were singled out for a special reason and kept together as a group. Following this advice, the Marine Corps may have separated them for no other reason than the Bureau’s counsel. Following this original group, the Marine Corps formed only one other all-Navajo platoon. Platoon 382 and Platoon 297 were the only all-Indian, all-Navajo Marine Corps platoons during World War II. Platoon 297 was formed in March 1943 and was made up of fifty-eight

Navajos.¹⁹⁷ All other Navajo recruits targeted to train as Code Talkers were integrated into regular platoons. It is probable that this decision was based strictly on necessity. The Marine Corps was the major ground force in the Pacific and the Navajo communicators were proving highly successful. The recruitment of qualified Navajos became more difficult as the war progressed, and the Marine Corps could not afford to wait for a contingent of Navajos large enough to train together. The need for Navajo communicators overrode the Indian Service's desire to coddle the young men into feeling special. They were needed in the Pacific, and to hold them back until there were enough of them to comprise an all-Navajo platoon for basic training was not feasible in the Marine Corps' opinion.

As a separate platoon, the Navajo recruits were highly visible on base, and immediately they became a novelty. The base newspaper, the *Marine Corps Chevron*, featured an article about the platoon less than a week into its training. Private Ed Rice, the author, lauded the "Navajo Indian lads" and their platoon as one of the "healthiest to date." Describing them as "magnificent specimens of original American manhood," Rice pointed out that all twenty-nine had volunteered, and were "already farther advanced than recruits usually are with so few days of training to their credit." The recruits' drill instructors reported that the Navajo recruits "take well" to the type of discipline and military instruction offered in the Marine Corps."

Private Rice also made a telling forecast about the platoon. The recruits, he said, were "fast, straight-shooting hunters" from the Navajo reservation and once they completed Rifle Range training, he predicted, they "should make an outstanding record at

¹⁹⁷ Shannon to Colonel D. M. Randall, Officer in Charge, Western Recruiting Division, 27 March 1943, RG 127, Entry 18A, Box 598, Folder 17, National Archives at College Park

Camp Calvin B. Matthews”.¹⁹⁸ Seven weeks later, at their graduation from boot camp, Colonel James L. Underhill, the base commanding officer, praised the Navajo Marines for being “one of the outstanding platoons in the history of this recruit Depot,” and as a platoon they “made one of the highest scores on the Rifle Range.” They graduated with a firing record of 93.1.

These articles did not go unnoticed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and indeed, it is likely that the Bureau of Indian Affairs played a role in Rice’s article. Appearing at the heading of the article is a photograph of Platoon 382 standing at attention. The men are under inspection by their drill instructors, as well as a civilian, Ralph E. Johnson, identified as the superintendent of Sherman Institute, a federal boarding school located in Riverside, California. There is no evidence that Johnson had any connection to the recruitment of this original group of Navajo recruits, and so his prominence in this article can only be attributed to the Bureau’s need to attach themselves to the chronicling of Indians in the war effort. The article states that the Sherman Institute “furnished nearly 100 volunteers to the Marine Corps during the past eighteen months.”¹⁹⁹ One of the recruits, David Curley, was a graduate of Sherman Institute. However, Curley’s military personnel file refutes this. In his own handwriting, Curley indicated that he graduated from Albuquerque Indian School in 1937.²⁰⁰

In the meantime, the Navajos settled into recruit life. Marching was a major component of their training. They were marched everywhere. Unlike many recruits, marching was not new to them. Federal Indian boarding schools had prepared them well for military life. Beginning with Carlisle Indian School, opened in 1879, the federal

¹⁹⁸ Pvt Ed Rice, “Navajo Indians Tote Rifles In Boot Platoon,” Marine Corps Chevron, May 15, 1942.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ David Curley, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

Indian boarding schools had implemented a military structure that included marching, calisthenics, rigidly scheduled daily activities, and lights out in the evenings.

Additionally, many federal schools clothed their students in military-style uniforms. If they were caught speaking their native language, children were punished in a variety of ways. Some received some solitary confinement, or they would have to perform a humiliating punishment.²⁰¹ Dean Wilson, who was the youngest of the “first twenty-nine,” went back to school at Haskell Institute in Kansas for a short time after the war, but he remembered what it was like back on the reservation when he was younger:

But where it was restricted was way back in the boarding school. Like there at Shiprock. I understand later from guys who went through Fort Defiance they had the same situation. And uh... Fort Wingate. When you... speaking our language, we'd squeal on each other. “So and so talked Navajo!” So they'd put a big sign here. (indicating across his chest) “I talked Navajo! ...walk in front of the girl's building. Anyway, either that or they'd give us some sort of punishment that we don't like. That's how it was.”²⁰²

Not all their memories focused, however, on the similarities between boot camp life and their boarding-school days. Wilsie Bitsie remembered that he and Dean Wilson were two of the shortest recruits in Platoon 382. Wilson, in his interview, also mentioned another recruit, Nelson Thompson: “There was three of us shorties. They always put us way in the back!” Bitsie related a funny memory:

We'd be way in the back and that wind would really be blowing and we'd be marching this way away from the wind and I guess they would shout,

²⁰¹ On the history of federal Indian boarding schools, see David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995); Jacqueline Fear-Segal, *White Man's Club: Schools, Race, and the Struggle of Indian Acculturation* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007). For information on southwestern boarding schools, see Robert A. Trennert, *The Phoenix Indian School: Forced Assimilation in Arizona, 1891-1935* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988); Sally Hyer, *One House, One Voice, One Heart: Native American Education at the Santa Fe Indian School, 1890-1990* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico, 1990). For information on education and the Navajos, see Peter Iverson, *Diné: A History of the Navajos* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002).

