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In 1942, the first group of Navajo code talkers, recruited by the Marine Corps, were tasked with a nearly insurmountable job—coming up with an unbreakable code. Over the course of the war, not one, but two types of code were developed:

The first type of code, referred to as “Type One Code” was

essentially a simple cypher. Navajo Code Talkers used English words for each letter of the alphabet and then translated these words into their native language. For example, the letter “C” was represented by the English word “cat” and the Navajo word “moasi”. To say “CODE” in Type One Code would be moasi (C-cat), ne-ahs-jah (O-owl), lha-cha-eh (D-dog), dzeh (E-elk).

Clearly, spelling out words letter by letter would be cumbersome and slow, so a second “Type Two Code” was also developed. This code assigned Navajo words to common pieces of military equipment. For example, “besh-lo” (iron fish) meant “submarine”, “a-ye-shi” (eggs) meant bombs, and “tsidi-ney-yehi” (bird carrier) meant aircraft carrier.

Once newly recruited Navajo Code Talkers memorized the codes and completed training, they were sent to Marine units in the Pacific theater where they transmitted coded information over telephones and radios. During the battle for Iwo Jima, six Navajo Code Talkers successfully transmitted more than 800 messages without any errors—a crucial part of the American victory there.

The Japanese were so perplexed by the Navajo code that it remained unbroken throughout the war. In fact, the code was so successful that it was not de-classified until 1968, meaning that the Navajo Code Talkers who had been so critical to victory, were left without recognition. In 2001, 60 years after the United States entered the Pacific War, Congress awarded Congressional Gold Medals to the Code Talkers. Today, we mark their achievements with National Navajo Code Talkers Day on August 14th.

Photograph of Navajo Indian Code Talkers Henry Bake and George Kirk courtesy of National Archives