# Code Talker

***{ Moasi Ne-Ahs-Jah Be Dzeh  Gah  Dzeh  Moasi  Dzeh  Tkin  A-Keh-Di-Glini  Dzeh  Be }***

Twenty-nine Navajo Marines created an unbreakable military code used during World War II. Memories of those glory days are fading, and Chester Nez is the last living original Code Talker.

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Chester Nez. 90,  is the last of the original 29 Navajo Code Talkers. All the rest of the U.S. Marines who created the first unbreakable code that baffled the Japanese during World War II  have died. Nez has been asked to tell his own story many times. When he tells it in English, he refers to pre-written answers his family keeps on a sheet of notebook paper. The questions are almost always the same. When his memory fails him — at 90, Nez is now an old man — he looks off into the distance. "Ask my son," he says. But when he speaks in Navajo, in the vivid light of the late afternoon, the colors of his memories are saturated, the edges sharp.

He remembers the words that helped slay the enemy even as they pierced his own sacred beliefs.

He remembers the words that helped protect him on the fields of battle.

And he remembers a full life. There is so much more to remember about Iiná, life.

Summers spent chasing after lambs and goats among the high desert scrub southwest of Gallup, N.M.

The school on the Navajo Reservation. A Marine Corps recruiter in a crisp uniform. A bus trip to California.

The room at Camp Elliott where Nez would help devise the simple code.

A war to fight in a faraway land. A home to return to. Demons to bury.

A family. A career. A medal.

*"Chéch'iltah déé' naashá*. I'm from Chi Chil Tah, among the oaks, in Jones Ranch, N.M," he introduces himself in Navajo. "I belong to my mother's matriarchal clan Black Sheep, and I'm born for my father's clan, the Sleeping Rock people."

***Ti' níléí dah'azká biláahdi hat'íí hóló***

**"Let's go see what's behind that mesa."**

The 1930s were the heyday of Navajo shepherds. Most families who lived on the reservation tended to a flock. A large flock was a sign of wealth and success. But in 1934, the federal government, as trustee, imposed a livestock-reduction policy because sheep and cattle were destroying the land through overgrazing. Navajo leaders and families fought the government, but in the end, many had their animals confiscated and sold, slaughtered or herded off canyon cliffs to their deaths. Dine Nez was a shepherd on the high mesa of the reservation near Jones Ranch, where rolling hills of piñon, ponderosa, juniper and oak are divided by lush meadows and deep canyons. As the herds were thinned, he began to see that his son, Chester, would have to learn to make a living in the White man's world.

**Above:** Nez lives in Albuquerque with his son, Michael, and his family.

He enrolled his son in a government-run school in Fort Defiance, in northeastern Arizona, far from the grazing lands of their home. When Chester Nez reached high school in the early 1940s, educators moved some students to Tuba City Boarding School, on the far western portion of the reservation north of Flagstaff. The Department of the Army operated the school. The boys learned English in the schools and grew up far from their families. Still, while the land was vast, they knew little of the world beyond the sacred mountains that framed their home. Since ancient times, Navajos have looked to four sacred mountains to define the boundaries of their world — Blanca Peak in Colorado, Mount Taylor in New Mexico, the San Francisco Peaks in Arizona and Hesperus Peak in Colorado. For Nez, language and life had always been defined by the images and formations of the land around him.

Then, on a spring day in 1942, U.S. Marines came to the boarding school, looking for Navajo boys. Four months earlier, 3,000 miles away, a sky full of planes had unleashed fire on Pearl Harbor. The reservation was quiet, but the world was at war. The military, ferrying troops to battle sites across the Pacific, was urgently seeking an undecipherable code to transmit classified information. It had attempted to use various languages and dialects as code, but each was quickly cracked by cryptographers in Tokyo.Philip Johnston, a former Army engineer and the son of Presbyterian missionaries who had lived on the Navajo reservation, proposed an idea: Try using the Navajo language. Written record of it was scarce. Its syntax and grammar were elaborate. The spoken language used tones that were difficult for an untrained ear to understand. The language might prove harder for the enemy to decipher. So that day in 1942, the Marine recruiters in red and white uniforms with shiny buttons showed up at the school's Old Main. They were seeking smart Navajo boys who spoke their native language and understood English. Nez longed to see life beyond the Navajo Reservation. "I told my buddy Roy Begay, ‘Let's go see what's behind that mesa,'." Nez remembered. "We said, ‘*táá ako'nihíí d'odoo*,' We agree, and we will join, too.',"