²⁰² Dean Wilson, interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

“To the rear, march!” Everybody would turn and we wouldn’t even hear it and we’d be way over here. The DI instructor would be yelling, “Where the hell you going!?” That first time, Dean Wilson turned around, he just took his rifle, and he started running. “Private so and so I want you to get back where you were and you march up here!” So we had to march over there five times and then get back with the crowd. Oh, we never could hear, we were so small. We always had the disadvantage of being the last ones, and the DI’s used to be way up front here. So I was always in trouble.²⁰³

Dean recounted a similar memory in his personal interview:

One time... I guess there were, oh, about twenty or thirty platoons out there... this great big parade ground. They’re all giving orders, you know, to their platoon. Count cadence. So we couldn’t hear our... blonde Corporal. (laughs)...the one that wanted us to count in Navajo. Anyway... we were going they had it in reverse. We were going first this time. Boy! Rifle, you know. I guess he hollered, “To the rear, march!” And these guys went... We were still going. Way down there! Finally I think it was Bitsie looked. “Hey!” he says. “Where’s our platoon?” So we stop and look back. So of course that evening... we always get... extra duty, I guess they call it. We call it punishment.²⁰⁴

“Extra duty” was par for the course in basic recruit training. Some experienced it more often than others, and Wilsie Bitsie, by his own admission, was the biggest troublemaker among the Navajo recruits. One such chore, he remembered, was giving Sergeant Duffy, a bulldog and the Marine Corps mascot, a bath. He said:

So I had to work off those demerits on Saturday and it was always the dog! Always the dog! Dirty! I’d wash his ears out. I’d take a swab and swab his ears, swab his nose, clean him up around the head, then shampoo his whole body! Clean out that little house. Do it with Lysol, rake up around that little yard of his, cut the grass. Oh man, let me tell you that dog!²⁰⁵

It appeared that the other Navajo recruits didn’t make it any easier for Bitsie, either:

Most of our boys, they hardly ever talked. They didn’t talk much. Every time something would come up they’d say, “Hey Chick! You go see them

²⁰³ Wilsie Bitsie, interview by Sally McClaine, June 2, 1993, Sally McClaine Collection, Navajo Nation Museum, Folder16.

²⁰⁴ Dean Wilson, interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

²⁰⁵ Wilsie Bitsie interview, June 2, 1993, Sally McClaine Collection, Navajo Nation Museum, Folder16.

DI's, go over and ask them." Then I'd go over there and make (a) mistake of some kind. I wasn't standing straight, or I didn't salute right, or my eyes were crooked or something. Then they'd get a bang out of it. But I was always the spokesman for the platoon. John Benally he used to always tell me, "Go on over there! Go on!" He had a Masters! He could talk a blue streak but he'd never talk to the DI's!"²⁰⁶

Drill instructors played a crucial role in the development of a Marine. Charged with the initial training of a platoon, drill instructors were notorious for their straightforward, gruff, and often crass tactics in molding men into Marines. They were the bane of a recruit's existence during training and recruits often had mixed feelings about their drill instructors. Chester's memory was pretty typical.

These DI instructors... Boy! They... (shakes his head) ... they holler at us, you know. They was doing everything to us, you know. And we couldn't keep up with them, you know. Five o'clock in the morning, everybody's out front, you know. Calisthenic. Run around the... run around the beach. They used to give us a bucket... aluminum bucket... fill it with wet sand... carry it around. And some of the guys they use to poop out, you know.²⁰⁷

Platoon 382 had three drill instructors. Sergeant L. J. Stephenson, who my father described as "a lanky Tennessean with a shrill voice and a manner to match."²⁰⁸ He had two assistants, Corporal L. Kohl, and Corporal R.J. Hays, a man that, many of the men remembered, was part Cherokee. Each of these instructors inscribed his own memories on the men. One such memorable occurrence happened when Sergeant Stephenson decided to give the recruits a boxing lesson. After some unsuccessful attempts to get the recruits to deliver some meaningful punches, Stephenson lined them up and proceeded to

²⁰⁶ Ibid. It appears that John Benally did not attend college. His military personnel file indicates he graduated from Santa Fe Indian School in 1937 and he was employed as a silversmith and instructor at the Tuba City Indian School from 1938 to 1942 when he enlisted in the Marine Corps. Benally did, however, go on to become one of the instructors for the Navajo Communications School that trained new Code Talkers, and he was the only member of the "first twenty-nine" who made the rank of Sergeant.

²⁰⁷ Chester Nez, interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

²⁰⁸ Henry & Georgia Greenberg, *Power of a Navajo: Carl Gorman: The Man and His Life* (Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 1996), 58.

yell in each recruit's face, punching and jabbing each with his boxing gloves. Some of the recruits punched back, but not aggressively enough to please Stephenson. When he reached my father, Carl, and yelled into his face, he also swung hard. My father ducked, faked a right punch, and whacked his drill instructor with his left. Stephenson fell backwards and slid across the highly polished floor. For days after, several of my dad's comrades worried that he would be brought up on charges, perhaps dismissed from the Marine Corps, but nothing happened. Everybody assumed that Stephenson was too embarrassed by the incident to pursue a formal reprimand.²⁰⁹

Some of the recruits, like Dean Wilson, credit Kohl, even though he appeared not to be well liked, for the idea of counting cadence in Navajo.

This Corporal. This blonde. Kohl is his name. He was... kind of the nasty one of the three. He used to make us count in Navajo. He'd say, "Count cadence...mmm No! "Navajo count cadence!" he used to say. And everybody at first would look at each other. Ahh! Boy! He'd get after us! And then after a while somebody would say, Tááła'í." Nobody would say anything. And then they'd start in, you know. Different ones. "Naaki, táá'." So then, after a while, I guess these guys caught on and they... they'd start saying things in Navajo about him, you know!²¹⁰

A large portion of the recruit training was devoted to the intricacies of shooting and caring for a weapon. The men had to learn to carry it, clean it, disassembled and reassembled it, as well as fire it. Two weeks were devoted exclusively to the Rifle Range located at Camp Matthews, California, where recruits learned to shoot several types of

²⁰⁹ I heard this story all my life, both my father's version as well as Dean Wilson, John Brown, and Eugene Crawford. There is a published version in my father's biography, *Power of a Navajo: Carl Gorman, The Man and His Life* by Henry and Georgia Greenberg. This account is my personal recollection of how my father told the story to me.

