

**NARRATIVE  
NONFICTION**  
nonfiction that uses  
literary techniques

# CODE TALK

The incredible true story of the Navajo Marines and the unbreakable code that helped win World War II

BY JOSEPH BRUCHAC

**As You Read** Think about why the work of the Navajo code talkers was so important.

It was almost midnight on November 4, 1942. Chester Nez, 21, was crouched in a muddy foxhole with his buddy Roy Begay. Bullets whizzed over their heads. Explosives crashed around them. At any moment, bombs could rain down from warplanes flying above.

In 1942, World War II was raging around the globe. Nez was a United States Marine. He had just arrived on Guadalcanal, an island in the southwest Pacific Ocean. The Marines were battling the Japanese Imperial Army for control of the island. The once-peaceful oasis was now a place of misery and death.

Nez and Begay tried not to think of what they had seen earlier that day—bodies floating in the water and the beach stained red with blood—when they

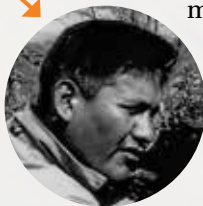
leapt from their boat and waded ashore.

Nez and Begay were Navajo, Native men from the Southwest. Their job on Guadalcanal was one of the military's most closely guarded secrets. Months before, they had helped invent a secret code. It used Diné, their native language—a language they had once been punished for speaking.

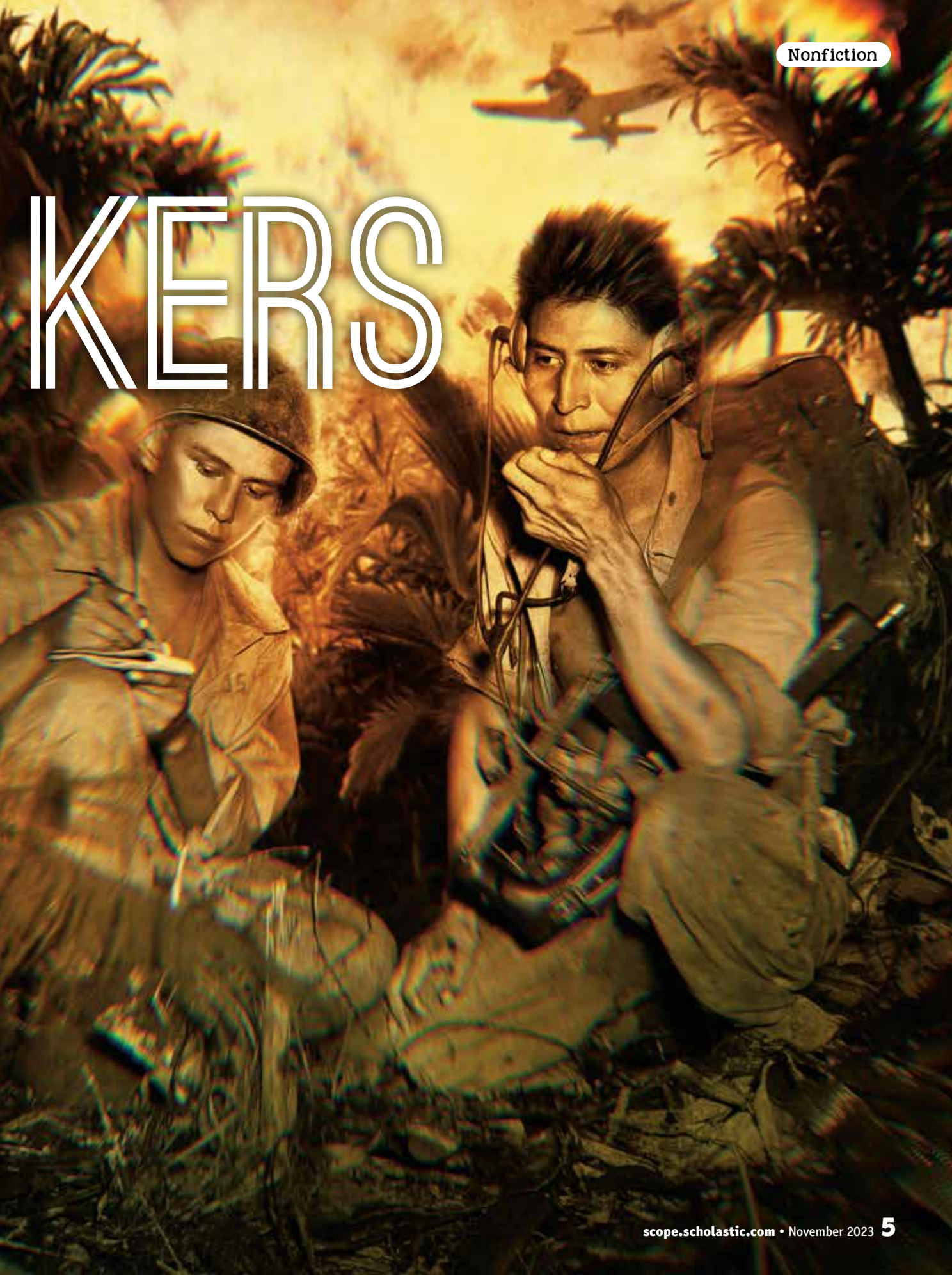
If their code worked, they could help their fellow Marines take the island. They could also help win the war.

