

Native American Code Talkers during WW2:

Origins, Execution and Multitribal Contributions

Abstract

This project and exhibit, Code Talkers, examines the role of Native American code talkers during World War II, highlighting their critical contributions to securing U.S. military communication networks. While the Navajo code talkers are the most widely documented, members of other Native American nations—including the Comanche, Ho-Chunk, Choctaw and Cree—also served in this capacity. This research reveals the significance of the use of indigenous languages in reducing the risk of interception in key military campaigns. In addition to evaluating their tactical effectiveness, this project explores how the prominence of the Navajo code talkers has overshadowed the contributions of other Native nations. By acknowledging the broader history of code talkers, this exhibit emphasizes both their tactical importance in wartime communications and the full scope of Native American participation.

Museum and Internship



The Fort Tuthill Military Museum founded in 2005 and is located within the Fort Tuthill County Park and is an entirely donation- and volunteer-based museum dedicated to preserving the history of the 158th Infantry Regiment. Originating as the First Regiment of the Arizona Volunteers in 1865. The regiment's history spans from being involved with Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders and as a border force during Pancho Villa's raids, to the World Wars. In 1947 the regiment was dissolved, but in 2005 an Arizona Guard battalion was designated First Battalion 158th Infantry, that served conflicts in the Middle East.

Over the course of two semesters during my freshman and sophomore years, I developed and curated an exhibit on Code Talkers, largely independently. During the first semester, I strengthened my historical research skills through the analysis of primary and secondary sources. I also designed the exhibit layout, overseeing the project from the initial conception to final installation.

During the second semester, I conducted artifact research and learned to catalog materials within the museum's archival system. In addition, I enhanced the exhibit's visual and educational impact by installing a television component featuring documentaries, interviews, and historical summaries.