²¹⁰ Dean Wilson, interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

weaponry and from various positions. On 30 May they went to the rifle range.²¹¹ Wilson explained:

But for a small group we had... Later we were told that we were, that we... did a pretty good job. Even Bitsie. (laughs) You know that rifle stock is kind of long. Barely get it in there. (mimicking putting rifle stock in the crook of his shoulder) Let out a round. He falls back, so couch has to hold him down. So... everyone qualified you know. Marksman was barely qualification and sharp shooter. Expert. That's what... 30 caliber and then pistol. Both.²¹²

In early June, Fred Daiker, who, since the meeting in March between the Marine Corps and the Indian Service, was now the assistant commissioner of Indian Affairs, wrote to Colonel Wethered Woodworth and requested more information about an all-Navajo platoon that was featured in a small article appearing in the border town newspaper of Gallup, New Mexico, on May 23. Daiker wanted to know if these Navajo recruits were connected to the discussions conducted a few months earlier between the colonel and the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C., in which Daiker had attended.²¹³

Colonel Woodworth immediately requested information from the commander of the Recruit Depot in San Diego, and on 16 June, he received a detailed response from the commanding officer of the Recruit Depot, Lieutenant Colonel George T. Hall. The platoon, Hall commented, was expected to graduate on 27 June 1942 and would be transferred to Amphibious Corps where they would be assigned "special duty in connection with communications." The Commander expressed rare high praise for a platoon of raw recruits:

²¹¹ Memorandum to the Commandant from Commanding Officer, Recruit Depot, Marine Corps Base, San Diego, 16 June 1942, RG127 Entry 18A Box 600 Folder 14, National Archives at College Park.

²¹² Dean Wilson, interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

²¹³ Daiker to Lt. Colonel Wethered Woodworth, 6 June 1942, RG127, Entry 18A, Box 600, Folder 14, National Archives at College Park.

This group has done exceptionally well at this Depot. They are tractable, attentive and loyal. At an early date they developed an exceptionally high esprit de Corps. They have already fired pistol record practice; 76% qualified (general average for recruits has been about 70%). They fire rifle record practice 19 June. Preliminary records indicate that a high percentage of qualification will be attended.

This group of 29 men is still intact, none has dropped back due to sickness, disciplinary action or lack of ability to keep up with the rest of the group. This is unusual. There is a usual attrition of from five to ten per cent in ordinary platoons. Their progress has been highly satisfactory.²¹⁴

Additionally, the commander sent a copy of the *Marine Corps Chevron* article, dated 16 May, and three Base Public Relation photographs of the platoon; it is likely Woodworth passed this material on to the Indian Service. One of these photographs appeared on the front the cover of the May-June issue of *Indians at Work*, an Indian Service publication.²¹⁵

Platoon 382 graduated from boot camp training on schedule, and once again, the *Marine Corps Chevron* featured an article that touted their accomplishments. The all-Navajo platoon had received high scores in every phase of their recruit training, and on the Rifle Range, as a group, had a firing record of 93.1. In a speech delivered at their graduation, the commanding officer of the Marine Base, Colonel James L. Underhill, praised the Navajo Marines as “one of the outstanding platoons in the history of this Recruit Depot.”

After seven grueling weeks at boot camp the twenty-nine men who made up Platoon 382 had proven themselves quite capable, both physically and mentally, to become United States Marines. Their ability to survive with only rudimentary

²¹⁴ Commanding Officer, Recruit Depot, Marine Corps Base, San Diego, to the Commandant, United States Marine Corps, memorandum, 16 June 1942, RG127, Entry 18A, Box 600, Folder 14, National Archives at College Park.

²¹⁵It is the author’s assumption that these are two of the three photographs that Colonel Hall mentioned as enclosures in his report. He credits the Base Public Relations sections for the images.

accouterments as well as their extraordinary aptitude to adapt to a military regiment surprised the Marine Corps. In articles written about the platoon during their training period, the Corps attributed these remarkable feats solely to the fact that, as Native Americans, they somehow possessed a special quality different from other recruits. In reality, these men came from an existence where skills in basic wilderness survival as well as the ability to shoot accurately with a rifle were learned from an early age. In the first half of the twentieth century, life of the Navajo Reservation, remote and far-removed from any modern conveniences of the day, necessitated these basic skills because without them, it could mean the difference between life and death. On the other hand, their ability to accommodate to military structure came from their experiences in federal Indian boarding schools. Regimented schedules were part of their daily existence. Marching, calisthenics, and even military-style punishments such as solitary confinement or extra chores, were part of their daily school existence.

Chapter Four - The Code

*Everything was taken into consideration, even the material put into it. And even what we thought and the spiritual value of certain items would go into it. This is what we batted around all day. Sometime maybe we just get two done, but when we did five that was real good.*²¹⁶

Wilsie Bitsie

The “first twenty-nine” fully expected, and were eagerly anticipating, the standard furlough granted Marines following the grueling seven-week boot camp. Chester Nez, in his memoirs, *Code Talker*, recalled that immediately following graduation they were approached by a Marine officer who told them that their “mission was very critical,” and they would not receive a furlough.²¹⁷ Instead, they were bussed to Camp Elliott, home of the Amphibious Corps Pacific Fleet, to begin communications training.

The thirteen weeks between Platoon 382’s graduation on 27 June and the men’s assignment to their combat units on 26 September are one of the least documented times of their training, yet it was the most vital part of the Navajo Code Talker program overall. Most of this phase has been pieced together from the “first twenty-nine” oral-history interviews as well the published memoir of the last survivor, Chester Nez. Additionally, the recollections of John Hood, a former sergeant in the Marine Corps Signal Group who trained the “first twenty-nine” in communications, also help to contextualize this

²¹⁶ Group interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

²¹⁷ Chester Nez with Judith Schiess, *Code Talker* (New York: Berkley Caliber, 2011), 101.

chapter.²¹⁸ Conversely, only a handful of the available Marine Corps sources that allude to this period, and only one directly concerns the original group.

The Amphibious Corps at Camp Elliott had been preparing for the arrival of the Navajo Marines, and once they had arrived no time was lost in briefing them on their “special assignment.” They were to develop a code in their native language that would be used to send voice messages over radio and field telephones in combat areas in the Pacific operations. They would be taught how to operate radio equipment and to familiarize themselves with the standard operating codes of the day.