That first night on Guadalcanal, Nez huddled beside Begay. Heavy rain poured down. Their foxhole almost filled with water. Nez was terrified. But he tried to stay focused. He and Begay had a job to do.

But first, they had to survive the night.



# IKERS





## THE WAR IN THE PACIFIC

The U.S. entered World War II in 1941, after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, an American naval base in Hawaii. During the war, the U.S. and Japan battled for control of islands in the Pacific. After landing on Guadalcanal, U.S. troops fought their way north, toward mainland Japan.

## PAINFUL HISTORY

For Chester Nez, being both Navajo and a Marine was complicated. The Navajo people had a painful history with the U.S. government. In the 1860s, the U.S. made war on the Navajo and forced them off their lands. Thousands of Navajo people died.

Around that time, the U.S. government enacted a new policy. Officials ordered Native children to be taken from their families and educated “like other Americans.”

Between 1869 and the 1960s, hundreds of thousands of Native children were sent to so-called Indian boarding schools. They were not allowed to speak their languages or practice their cultural traditions.

Nez was one of these children. In 1929, he was 8. He lived in Chi

Chil Tah, New Mexico. He was sent to the Fort Defiance School in Arizona.

It was not a good place for Nez. His long hair was cut off. His clothing was taken from him. The school matrons treated the children coldly and disciplined them harshly. When Nez was caught speaking Diné, a matron brushed his teeth with a bitter soap. (Years later, that same soap would be given to Nez and all Marines to wash their clothes.)

Nez stayed at Fort Defiance until high school. Then he was sent to another school. He was able to go home for short visits. But he lost years of contact with his family. Even so, he was determined to hold on to his culture and his language.

And it would be Diné, the

language he was told to forget, that would one day help the U.S. win World War II.

## THE WAR BEGINS

The U.S. entered World War II in December 1941. Nez was in 10th grade. The U.S. fought on two **fronts**: in Europe, against Germany and Italy, and in the Pacific, against Japan.

By the spring of 1942, Japanese forces controlled much of the Pacific Ocean. On the West Coast, many Americans feared invasion.

Nez wanted to join the war effort. He knew that the U.S. had once fought the Navajo. He also understood that the U.S. was now the Navajo people’s country too. He wanted to fight, as his

Jim McMahon/Woman@ (map); Library of Congress (Pearl Harbor); Image courtesy of the Richard Henry Pratt Papers, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library (before & after)



ancestors had, to protect his homeland.

In April 1942, Nez got his chance. That month, recruiters from the Marine Corps came to the Navajo reservation, looking for Navajo men to volunteer. Nez eagerly joined up.

High school would have to wait.

## TOP-SECRET PROJECT

He didn't yet know it. But Nez had been recruited for a top-secret project: to help the Marines create an unbreakable code.

