

Whether the popular image of the Indian was positive or negative, it was often enveloped in what historian Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., called “a curious timelessness.” European Americans tended to portray Indians in aboriginal times, before white contact, or in the early years of contact. This portrayal neglected the subsequent decades of historical development and the changed conditions among Native Americans. In the white imagination, the only “real” Indians were those who inhabited the distant past. Thus when American audiences viewed John Ford’s *Savagecoach* in 1939 they were able to make a nostalgic escape into that past. And Americans surely *wished* an escape, for the news in 1939 was not good. Japanese imperial forces continued their invasion of China, while Great Britain and France declared war on Nazi Germany following Hitler’s murderous assault on Poland. The following year the news was no better. The Nazis invaded Denmark, Norway, and the Low Countries; France fell to Germany; and the Battle of Britain began. American audiences witnessed these horrors on newsreels just before setting in to see such films as King Vidor’s viciously anti-Indian frontier epic, *Northern Passage* (1940). As this celluloid drama unfolds, Spencer Tracy as Major Robert Rogers delivers an impassioned speech about the horrors of Indian warfare and commands his valiant Rangers to exterminate the residents of a nearby Native village. The deed is done and Major Rogers is on his way to becoming a frontier saint. The film ends with the major’s silhouette dramatically cast against the heavens.

NATIVE AMERICANS IN WORLD WAR II

“Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.” President Franklin D. Roosevelt thus spoke one of the most fateful sentences in American history. Among the far-reaching effects of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the subsequent entry of the United States into World War II was a fundamental change in the status of American Indians and their relationship with their fellow Americans. Tens of thousands of Indians served in the armed forces and worked in defense industries during the war, giving many non-Indians their first face-to-face encounters with Native people. These encounters challenged old stereotypes and had profound consequences for all Americans.

Even before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Native Americans had followed closely the news of the struggle raging in Europe and Asia. They

watched the same newsreels as their fellow citizens and gathered around loudspeakers to listen to the latest war bulletins. In remote corners of reservations in the Southwest, Indians tuned in shortwave radios to keep informed about troop movements and casualty lists. The news of the war inspired the Navajos to nickname Hitler “Moustache Smeller” and Mussolini “Big Gourd Chin.”

Native Americans had special reason to follow closely the news of the war: For the first time in history, they were subject to the military draft. About half of all American Indians had been noncitizens during World War I and thus had been exempt from conscription. The dedicated service of 10,000 Indian volunteers in that conflict prompted Congress in 1924 to grant citizenship to all Native people. Thus, when the Selective Service Act of 1940 required all young men to register for the draft, Indians no longer were an exception. By the spring of 1941, more than 7,000 Indians had registered while fewer than 100 had attempted to resist. (The resisters argued that conscription violated tribal sovereignty, but a federal court ruled that tribal membership did not exempt Indians from military service.) Also by the spring of 1941, more than 500 Indians had volunteered for the armed forces and thirty-seven had been inducted, an impressive ratio of fifteen to one. The largest number of volunteers, over 100, came from the Sioux and Assiniboine reservation at Fort Peck in northern Montana. Among the volunteers from Fort Peck were proud descendants of the band that had defeated Custer at the Battle of the Little Big Horn just sixty-five years earlier.

Novelist and ethnologist Oliver La Farge was in a small Pueblo village on December 7, 1941, when the news of Pearl Harbor first arrived. The villagers expressed deep regret, La Farge recalled, “for the many boys, not just their own people, but American boys in general who were going to be killed. . . . There was a general acceptance of the war as their own, deriving from a definite feeling that they were sharers in America and democracy.” These sentiments were echoed in villages and on reservations throughout the nation. When asked about the upsurge of patriotism among Native Americans at the outset of the war, one Indian veteran explained simply, “we were fighting for *our country*.” To him the attack on Pearl Harbor meant the “enemy was headed this way and we had to stop them. If someone is trying to take something away from us, we fight back. If this is what you call *patriotism*, then we are very patriotic.” Another veteran, Cossey Brown (Navajo), remembered his wartime service in similar terms: “I would think, ‘I’m doing this for my people.’ We protected the American