John W. Hood, a young communications sergeant at Camp Elliott, was placed in charge of their communications training. His company commander had assigned two Corporals, Massey and Caddel, to assist him. Their job was to train the Navajos “in the use of all of our types of communication equipment and procedures. This would include Field Telephone, TBX Radio, SCR Portable Radio, Semaphore and the International Morse Code.”²¹⁹

Sergeant Hood and his team were assigned a quanset hut where they trained the Navajos in morse code. According to Hood, they had set up tables, each one to accommodate ten men, and wired the individual stations with headphones and keys to send and receive messages in morse code. Outside the hut, they had placed radios and telephone equipment for field training.²²⁰ Hood explained their daily schedule:

²¹⁸ In 2001, Hood shared his reminiscences on tape with me and my mother, Mary Gorman. In 1994, Hood and his wife, Geraldine, made a special trip to the Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial at Gallup, New Mexico, in hopes of contacting some of the “first twenty-nine” Navajo Code Talkers. He reunited with my father, Carl Gorman, that year. Two years later, Hood and his wife visited again, and then in 1999, the year my father died, they were able to reconnect with Wilsie Bitsie.

²¹⁹ Cassette tape and transcription of personal remembrances by John W. Hood sent to Mary and Zonnie Gorman, Gorman family collection, 2001.

²²⁰ Ibid.

The day would extend from 800 hours to 1700 hours when they would return to their own barracks. There would be a 10-minute break in the A.M., 1 hour for noon chow and one 10-minute break in the P.M. Generally, the A.M. would be used learning and practicing the Morse Code and the P.M. learning how to use and practice with radio and field telephone equipment. Also, practicing to send and receive messages via semaphore.²²¹

Years before Hood shared his recollections with me, several of the “first twenty-nine” had reminisced in their interviews about learning the various methods of communication. John Brown recalled learning to use cipher cylinders.

There was some instruments that they used to decode information which they showed us. And there was one that I remember. It was, I mean, about eight inches long, about an inch and a quarter in diameter. It had all kinds of written...one, two, three. A,B,C, and all that and you had to kind of move it around so when you send a code which would be a message, they went ahead and taught us that.²²²

Dean Wilson, on the other hand, remembered when the group had to learn the Navy signaling systems such as semaphore and light blinkers. One simple method was utilizing a single flag. “You have to go... one way, dit, and the other way, dash,” explained Wilson.²²³ One day he had to run up a hill and execute a message using the flag. None of the Navajos were very impressed with the single-flag messaging system because it was cumbersome and time consuming. The men gave Wilson a hard time about his performance. Wilson explained: “And... shoot! By the time I executed my dit and dash I’d be dead, they said! Cuz you’re standing up there in the skyline, you know. So they didn’t go for that one!”²²⁴

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² John Brown, Jr. interview by Zonnie Gorman, August 6, 1991, Oral History Collection, University of Arizona library.

²²³ Dean Wilson interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

²²⁴ Ibid.

Learning the International Morse code seemed to be one of the more frustrating lessons the men encountered. Sergeant Hood remembered an incident when one of the recruits became so exasperated that he walked out:

One day, I was at the head table sending the English alphabet in Morse Code. All 29 had head-phones on and were trying to copy what they heard. Suddenly, one of them yelled something like “naztsiad,” yanked his headphones off, slammed them on the table and stomped out the front door. I immediately called a break and followed the man out. He was waiting outside, expecting to get a tongue-lashing from me, a Sergeant. However, I just asked quietly, “Hey man, what’s wrong?” At first, he couldn’t answer and then he said, “he just couldn’t get it.” He felt like he would never learn the Morse Code. I knew that all of them had been under a lot of stress and this wasn’t the time to push. So, I explained that his problem wasn’t any worse than when I was learning. I had the same frustrations trying to learn and at times, I just wanted to tear the headphones off too. I said, “Why don’t you just rest awhile then come on back in when you feel like it.” His buddies grouped around him and started talking to him. I went back inside and purposely let the break time extend much longer than usual. Actually, I waited until somebody yelled, “Hey Sarge – he’s ready to come back.” I said “Okay, let’s go!” Well from then on that person never complained anymore and all of the 29 learned the Morse Code well. Later that day, I asked Bitsie if he understood what the guy said when he ripped his head-phones off and he said, Yeah, it meant something like – to kill – or want to kill it.²²⁵

Little recognition has been given to the three, and possibly four other men who joined the “first twenty-nine” during this essential period and assisted in the creation of the original code. During interviews with members of the “first twenty-nine” some of the men recalled these three individuals by name: Ross Haskie, Wilson Price, and Felix Yazzie. Chester Nez recorded in his memoirs, *Code Talker*, that the “first twenty-nine” specifically requested these three individuals join them to “help us with the code.”²²⁶ McClain, in her book, *Navajo Weapon: The Navajo Code Talkers*, implied that the “first

²²⁵ Cassette tape and transcription of personal remembrances by John W. Hood sent to Mary and Zonnie Gorman, Gorman family collection, 2001.

²²⁶ Chester Nez with Judith Schiess, *Code Talker* (New York: Berkley Caliber, 2011), 109.

twenty-nine” were so frustrated with the difficulty of their job that they requested the help of these three men who were already on base.²²⁷

New research, suggests this is not entirely true. Ross Haskie and Wilson Price enlisted on 25 May 1942, two weeks after the “first twenty-nine.” Their military service records indicate that they were transferred to Camp Elliott to join the original group on 18 July, following their graduation from boot camp.²²⁸

Ross Haskie, who was twenty-six, had married in 1941 and was working as a teacher at the Tuba City Indian School when he enlisted. He had graduated from the Albuquerque Indian School in 1937, and in 1940 he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Industrial Arts from the Arizona State Teachers School in Flagstaff, Arizona.²²⁹ It is probable that some of the “first twenty-nine” specifically requested that Haskie join them. Chester Nez, Roy Begay, and Allen Dale June had been students at Tuba City Indian School and they likely knew him. John Benally probably knew him as well because he, too, had been teaching at Tuba City just before his enlistment.

Wilson Price, on the other hand, was twenty-one years old and from the community of Fort Defiance. He had attended school to the eighth grade in Fort Defiance and, at the time of his enlistment, was employed at the Navajo Medical Center.²³⁰

The third individual specifically named by some of the “first twenty-nine” was Felix Yazzie. He was twenty-two years old and had been a student at the Albuquerque Indian School when he enlisted. There is some discrepancy, however, in his timeline, which places some doubt about his presence on base at the time the Navajos were

²²⁷ Sally McClain, *Navajo Weapon: The Navajo Code Talkers* (Tucson: Rio Nuevo Publishers, no date), 54.