At the time, troops communicated with each other over the radio. But the messages could be overheard by anyone, including enemy forces. So they had to be sent in code.

To send a coded communication, troops used a special machine to turn the message into numbers and letters. After the message was received, it was

decoded using another machine. The whole process could take hours.

Worse, the Japanese were expert code breakers. They had figured out every American code so far.

That was a deadly problem. After cracking a code, Japanese forces could predict the Marines' every move—where the Marines were going, how many supplies and troops they had, what their battle plans were.

The Marines believed that Diné could be the solution. The language is extremely difficult to learn unless one begins in early childhood. Aside from one small grammar book published in 1926, there were no books about Diné at the time. Only the Navajo people spoke it well.

## INVENTING THE CODE

Hundreds of Navajo men volunteered for the Marines. But only 29 were selected, including Nez. Those men became known as the "Original 29."

In May 1942, they reported to

San Diego for basic training. It was the initial training that all military recruits go through.

The training was grueling. But it was easier for them than for many others. As Navajos, they had spent most of their lives outdoors. Hauling heavy loads and walking great distances were no challenge. They had carried rifles since childhood to defend their herds of sheep and goats from predators. So rifle training was like a game to them. They shot with such precision that their platoon earned one of the highest marksmanship scores of any Marine platoon in history.

After basic training, Nez and the other Navajo men were taken to a classroom. Finally, they learned the true reason they'd been recruited: to create a secret code using their language.

Immediately, the men got to work. For every letter of the English alphabet, they chose a Diné word. For A, they used the Diné word for ant, pronounced wol-la-chee.



Sarah Images/The Granger Collection (classroom)



A Navajo student when he entered a boarding school—and three years later



## THE BOARDING SCHOOL POLICY

So-called Indian boarding schools once operated across the U.S. Harsh physical punishment and poor nutrition were common. Many students died. Others ran away. The boarding school policy caused so much trauma that the effects are still felt in Native communities today.

B became the Navajo word for bear, pronounced shush.

To make the code harder to break, more than one Navajo word was chosen for vowels and other frequently used letters. Thus A was also the Diné word for apple, pronounced be-la-sana. The men picked other words for military terms and places. The Diné word for egg meant bomb. The word for mother meant United States.

Each day, lunch was brought to them. Each day, they were released around 4 or 5 p.m. with strict orders to tell no one what they were doing.

Over the next three months, they created the code. Night after night, they practiced speaking coded messages to each other. The men soon became known as the “code talkers.”

Now they had to test the code on the battlefield.

In November 1942, Nez and the other Navajo Marines arrived on Guadalcanal to do exactly that.

## WOULD IT WORK?

On the morning of November 5 on Guadalcanal, Nez looked up at the sun. He took a pinch of corn pollen from the medicine bag he carried with him everywhere. Touching the pollen to his tongue and the top of his head, he prayed to each of the four directions. Begay did the same, giving thanks for having survived their first hours in battle.

The two men had hardly slept. But the blessing helped them feel alert. They grabbed their 30-pound hand-cranked radio and moved into a new position.

Suddenly, a runner approached with a message about a nest of Japanese machine guns. The moment had come for Nez to send his first battlefield transmission.

One mistake could be deadly. The American guns might fire at the wrong location. They might wipe out their own men.

A code talker keeps a lookout.



His heart pounding, Nez picked up the receiver. He began to speak: “Beh-na-ali-tsosie a-knah-as-donih ah-toh nish-na-jih-goh dah-di-kad ah-deel-tahi.”

The message was received by code talkers on an American ship offshore. They translated it into English: *Enemy machine gun nest on your right flank. Destroy.*

Minutes later, the ship’s guns roared to life. The Japanese machine guns exploded.

“You see that?” Nez asked. “Sure did,” Begay replied. The code had worked.

## DANGEROUS BATTLES

In less than two days, it was clear that the code talkers were **indispensable**.

### BEACH LANDING

U.S. troops approach an island held by Japan, in 1944.



# THE BATTLEFIELD



The code talkers worked in pairs to send and receive coded messages.

