

Secret Language

An unbreakable code helped win World War I. But to these soldiers, it was just a chat.

IT was October 1918 at Forest Ferme in France. The Germans surrounded the American forces.

The Germans had tapped the phone lines and broken every code the Americans used. They knew every move the Americans tried to make.

Private Mitchell Bobb delivered a message into the field telephone to Ben Carterby at battalion commander headquarters. He knew the Germans were listening. But the Americans had to take the chance or be defeated.



Ben Carterby

Talking in Code

The Germans heard gibberish on the phone lines. Try as they might, they couldn't break the code. Within 24 hours, the Americans successful-

ly launched surprise attacks. After 72 hours, the Germans retreated.

The "code" that helped American forces win several battles in the final days of World War I was no code at all. It was Choctaw, the language of eight American soldiers, including Bobb and Carterby, from rural Oklahoma.


Cryptology is the science of codes. In the military, codes ensure secure communication. Code talkers transmit information over telephones, radios and through runners. When troops are spread out, having an "unbreakable" code is an advantage.

Inventing Words

Speaking Choctaw was the first attempt by the U.S. armed forces to use an American Indian language. Because military terms are not part of the Choctaw language, those words had to be created. "Big gun" was used for artillery. "Little gun

shoot fast" meant machine gun.

American Indians in the military are nothing new. Indian scouts aided the colonists during the Revolutionary War against England. More than 12,000 American Indians served during World War I. At least 44,000 served in World War II. And more than 90 percent of the 42,000 American Indians who served in Vietnam volunteered. According to U.S. Navy historians, American Indians have the highest record of service per capita of any ethnic group.

During the first half of the 20th century, many Native Americans were sent to government boarding schools and forbidden to speak their native languages. Imagine how different things might have been if eight young men from Oklahoma had not known how to speak Choctaw.  —Karen Gibson

NAVAJO CODE TALKERS

Between World Wars I and II, many Germans and Japanese studied in the United States. Some visited Indian reservations and learned the languages. Many Native American languages used as code were eventually broken. Except for one: Navajo.

Because it was an unwritten language with no alphabet, Navajo words could change meaning according to tone and pitch. For anyone not living among Navajos in the Southwest, it was a very difficult language to learn.

The Navajo code talkers took part in every U.S. Marine assault between 1942 and 1945. Iwo Jima, in the Pacific islands, was one of World War II's most important battles. It is said that the Americans would never have taken Iwo Jima in 1945 without the Navajo code talkers.

This 1919 photograph shows some of the Choctaw code talkers. The Germans were "flipping their wigs" trying to translate the strange language, observers said.