²²⁸ Ross Haskie, official military personnel file, National Archives at St Louis and Wilson H. Price, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

²²⁹ Ross Haskie, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

²³⁰ Wilson Price, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

devising the code. His official military personnel file indicates that he enlisted on 29 July 1942. This would place his graduation from boot camp in the middle of September, just about one week short of the original group's assignments to their combat units. And, indeed, his record shows that he transferred to communications training at Camp Elliott on 26 September. Surprisingly, however, his record also indicates that he was assigned to a combat unit, and served as a Navajo Code Talker with Headquarters, 2nd Raider Battalion, alongside two of the "first twenty-nine," Eugene Crawford and Wilsie Bitsie. It appears then that Yazzie may have been given special dispensation and allowed to join his fellow Navajos to help with the code, or it may be that he was just a fast learner.

There was a fourth individual who, by all appearances, participated with the original group, even though in recorded oral histories by members of the "first twenty-nine" he is never mentioned. Jesse Kenepah, a Navajo from Toadlena, New Mexico, had enlisted in the Marine Corps on 10 March 1942, nearly two months before the "first twenty-nine."²³¹ A memorandum, dated 16 June 1942, detailed the progress in boot camp of the original group of Navajos. It was sent to the commandant of the Marine Corps by the commanding general of the recruit depot and included the following point. "3. One Navajo Indian, Private Jesse Kennepah (sic) who was in training when the group referred to arrived, has already been transferred to the Amphibious Corps and assigned special duty in connection with communications."²³² Kenepah's official military personnel file indicates that he was indeed transferred on the first of June. It also shows that he was

²³¹ Jesse Kenepah, official military personnel file, National Archives at St. Louis.

²³² Memorandum to the Commandant from Commanding Officer, Recruit Depot, Marine Corps Base, San Diego, 16 June 1942, RG127 Entry 18A Box 600 Folder 14, National Archives at College Park. Kenepah is misspelled in this memorandum.

assigned to overseas duty with the first Signal Company, First Marine Division, along with seven of the “first twenty-nine.”²³³

Whether there were three men, or four men, who ultimately joined the “first twenty-nine,” it is evident that they did not all arrive at the same time. Nevertheless, Sergeant Hood remembered that one of the original group, William McCabe, was chosen by the other Navajos to be their “coordinator and recorder.” Hood also recalled that McCabe was the platoon leader and called cadence when the men would march in for class in the morning.²³⁴ McCabe, who died in 1976, had been interviewed five years earlier in Window Rock, during the first Navajo Code Talker “reunion.” According to McCabe, through a process of elimination among the men themselves, he was chosen to lead the group. He stated that he was the only one with some college education and that was why they chose him.²³⁵

Gleaned from other interviews, however, is that a core group of men was initially chosen to make some basic decisions about how to develop the code, and then, possibly, to serve as team leaders who oversaw the rest of the group. Dean Wilson, in his personal interview, remembered that several of the older men in the group were placed in charge:

Some of the older fellows like John Benally and your dad and Crawford and I forget how many of them. Those guys were kind of... kind of...overseeing the rest of us. We just kind of contributed to... “What shall we call this one?” They’d write on the board. Everybody’d say,

²³³ A memorandum in Kenepah’s official military personnel file from the Commandant of the Marine Corps to the Commanding Officer, Division Headquarters Battalion, First Marine Division, Fleet Marine Force dated 19 June 1943 lists him with the following “first twenty-nine.” James Dixon, Cosy S. Brown, Lloyd Oliver, John Chee, Sam H. Begay, Allen D. June, and William McCabe. This same document also appears in each of the official military personnel files for the same named men. Unfortunately, Kenepah’s file does not list him with the MOS 642 (Military Occupation Specialty) that designates him as a Code Talker. His name remains on the “not confirmed” listing from the 2001 Congressional Medal ceremony.

²³⁴ Cassette tape and transcription of personal remembrances by John W. Hood sent to Mary and Zonnie Gorman, Gorman family collection, 2001.

²³⁵ William McCabe interview by John D. Sylvester and Benjamin Lee, July 10, 1971, Doris Duke Number 1171, transcript, American Indian Oral History Project, Western History Center, University of Utah, 4.

“Why don’t you call it this?” “No, this one!” “No!” Finally they’d decide on something. So then that would be it... and then another one.²³⁶

In his interview, Wilsie Bitsie related his personal memories about this core group. Rather than McCabe, Bitsie remembered that the college-educated man chosen for the group was Ross Haskie, one of the men who joined the men at Camp Elliott:

Carl, myself, and John Benally were taken into a little room. They told me that a... well Ross had quite a bit of college education and so he kind of was the moderator. And they just shoved us in there. Now you four here are the brains of these others out here. You’re going to have to work out something. You’re going to have to work out a code of some kind. So we sat there. We didn’t know what to think. We sat behind those bars and kept thinking. Finally it hit us. We would go by animals; birds of the air, fish of the sea and all that. And then after we got that then we went back to our regular outfit.²³⁷

Bitsie was much younger than most of these men, but he was opinionated and straightforward, and was not afraid to state his mind. As noted in the last chapter, this quality often got him into trouble during boot camp. When it came to the creation of the code, however, his exuberance was an asset. It is not surprising, then, that Bitsie was included in the core group. He stated:

The beginning was only the four of us to see what words we could use or how we could go about it. And that this was not... we were... we were not a committee so to speak. But we just chose some words to bring back and kind of... bring to the group. And then after that we told them what this really was. And then we got together and we all worked together, everybody. Just like I said, we really had good input. We worked up the alphabet. We worked on that and that’s where we started with the alphabet.²³⁸

²³⁶ Dean Wilson, interviewed by Zonnie Gorman, 21 April 1990, Oral History Collection, University of Arizona library.

²³⁷ Wilsie Bitsie, group interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

²³⁸ Ibid.