Soon, every crucial radio message in the Pacific was sent using the Navajo code.

Code talkers tracked enemy positions and shared ship movements and attack plans. They called for food and medical supplies. They dodged enemy fire, lugging their heavy radios through mud and rain.

Thanks in large part to Nez and his fellow code talkers, the U.S. took control of Guadalcanal early the next year. Finally, there was hope that America and its **allies** could win the war.

More code talkers were trained. Their numbers exceeded 400. For the next two-and-a-half years, American forces fought for control of islands in the Pacific. They

pushed north toward mainland Japan. The Navajo Marines were part of every win.

All the while, the code was never broken. Though code talkers served in some of the most dangerous battles, only 13 died. Like Nez, they relied on their cultural and spiritual traditions—not just their training—to help them survive.

## LEAVING WAR BEHIND

In August 1945, Japan surrendered. World War II was over. Around the world, people began the long work of rebuilding.

Nez went back to New Mexico and his family. It was a happy reunion. Yet Nez couldn't talk

## THE SECRET CODE

The code talkers substituted phrases in Diné for common military terms. Here's how to pronounce a few examples of the code:

Military term: **grenade**

Code word in Diné: **ni-ma-si**

English translation: **potatoes**



Military term: **tank**

Code word in Diné: **chay-da-gahi**

English translation: **tortoise**



Military term: **battleship**

Code word in Diné: **lo-tso**

English translation: **whale**



Military term: **fighter plane**

Code word in Diné: **da-he-tih-hi**

English translation: **hummingbird**



Military term: **bomb**

Code word in Diné: **a-ye-shi**

English translation: **eggs**



about his role in the war. The code talkers were still under strict orders to keep it a secret.

Nez finished high school, then pursued a degree in art at the University of Kansas. He married and started a family.

Though he had left war behind, war had not left him.

Nez was plagued by nightmares. In them, he saw the ghosts of the dead Japanese soldiers he had seen—and even touched. They threatened to take him with





The hard work of the Navajo code talkers remained a secret for decades after the war.

them. Contact with the dead is avoided in Navajo culture. It's believed that everyone has both good and bad within them. When one dies, that little bit of bad may turn into a dangerous spirit.

Nez's father arranged for a Sing, a ceremony lasting several days. It involves the creation of sand paintings and ritual chanting by a medicine person known as a hataalii. The ceremony performed for Nez was an Enemy Way.

Enemy Ways were for people who had been to war. But they were also for those returning from boarding schools, to heal their spiritual and psychological wounds.

Nez's ceremony was successful.

He stopped having bad dreams.

## THE LEGACY

As for the code? In 1968, new technology made it possible to quickly send secure messages by radio. The code was **declassified** at last.

Nez and the other code talkers had kept their secret for 23 years. Finally, they could be recognized for their heroism. In 2001, Nez traveled to the White House.

He and other code talkers were awarded gold medals by President George W. Bush.

Chester Nez died in 2014 at the age of 93. He was the last surviving member of the Original 29.

Yet the shared legacy of the code talkers lives on. This legacy is about more than the pride Native people feel in the crucial work they did during the war. It's also about the importance of language and culture.

Today, 170,000 of the Navajo Nation's 400,000 members speak Diné. Across the country, Native nations are working to preserve their languages, many of which have been in danger of disappearing. The code talkers helped inspire these efforts.

To this day, hundreds of their names, including Nez's, can be seen on the bricks of a veterans memorial in Window Rock, Arizona, in the heart of the enduring Navajo Nation. ●



### HONORING A HERO

Left: Nez in 2011 at age 90. Right: Nez is honored by President George W. Bush in 2001.



## Writing Contest

Imagine that the U.S. Postal Service wants ideas for who to feature on a new series of stamps. Write an essay explaining why it should choose the code talkers. Support your ideas with information from the article. Send your essay to **Code Talkers Contest**. Three winners will each get *Code Talker* by Joseph Bruchac.

Get this activity online.

Entries must be submitted by a legal resident of the U.S. age 18 or older, who is the teacher, parent, or guardian of the student. See page 2 for details.