of critical importance on any battlefield, and during World War II the Germans and the Japanese proved adept at deciphering American codes. Philip Johnston, a white civilian who had grown up on the Navajo reservation, proposed constructing a new code based on the Navajo language. The Marine Corps approved Johnston's proposal and recruited twenty-nine young Navajos to come to a communication school training center in California to develop the code. These young marines produced an ingenious code that included more than 400 Navajo words for the most frequently used terms in the military lexicon. The Navajo word for "buzzard" became the code name for a bomber, an "owl" was an observation plane, and a "chicken hawk" was a dive bomber. Battleships were known by the Navajo word for "whale," submarines were "iron fish," and destroyers were "sharks." To further confuse the enemy, the code talkers continually changed the code. Each letter of the alphabet also received a Navajo name so that words not in the code could be spelled out. The letter A was the Navajo word for "ant," B was "bear," all the way through "yuucca" for Y and "zinc" for Z. The code was so effective that even Navajos who did not know the code were unable to decipher it.

After the initial group of Navajo marines developed the code, they stayed on at California's Camp Pendleton to train new recruits in its use. Navajo instructors drilled their students not only in the code but also in the necessity of defending it with their lives. One instructor later recalled the intense grilling he gave the future code talkers:

Would you refuse to give away the secret of the code if you had a samurai sword at your throat? If the enemy would ask, "What is your word for A?" would you tell them? You begin to bleed; you begin to feel your own blood trickling down . . . warm, with the cutting a little deeper. You *would* lay down your life before you would tell, wouldn't you?

That such training was not just academic was proved during the war when Joe Lee Kleyoomie (Navajo) was captured, imprisoned, and tortured for five months by the Japanese in a futile attempt to force him to reveal the code.

Eventually more than 400 Navajos were recruited for this unique program, and all but thirty served in the Central and South Pacific. When necessary, the code talkers fought alongside their fellow Leathernecks and risked their lives as troubleshooters and stretcher-bearers. Their service was absolutely essential in several key engagements. "Were it not for the Navajos," commented one officer, "the Marines

would never have taken Iwo Jima! . . . During the first forty-eight hours, while we were landing and consolidating our shore positions, I had six Navajo radio nets operating around the clock. In that period alone they sent and received over eight hundred messages without an error." Non-Indian veteran Dillon Story's eyes filled with tears as he later recalled the contribution of the code talkers: "They were 100 percent effective, 100 percent. Without them a lot more boys would have died taking those islands."

Native Americans serving in the Pacific, whether as code talkers or not, occasionally suffered the embarrassment and danger of being mistaken for the Japanese enemy. In dozens of cases, the language spoken by the code talkers was mistakenly identified by the uninitiated as Japanese. Far more serious were the cases of mistaken identity in which Indian soldiers were thought to be the enemy in disguise. One Native American marine and his buddies came under fire on Saipan while attempting to make emergency repairs to damaged communication lines. A corporal was killed in the barrage. Later the Indians learned that they had been fired upon by their own men who mistook them for Japanese in marine uniforms. Likewise, an army unit picked up a Native marine on Guadalcanal and sent a message to headquarters: "We have captured a Jap in Marine clothing with Marine identification tags." After several tense exchanges, the Indian marine was properly identified and released. A Navajo had a similar narrow escape on New Georgia Island. He later recalled:

When we were under fire, one army officer pulled his .45 pistol on me, taking me for a Jap. . . . I had a hard time convincing that officer that I was an American Marine. They threatened to shoot me, but took me to headquarters at my insistence, where I was identified.

Even when they were out of uniform, Native American soldiers ran the risk of being mistaken for the enemy. An MP came upon an Indian soldier bathing in a water-filled crater on an island in the South Pacific. He promptly placed his bayonet between the eyes of the startled bather and adamantly refused to believe the soldier's protestations of innocence—"I'm one of the Marines!"—until he was positively identified by his commanding officer. This same Indian marine later brought back some captured Japanese prisoners. When he arrived at his platoon headquarters, his fellow soldiers treated it as a joke. "Which is the prisoner?" they laughed. "Which are the Japanese?" One field officer said that even the "canine corps" sometimes