Wilsie Bitsie and Oscar Ilthma, according to McCabe, came up with the idea about how to code the alphabet.²³⁹ They suggested creating it in a similar fashion to the International Phonetic Alphabet. Each letter would be designated a word. That word would be in English. However, it would have to be a word that, when said in Navajo, did not start with the same letter. According to McCabe, Ilthma was familiar with this form of coding because his father, who was German, had served in World War I.²⁴⁰ It is also possible, however, that Ilthma was familiar with the technique of alphabetical coding because he had five years of military experience with the Kansas National Guard when he was a student at Haskell Institute. Years later, Bitsie, who was part of the core group, shared an example he created for the word THE:

And one word in particular always gets me. And that's Turkey Horse Elk. That was one that always got me because that was one of the first words that I brought up. I used it as an example. And how you gonna do that? And so finally we got down to business and then we started getting real good input. And everybody there. I mean they just...were just wonderful!²⁴¹

Whatever it was that the core group did, the entire group worked together to create the Navajo code. For the men, the discussions ran deeper than what word they might use to substitute for another word, or how to structure a coded term. As Navajos, they grappled with deeper issues. The Marine Corps wanted them to take their language, something sacred and central to Navajo existence, and utilize it for war purposes. This would have been diametrically opposed to their upbringing because, for Navajos, the very act of speaking is intimately connected and deeply entwined with the epistemological conception of self, community, and universe.

²³⁹ William McCabe interview by John D. Sylvester and Benjamin Lee, July 10, 1971, Doris Duke Number 1171, transcript, American Indian Oral History Project, Western History Center, University of Utah, 7.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, 7.

²⁴¹ Wilsie Bitsie, group interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

The Navajos consider the spoken word as powerful and sacred. The way in which one physically voices thoughts, ideas, and emotions into the world affects causality. Voice, or more specifically “speech,” is the manifestation of thought. Good and evil, in and of themselves do not exist, but rather, they are what is created by the power of thought, speech, and action. In order to maintain harmony, a person must be mindful of these processes. There is a personal responsibility for what occurs, and therefore certain observances are practiced, or avoided.

Navajo religious perspectives are deeply tied to this conceptional framework of causality. If balance is disrupted, then harmony must be restored through ritual song, prayers, and ceremonials in which the power of the spoken word is central. Harmony relies not only on what is said, but how, and in what way it is said. For example, the specific repetition in chants of the words, phrases, and concepts, as well as the number of times they are repeated, all play into the restoration of harmony and balance.²⁴²

These beliefs and practices are an integral part of Navajo existence and everyday life, and in the 1940s, these conceptualizations of the world were exceedingly intruded upon by Western ideology. For Navajo men, and native men in general, World War II and their service in the Armed Forces challenged them both physically and conceptually. Opposing cultural constructions of identity, philosophy, and belief challenged them in ways that forced them to vacillate between Navajo and white notions of masculinity.

²⁴² There have been many studies published on Navajo religion, ceremonialism, and philosophy, as well as on specific Navajo ceremonies and chants. In relation to this general conversation, see Leland C. Wyman, *Blessingway* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1970); Berard Haile, O.F.M., *Soul Concepts of the Navaho* (Cincinnati: The Franciscan Missionary Union, 1943/1964); James Kale McNeley, *Holy Wind in Navajo Philosophy* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1981); John R. Farella, *The Main Stalk: A Synthesis of Navajo Philosophy* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990); and Gary Witherspoon, *Navajo Language and Art in Navajo Universe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977).

The internalized struggle to find a middle ground is illustrated in Chester's response, illustrated in both his words and in his hesitations, about the appropriateness of using the Navajo language for war purposes:

That's got something to do with our religion, you know. So they... some of the guys they didn't think that was right. But uh... when we started to name all these animals, you know. And all these creatures and stuff like that, you know. Uh... we gradually, you know, forgot, you know, what uh... some of these things that were related to our religion, you know. We...we... we gradually forgot, you know, and said, "Well... we might as well go ahead and use it," ... you know. If that's what a... what our commander, the general wants... and uh...we're just going to have to do it.²⁴³

According to several of the men, the discussions about the language continued throughout the process of creating the code, particularly concerning the use of animals or natural phenomena. Discussions were lengthy and all aspects considered. Bitsie, in a group interview, stated that if they came out with five coded words a day that was really productive. His comrades readily agreed.²⁴⁴

As mentioned earlier, the men worked on the alphabet first, which they all remember being rather simple to create. Once it was completed, they turned their attention to other words. Wilson explained:

We went through the alphabet, went through the ranks, the rank system, from private on all the way to the general and then some of the terminologies that the military used. And then, of course, names of equipment that are always used; tanks, trucks, other things, ammunition and what... what generally constitutes a message.²⁴⁵

These "other words" were part of a much larger list that was quite extensive. It included ranks or officers, military organization, communications terminology, airplanes,

²⁴³ Chester Nez, interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

²⁴⁴ Wilsie Bitsie, group interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

²⁴⁵ Dean Wilson, interview by Zonnie Gorman, April 21, 1990, Oral History Collection, University of Arizona library.

ships, calendar months, and a general vocabulary. The number of terms the initial code contained is a matter of contention. According to Doris Paul in *The Navajo Code Talkers*, the “first twenty-nine” developed code terms for 211 words in addition to the alphabet. Together this made 237 terms. This has become the accepted number in the original code, in part, because her book was the first publication about the Navajo Code Talkers.

However, while growing up, I heard men like my father and Dean Wilson, consistently say that the original group created several more code terms than Doris Paul credited them with in her book. Years later, when I conducted my own interviews with members of the “first twenty-nine,” they asserted that there had been more terms. One specific example was the names of several countries, which Paul listed, sixteen in total, in a category of additions she claimed were created by Navajos who followed the “first twenty-nine” into the service.

In comparison, Sally McClain, in the appendices to her book, *Navajo Weapon: The Navajo Code Talkers*, lists 253 terms in her version of the “Original Code.”²⁴⁶ McClain chose to include the names of the countries from later additions and placed them in the original code. Furthermore, she added several Navajo terms for English punctuation marks such as periods and commas. These too, she took from later versions of the code. It is unfortunate, however, that she offered no explanation as to why she did this.

