UNBREAKABLE:
The Navajo Code Talkers

How did the United States and the Allies conquer the enemy in World War II? You probably know about the D-Day invasion on the coast of Normandy, and you've likely learned about the atomic bomb. But what about the Navajo Code Talkers?

The United States developed many complex strategies during World War II in the 1940s. One of those strategies was the use of the Navajo Code Talkers. They were credited for success in difficult battles, including Iwo Jima, an intense battle between the U.S. Marines and the Imperial Japanese Army. "They sent and received over 800 messages without an error. Were it not for the Navajo Code Talkers, the Marines never would have taken Iwo Jima," said Fifth Marine Division Signal Officer Major Howard Conner.

Navajo recruits had to be between 16 and 35 years of age. Since there were no birth records available, many lied about their age.

A Promising Idea

After Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the United States entered World War II. Secret forms of communication were crucial, but it was very difficult to find a code that could not be cracked by the skilled Japanese **cryptographers**, those who code and decode messages.

Philip Johnston, a civil engineer from Los Angeles and a World War I veteran, had an idea. He remembered that Native Americans had been used as code talkers in World War I. Having grown up on a Navajo reservation himself, he thought that the military should base a secret code on the Navajo language.

In 1942, the Navajo language was nearly obsolete. That means very few people still spoke it. Navajo was not a written language, and schools did not allow students to speak it. In addition, it was a very complex language with peculiar, unfamiliar sounds. One word in Navajo could mean four different things depending on the way it was said.

Johnston felt certain it could work. He traveled to the U.S. Marine Corps Camp Elliot near San Diego, California. In a meeting with Signal Corp Communications Officer Lieutenant Colonel James E. Jones, Philip Johnston convinced him to use his idea.

The New Navajo Plan

The U.S. Marines began recruiting Navajo quickly. Many had never even left the reservation. Twenty-nine Navajo were recruited and trained at Camp Elliot as United States Marines. They worked to create more than 200 new Navajo words for military terms and memorized them. They also devised a 26-letter alphabet to code. Using translations of simple English words, they assigned Navajo words to each letter of the alphabet. With this new code, the Navajo could transmit messages in seconds. This was a huge improvement over the 30 minutes normally required for the machines at the time.

Code Talkers were given messages in English. They would translate the message to Navajo code and quickly send it on to another Navajo to receive the message. It would be written down in English and recorded. Now, the original message could be passed on to those who needed it. "The commanding officer, they give you a message that's written. It's just short talking about how much ammunition and certain map area that Marines are getting killed. They need more machine gun ammunition. You translate that as small as you can," said John Brown, Jr., Navajo Code Talker, in a 2004 interview.

Navajo Talkers in the Bougainville operation in December 1943. (USMC official photo)

Once in battle, the Code Talkers found themselves in very serious situations. In the middle of the battlefield, their messages could be the difference between winning and losing a battle. They also affected how many lives were lost.

Unbreakable

The Navajo Code Talkers and the secret code they created were a success. After their first battle, more Navajo were requested. In every battle, two communication systems were used. An English system was used for unclassified messages, and a Navajo system was used for all top secret communication. The Code Talkers worked in teams of two, in small holes that had been dug out in the ground, for hours on end. "We were almost always needed to transmit information, to ask for supplies and ammunition, and to discuss strategies. And after each transmission, to avoid Japanese fire, we had to move," Chester Nez wrote in his book *Code Talker*.

The secret Navajo code is the only spoken military code to never have been deciphered. In 2001, President George W. Bush presented the 29 original Code Talkers with the Congressional Gold Medal.

Decode this message:
Gloe-ih Dzeh Be Dzeh Mosai Ne-ahs-jah Be Dzeh Be.

Navajo Code Talkers' Alphabet

Letter	Navajo Word	English
C	Mosai	Cat
D	Be	Deer
E	Dzeh	Elk
O	Ne-ahs-jah	Owl
W	Gloe-ih	Weasel

Comprehension Quiz

Answer each question according to the article.