For more information visit: www.forttuthill.org



Completed Code Talker exhibit

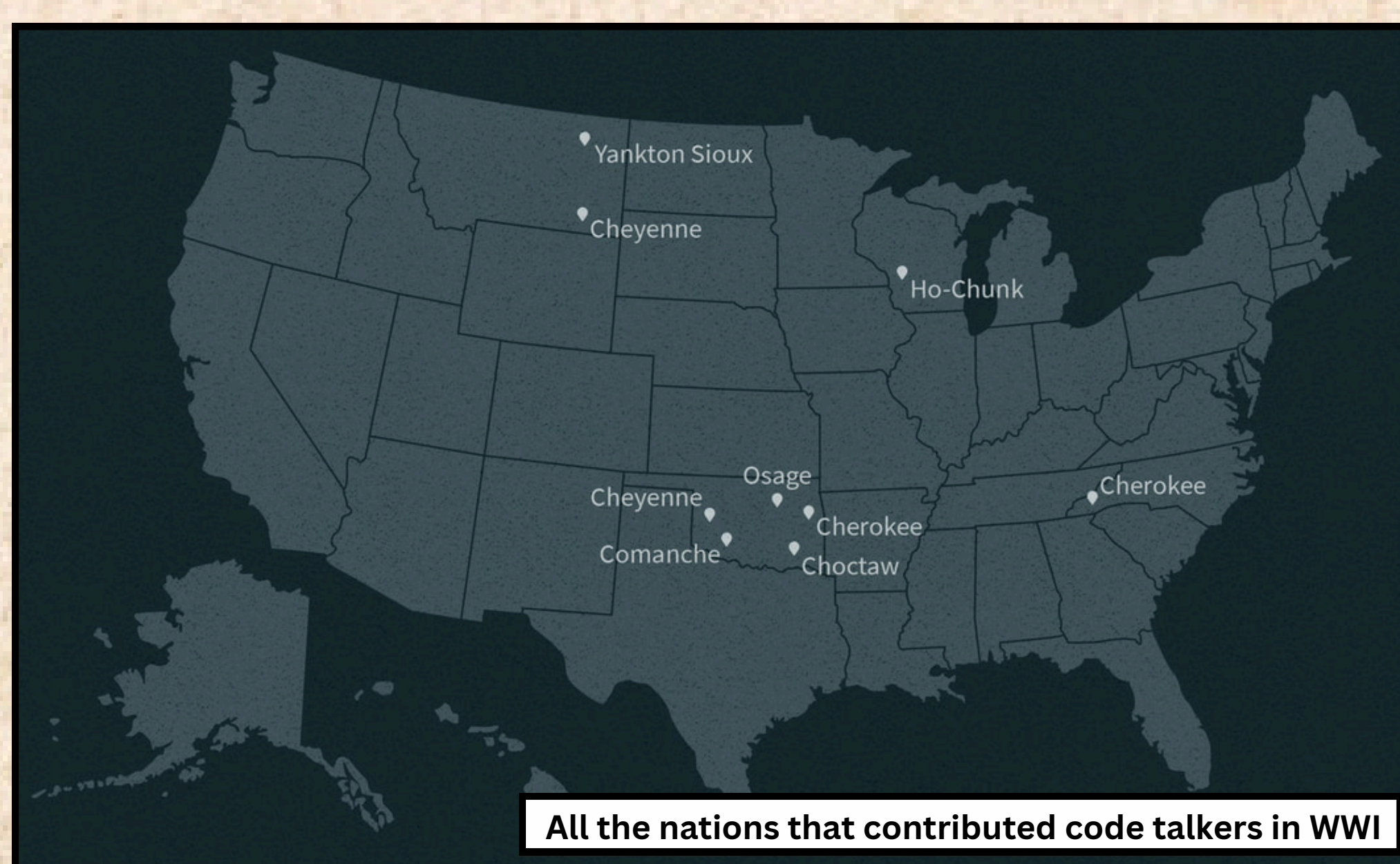
Linguistics

The Americas are home to approximately 296 Native American languages belonging to 58 groups (30 families and 28 language isolates). Some of the major language families include:

- Siouan Family:**
 - Crow, Sioux (Lakota & Dakota), Assiniboine, Ho-Chunk
- Uto-Aztecan Family:**
 - Comanche, Hopi, Pima
- Athabaskan-Eyak-Tlingit Family:**
 - Apache (Chiricahua, Mescalero, Jicarilla), Navajo, Tlingit
- Iroquoian Family:**
 - Oneida, Mohawk, Cherokee
- Muskogean Family:**
 - Choctaw, Seminole, Creek (Muskogee)

Origins of Code Talkers

- Choctaw:**
 - 19 soldiers are recognized as Choctaw code talkers
 - Served in the 142nd and the 143rd Infantry Regiments
 - First used in the Oct. 1918 Meuse-Argonne Offensive to coordinate the withdrawal of troops, attacks, and transmit messages.
 - They were first known as "telephone-talkers".
- Ho-Chunk:**
 - Possible early use at Chateau Thierry, where cousins Robert Big Thunder & John Longtail transmitted messages
 - Possibly also used at Belleau Wood and other battles.
 - Exact numbers remain unknown, according to reports Robert 29 originally enlisted.
- The Choctaw are the most well-documented code talkers of WWI.
- Evidence for other Native nations—Ho-Chunk, Cheyenne, Osage, Yankton Sioux, Comanche—remains limited, with some roles being speculated or unknown.



All the nations that contributed code talkers in WWI

Navajo Code Talkers

- Philip Johnston (1892-1978) proposed the use of the Navajo language as an encrypted military code.
- February 28, 1942: Demonstrated the concept with four Navajo volunteers—able to send 20-second messages compared to 30 minutes by conventional methods.
- The "Original 29" trained as part of Platoon 382, becoming the first all-Navajo platoon.
- Development of a two-part code:
 - Assigning a Navajo word(s) to each letter
 - Descriptions of modern military terms in Navajo
- Used in every major Pacific campaign: Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Iwo Jima, Okinawa.
- By the war's end, over 400 Navajo served as code talkers, many were required to keep their service secret, until program declassification in 1968.