Following work sessions on the code, the men had to turn in all papers. Bitise remembered that there was no trash can, only a “scribble basket.” Any papers they used

²⁴⁶ Sally McClain, *Navajo Weapon: The Navajo Code Talkers* (Tucson: Rio Nuevo Publishers, no date) – Appendix 3, 251. The description of the appended list states that there are “263 terms” in the original code. The list itself in McClain’s book has 253 terms. (italics mine).

for notes had to go into this basket, and at the end of the day, it was removed by communication personnel. One day Bitsie asked a sergeant what they did with the papers. “Oh we go through it and if we find anything that’s worth using, we keep it,” he was told. The thought of communication personnel trying to figure out what Navajo words they may have “scribbled” on the papers were worth keeping was hilarious to Bitsie.²⁴⁷

As the creation of the code progressed, the men practiced in the evenings in their barracks after lights out. Because the nature of their work was secret, the Marine Corps had quartered them in their own barracks. This offered an ideal place to go over what they had developed during the day, and the practice helped them commit the code to memory. Coming from an oral tradition where memory was a natural part of their upbringing, memorizing the code was not as difficult as creating it. McCabe explained: “Well, in Navajo everything is in memory... from the songs, prayers, everything... it’s all in memory. So we didn’t have no trouble... that’s the way we were raised up.”²⁴⁸

In addition to the uncertainty of what the original code contained, there is also no absolute consensus on how much time was spent developing it. Among the men themselves, a few recalled that the process was a matter of three or four weeks, while others believed that it took up to eight weeks. Most recalled that they worked on the code at the same time they were learning to use the radios and field telephones as well as the standard codes they had to learn.

Although Sergeant Hood, their communications instructor, was not privy to the specific details in the composition of the code, he corroborated that the Navajos must

²⁴⁷ Wilsie Bitsie, group interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

²⁴⁸ William McCabe interview by John D. Sylvester and Benjamin Lee, July 10, 1971, Doris Duke Number 1171, transcript, American Indian Oral History Project, Western History Center, University of Utah, 7.

have been working on it during part, if not all, of the six or seven weeks that he trained them. During breaks he would hear snatches of conversation between the men:

Based on conversations during the 10-minute breaks at our communications class during the day, they must have had a frustrating time agreeing on specific Navajo words to be used in the code. Even then, there would be small groups discussing the suggestions made the night before. Anyway they got it done, and nobody helped them do it!”²⁴⁹

Under the stressful conditions, and not being allowed a furlough, the men were not immune to feeling a little down and homesick at times. Hood shared a memory of one of these moments:

Bitsie was sitting alone which was unusual. He was always laughing and talking with different groups during our breaks. I went over to see if he wanted company. He did and he was very homesick. He talked to me and said he would sure like to talk to his folks, especially his grandmother. I just let him talk and then told him that I had experienced the same thing after being away from home during the first year, but that it went away after a period of time. However, I suggested he call home if he could make contact that way.

The next day he was in good spirits and told me that he didn't get in touch with any of his folks because none of them had a telephone, but he called Gallup and talked to the operator for quite awhile. She knew a lot of people he knew and that was a real help to him just talking to someone from his home area. I said, “Well, did you get her name?” He said, “Sure did, it's Irene Fulsom.” I said, “Hey Bitsie, I knew a girl by that name in Oklahoma. She was a very pretty Choctaw girl and I was sweet on her.”²⁵⁰

Hood himself was part Choctaw and had grown up in Oklahoma, and he developed an easy rapport with the men. He had joined the Marine Corps when he was sixteen and by the time he was eighteen, he was well versed in military communications.²⁵¹

Once the Navajos completed the code and committed it to memory, they were run through several field exercises: ground-to-ground, ship-to-shore, and air-to-ground

²⁴⁹ Cassette tape and transcription of personal remembrances by John W. Hood sent to Mary and Zonnie Gorman, Gorman family collection, 2001.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ John H. Hood, pers. comm. with author, 2000.

simulations. According to several of the Navajos, high-ranking Marine Corps officers witnessed some of these exercises. They recalled how amazed they were at the speed and accuracy with which the messages were sent. Some of the Navajos remembered that the officers made them send the same messages over and over again just to prove that they were not cheating. McCabe described the exercise:

And the general was coming down there. They sent a message, 'send this', and we sent it. They send a runner down there, "Bring the other message back!' And he compares the message we sent, it comes out perfect. They said, 'I don't understand it. You seen your buddy over there, so why don't we go in the next room. Get behind the house or something where you don't see him.' So we go over and try again, and send the message. He'd be behind the house hiding and he'll have a guard over him so that nobody will come and tell him what kind of message he's suppose to be receiving. They think that we was trying to give them sign language or we was trying to... Yeah. They thought that we have a man already seen the message.²⁵²

The utter disbelief expressed by the Marine officers worried the Navajos. My father remembered one officer who kept shaking his head every time a message was relayed. "We thought, 'Gee, he doesn't like it!'" my dad declared. When they completed their field maneuvers, the officer asked them: "How in the hell could you do this? It's so fast!" The Navajos realized he was not disappointed, but amazed at their speed. William McCabe, my dad recalled, told him: "It's all in our head here. We got all that code in our head."²⁵³

According to William McCabe in his 1971 interview, and later, in Wilsie Bitsie's interview in 1992, one of these field exercises alarmed the U.S. Naval Intelligence Service. Apparently, some unintelligible radio message had been intercepted and, for three weeks, the Naval cryptographers attempted to decipher it. Eventually, some of the

²⁵² William McCabe interview by John D. Sylvester and Benjamin Lee, July 10, 1971, Doris Duke Number 1171, transcript, American Indian Oral History Project, Western History Center, University of Utah, 9.

²⁵³ Carl Gorman, interview by Zonnie Gorman with Silver Cloud Video Productions, [1990-1992].

Navajo Marines were taken to North Island. McCabe recalled that he sent John Benally, while Bitsie claimed that he too, had been there. Whatever the case may be, the message was identified, the Navajos hustled out of the room and off the Naval base, and no more was said about it.²⁵⁴

As the early days of fall approached, the Navajos had completed the difficult task of creating a unique voice code in their native language. They had field tested it to the satisfaction of the Marine Corps, and now, once again, looked forward to some time off. Several thought about the chance to go home, even for a few short days, and visit families they had not seen for over four months. Instead, their commanding officers briefed them on the critical situation in the Pacific. Since the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the United States' official entrance into the war, the Japanese advances had been alarming. The Navajos had forged a special code that was fast and accurate, and they were desperately needed in the Pacific.

Again, the men faced disappointment. They were not to receive their furlough, but instead, were advanced to their assignments.²⁵⁵ Twenty-seven of the original group, along with the men who had joined them, would be divided between the First and Second Marine Divisions and assigned to various units. Two of the original group, John Benally and Johnny Manuelito, remained stateside to help recruit more Navajos for the new program, and to serve as the first instructors in the Navajo code.