1. Who was credited for the victory at Iwo Jima?

   _____

2. What does the word *cryptographer* mean?

   _____

3. What connection did Philip Johnston, the man who had the idea for Navajo Code Talkers, have with the Navajo?

   _____

4. How many original Code Talkers were recruited?

   _____

5. Where did the Code Talkers train?

   _____

6. Which branch of the military did the Code Talkers belong to?

   _____

7. Where did the Code Talkers typically work from?

   _____

8. President George W. Bush presented the original Code Talkers with what?

   _____

Finding Text Evidence

Find each piece of text evidence in the article and highlight OR underline it with the color specified.

For items 1-4, you'll be citing textual evidence to support what the text says explicitly.

1. Find the sentence that tells the date of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Highlight it in **blue**.

2. Find the sentence that tells how old the Navajo recruits had to be. Highlight it in **green**.

3. Find the sentence that tells one thing Navajo Code Talkers had to do to avoid Japanese fire. Highlight it in **purple**.

4. Find the sentence that tells when Native Americans were first used as code talkers. Highlight it in **gray**.

For items 5-8, you'll be citing one piece or multiple pieces of textual evidence to support inferences drawn from the text.

5. Find one piece of evidence that suggests it was difficult for some Navajo to leave home. Highlight it in **orange**.

6. Find one piece of text evidence that tells you that the United States recognizes and appreciates the war efforts of the Navajo Code Talkers. Highlight it in **pink**.

7. Find one piece of text evidence that tells you that Code Talking could be a stressful job. Highlight it in **yellow.**

8. Find two pieces of text evidence that show you the Navajo were intelligent and resourceful. Highlight them in **red.**

A. Development of Central Ideas

Use the article to answer the questions and complete the graphic organizers.

1. Reread the section titled **A Promising Idea**. What is the main idea of this section?

2. The author presents a problem and a solution. Briefly summarize the problem and the solution in the spaces provided.

A Promising Idea
(1)

Problem	Solution
(2a)	2b)

3. In your own words, explain how the text develops the main idea you identified for the section, **A Promising Idea**. (Your answer to Question 1)

_____

_____

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B. Objective Summaries

Read the following statements about the article. Then, classify them as objective statements or non-objective (subjective) statements. Write each answer choice in the correct column in the table below.

4. Pearl Harbor was bombed by the Japanese on December 7, 1941.
5. The Navajo Code Talkers are the biggest reason the U.S. and Allies conquered the enemy in World War II.
6. It was not difficult for the Navajo to create 200 new military terms.
7. Many Navajo were leaving home for the first time.
8. The Code Talkers trained at Camp Elliot in San Francisco.

Objective Statements	Non-Objective Statements

9. In order to summarize the section **The New Navajo Plan**, follow these steps. In the spaces provided, use your own words to summarize each paragraph in one sentence that includes the main idea of the paragraph without including specific details. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, combine those sentences whenever possible to write a succinct summary of the section. Be sure that your summary is **objective**, or completely free of your opinions or any assertions that are not supported by the text.

¶ 1	¶ 2	¶ 3

C. Analyze Relationships Between Events

According to information from the article, how are these ideas related? Describe the relationship between ideas succinctly in the space provided. See the first example that is done for you.

10. Japan and the U.S. entering the war ← ─────── Pair of ideas

Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. This caused the U.S. to enter the war. ← ─────── How these ideas are related

11. Philip Johnston and Signal Corp Communications Officer Lieutenant Colonel James E. Jones

12. Navajo Code Talkers and Camp Elliot

13. 26 letter alphabet and the Navajo language

14. Transmitting information and Japanese fire

Integrate Information

View the video news clip, "Navajo Code Talker Explains Role in WWII" Then, answer these questions.

1. Which of these statements is the **central idea** of the video clip?
    a.   Serving in World War II was difficult for the Code Talkers.
    b.   The Navajo Code Talkers created new code words for military terms.
    c.   Some Navajo men did not understand the language completely.
    d.   The final battle of the war helped the U.S. to defeat the enemy.

2. Why do you think it was so important for the Code Talkers to create code words for common military terms? Explain why with examples from the article and/or video clip.

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

3. **Just for fun:** The article did not discuss specific words that the Navajo created. Using the terms below, as well as the type of logic discussed in the video clip, match each English code word to the correct military term.

English Code Word	Military Term
Our Mother	Alaska
Two Star	Submarine
With Winter	Bomber Plane
Iron Fish	America
Buzzard	Major General

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