The "Original 29" after graduating boot camp



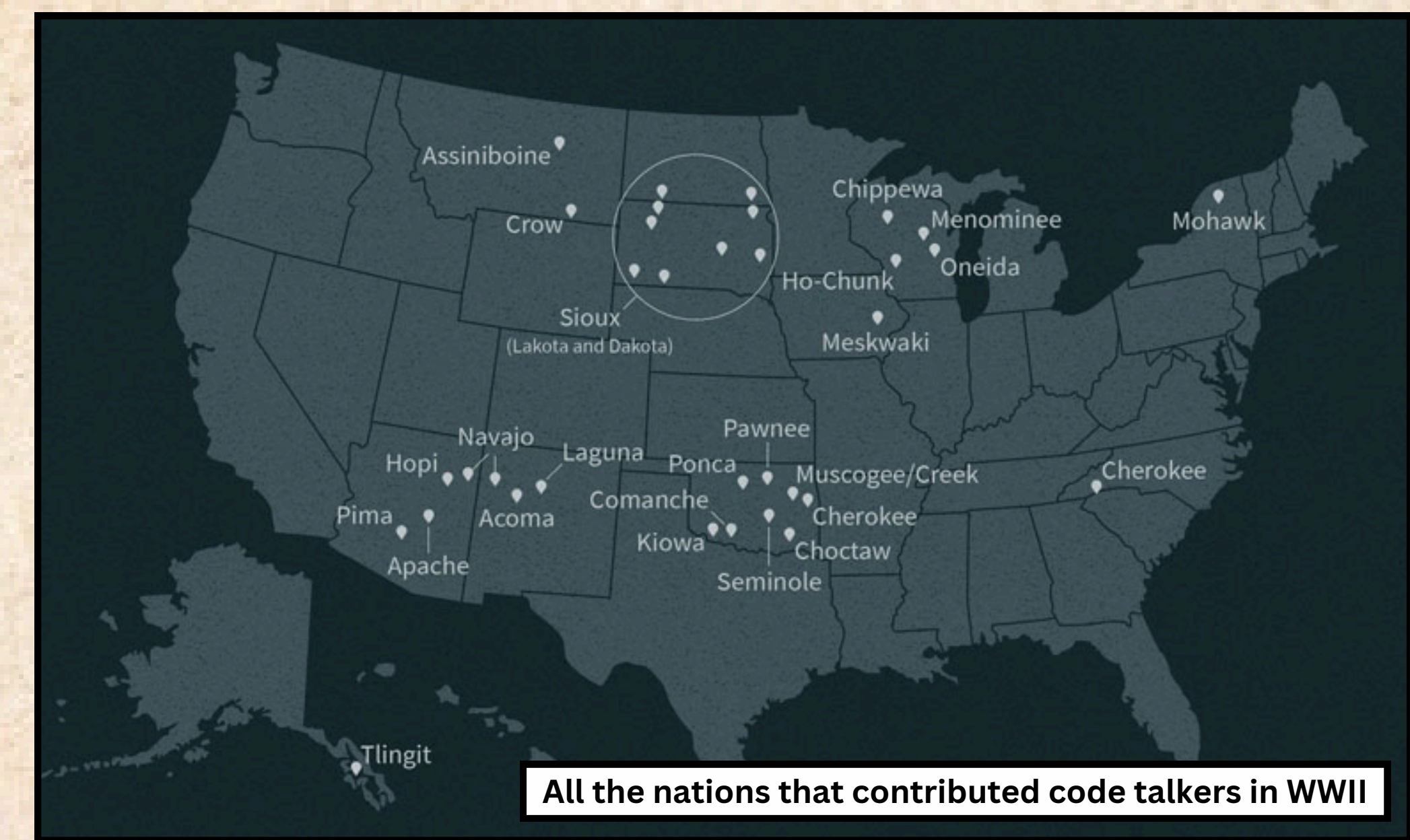
- In 2008, Congress passed the Code Talkers Recognition Act, which honored Native American code talkers from the numerous tribes who served in both World Wars and authorized the awarding of Congressional Gold and Silver Medals. Medal ceremonies began in 2013.



Philip Johnston



James P. Herndon



All the nations that contributed code talkers in WWII



Meskwaki code talkers, February 1941.
Top: Judie Wayne Wabaunsee, Melvin Twin, Dewey Roberts Sr., Mike Wayne Wabaunsee
Bottom: Edward Benson, Frank Jonas Sanache Sr., Willard Sanache, Dewey Youngbear



14 Comanche code talkers, Fort Benning, Georgia, 1941

Other Tribes in WWII

- Approximately 30-33 Native nations are reported having contributed in WWII; however, documentation is limited and their exact roles are not fully known in military records.
- Some Native American groups—including the Sioux—are reported to have served in reconnaissance and communications roles under Douglas MacArthur, though details (including references to "MacArthur's Boys") remain unclear and not consistently documented.
- The U.S. Army Air Forces' Fifth Bomber Command is believed to have included Native speakers from tribes such as Acoma, Apache, Chippewa (Ojibwe), Crow, Hopi, Laguna, and Sioux, though documentation is limited.
- Hopi code talkers are reported to have served in the Pacific, including in the Philippines, the Marshall Islands, and New Caledonia.
- Tlingit speakers are believed to have been used in Alaska during the Aleutian Islands Campaign, including the Battle of Attu and others in the Pacific, though the extent of their role remains limitedly documented.
- Some accounts suggest that members of other tribes, including the Pawnee, served in Pacific campaigns such as New Guinea and the Philippines, though their specific role as code talkers is not consistently documented, though not consistently verified.
- In the European Theater the Comanche, Seminole, Kiowa, Ho-Chunk, and several others are reported to have been used in D-Day, the Battle of the Bulge, the Sicily Campaign, though documentation remains uneven.
- The Canadian Army used the Cree in operations in the European Theater.
- The Meskwaki are reported to have been used in North Africa during Operation Torch, though evidence is limited.

158th Infantry Regiment Code Talkers

- Approximately one-fourth of the regiment was comprised of Native Americans, including Pima, Navajo, Apache, Papago, Maricopa, Yuma, Hopi, Mojave
- In 1932, James Prugh Herndon was appointed commander of the regiment and began to think of using Native Americans as code talkers, experimenting with a group of Pima, Navajo, Apache, and Papagos soldiers.
- In 1941, further experimentation occurred during Louisiana maneuvers and in Jan. 1942 during Panama jungle warfare training.
- After deployment to Australia and the South Pacific the Regiment's use of code talkers is not clearly documented.
- In the Philippines and New Guinea their main task reportedly included scouting and patrolling missions. The 2nd Battalion was recorded as using a different Native language every day to further confuse Japanese interceptors.