The original group of Navajo Code Talkers, the "first twenty-nine," and the few Navajo men who joined them in communications training at Camp Elliott developed the

²⁵⁴ William McCabe interview by John D. Sylvester and Benjamin Lee, July 10, 1971, Doris Duke Number 1171, transcript, American Indian Oral History Project, Western History Center, University of Utah, 9-13. Wilsie Bitsie, interview by Sally McClaine, June 2, 1993, Sally McClaine Collection, Navajo Nation Museum, Folder16.

²⁵⁵ Carl Gorman, interview by Zonnie Gorman, March 16, 1990, Oral History Collection, University of Arizona library. Also mentioned by Chester Nez in his memoirs, *Code Talker*, 114.

initial Navajo code of some two hundred terms. When the Marine Corps initially asked the Navajos to develop a code in their native language for use in the war, the men's first reaction was one of consternation. Navajo beliefs in the sacredness of the physical act of speech as well as the use of language to affect the world in which one lives was intimately woven into their psyches as Navajos. These cultural values profoundly shaped the process by which they considered and then chose the words to use in the code. What these men created proved to be a reliably fast and accurate means of secure communications and laid a solid foundation of what would become an unbreakable voice code that greatly contributed to the American victories in the Pacific campaigns during World War II.

Conclusion

The beginning of what would become the Navajo Code Talker program has received only rudimentary attention in most popular narratives written to date, with the exception in very recent years of Chester Nez's memoirs. This, in part, is due to a lack of substantive material, but also because most narratives have placed more emphasis on the presentation and pitch of the idea to the Marine Corps. This thesis has attempted to broaden that canvas and refocus the lens on the pilot group of Navajos, known as the "first twenty-nine," who were recruited specifically to develop a code in their language and to test its feasibility. It was the genius, determination, and hard work of the initial twenty-nine Navajos, and the few additional men who joined them after boot camp, that proved beyond doubt that a viable combat code in the Navajo language would be highly effective.

The recently disclosed oral history interviews with a half dozen of the original "first twenty-nine" and the plethora of new primary documents have added new voices and generated a deeper resonance to the narrative about the early phase of the Navajo Code Talker program. This thesis has reevaluated and expanded each component part of the initial phase: the conception to utilize Navajos and its introduction to the Marine Corps in February of 1942; the recruitment of the original group of men; their subsequent training as Marines and as communication personnel; and ultimately the creation of the initial Navajo code.

Earlier research recognized that the use of Native American languages by military organizations was not a concept original to World War II. The U.S. Army had utilized indigenous languages in World War I and continued, even expanded, their use in World War II. However, the idea to utilize the Navajo language for combat communications was also not new when war was officially declared by the United States in December of 1941. New documents indicate that the idea to use Navajo, along with several other indigenous languages, was submitted to the military by Robert Young, a civilian and linguist, as early as 1940. His enthusiasm, though, was met with reserve from the U.S. Army, which, as it turned out, was already quite familiar with the concept.

Unlike the U.S. Army, the Marine Corps had no experience with the use of indigenous languages for communications. When approached in 1942 by another civilian, Philip Johnston, the Marine Corps leadership immediately recognized its potential for a secure means of communication. Even though the data that Johnston provided as an “expert” on Navajos was less than academic, the Marine Corps nonetheless was eager to test its possibilities.

The “first twenty-nine” recruited as the pilot for the program proved their capabilities in a number of ways to the Marine Corps. As early as boot camp, these young men set themselves apart. They adapted well to military life, and remained intact as a group throughout their training. None dropped out due to illness, lack of ability, or discipline problems. As the group neared the end of boot camp, the commanding officer of the Recruit Depot pointed out in a memorandum to the commandant the unusual nature of their record. The Navajo recruits received high accolades at their graduation and

scored one of the highest firing records on the rifle range of any platoon to go through boot camp in the history of the California recruit depot.

Earlier research suggested that only one team of recruiters sent was to the Navajo reservation; the mobile recruit unit from San Francisco, California. However, recently discovered documents reveal that there were two teams. The second unit was dispatched from the regional recruitment headquarters in Phoenix, Arizona. Major Shannon was placed in charge, and he established a temporary station in Window Rock, Arizona. He and his team targeted three major federal Indian boarding schools: Wingate Industrial School; the Shiprock boarding school; and the Tuba City boarding school. This information, as well as the number of volunteers recruited out of a specific school, has been hitherto unknown. An examination of the official military personnel files for the “first twenty-nine,” along with supplemental information provided in interviews with three men who were students at the time (Chester Nez, Dean Wilson, and an earlier published interview of Cozy Stanly Brown) reveal that fifteen of the twenty-nine young men were recruited from these specifically named schools.

The missing “thirtieth man” also appears to have been recruited from a federal boarding school. George Clinton’s official military personnel file from the U.S. Army indicates that he was either a student, an employee, or both, at the Wingate Industrial School in the spring of 1942. The major discovery of his name as the missing recruit has solved a decades-old mystery and has dynamically refashioned the narrative surrounding the recruitment of the “first twenty-nine.”

The second Marine Corps team, led by First Sergeant Frank Shinn, chose to set up its mobile recruit unit near the Navajo Medical Center in Fort Defiance, Arizona. It

appears that Shinn recruited the additional fourteen men, and from information pulled from their official military personnel files, it has been ascertained that they were all high school graduates and employed in some capacity with the federal government. Several were also married.

The most distinctive voices emerging to reshape the narrative are the Navajo men themselves. In newly disclosed interviews, along with Chester Nez's memoirs, and a handful of other published and unpublished interviews, the "first twenty-nine" shared their memories, thoughts, emotions, and personal stories, often humorous, sometimes tragic. Additionally the recollections of Sergeant John W. Hood are the first known accounts from a former Marine directly involved in the communications instruction of the Navajos at Camp Elliott.

The most vital aspect of this first phase of the Navajo Code Talker program was the creation of the Navajo code. While most published narratives have engaged in lengthy analysis of the linguistic qualities of the Navajo language, what was foremost in the men's minds was the propriety of utilizing the Navajo language for war, as argued in the final chapter of this thesis.

The initial phase of the Navajo Code Talker program was vital to the creation of what would become one of the Marine Corps' most critical weapons during World War II: the ability to send and receive fast, accurate, and secure combat messages without fear of the enemy comprehending them. The credit for the origins of this combat code belongs solely to the "first twenty-nine," and the men who joined them to create it.

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