When school finished in 1942, a charter bus full of young Navajo men, including Nez and Begay, pulled out of Fort Wingate, east of Gallup, N.M. The bus was headed for California with enlistees on a secret mission. The men said farewell to their four sacred mountains. They left behind a simpler life on the reservation for the uncertainties of war. Nez remembers losing his jet-black hair to a barber's razor shortly after he arrived in San Diego for boot camp. "I touched my head. It was sleek as the canvas pants I wear," Nez said, sliding his hand along the fabric of his pant leg. The 29 men became the all-Navajo 382nd Marine Platoon.

Their first task was learning the military's communication system. Next, they were asked to build a code using Navajo words. The code would have to be accurate, consistent, simple and easily memorized. One soldier suggested creating an alphabet using Navajo words, while another proposed using native words for animals, plants, neighboring tribes or weapons, according to Sally McClain, author of "Navajo Weapon."

McClain collected first-person accounts from several of the original Code Talkers. Nez said words for the code came from everyday words used on the reservation, such as lamb, nut, quiver, cross and yucca. The men easily attached familiar words to letters to create a code alphabet. "A." *Wol-la-chee*. Ant.- "B." *Shush*. Bear. - "C." *Moasi*. Cat. - "D." *Be*. Deer. - "E." *Dzeh*. Elk. - "F." *Ma-e*. Fox. So the word "enemy," E-N-E-M-Y, would be *Dzeh — Nesh-chee — Dzeh — Na-as-tsosi — Tash-as-zih.*

More challenging, McClain wrote, was devising a code to represent military equipment such as ships, airplanes or the ranks of officers. The men struggled to describe war objects they had never seen during their lives on the reservation.

*So-na-kih.* Two stars. "Major general."
*Ha-a-cidi.* Inspector. "Reconnaissance."
*Be-al-do-tso-lani.* Many big guns. "Artillery."
*Anaa'í.* Enemy.
*Nááts'ósí.* Japanese.
*Be'eldooh alhéé dildoni.* Machine Gun.
*Nish'náájígo. Dahdikadgo.* On your right flank.
*Diiltááh.* Destroy.

Nez has long forgotten which words he suggested. "*Doo bénáshniihda*," I can't remember, he said, closing his eyes and searching his memory for answers. He does remember another challenge of creating the code. As the system took shape, each Navajo word took on a new meaning. But Navajo words carried their own significance. Using them in battle, Nez feared, would bring him harm.

## *Ách'ááh tsodizin*
### A shield made of prayer

In Navajo culture, elders impress upon their children that the spoken Navajo word is potent. Words uttered in a harmful way bring harm to the speaker or his family, they say.

**Above:** Nez holds a photograph of himself taken in the early 1950s.

A child growing up on the reservation in the 1930s would have understood this. Nizaad baa' áhályá, he would be told. Be cautious of how you speak. Saad, words, carry unseen power. Nez knew the code was meant to help confound the enemy. But that would mean using the language, his words, to bring harm. He turned to his family. The words carried unseen power, but they were also powerful enough to offer him a shield. Historically, Navajo words used by a soldier in war could be protected by a religious ritual called ách'ááh

tsodizin — a shield made of prayer.Such a shield was worn by Naayéé' Neizghání, Monster Slayer, a Navajo hero who, according to belief, killed people-eating giants.

Other Navajo soldiers had prayers conducted for them by tribal medicine people on the reservation before they shipped out. But Nez could not return to the reservation. The original 29 Code Talkers were not allowed to leave the base. Their secret code had to be protected. At Camp Pendleton, in California, Nez packed up his Marine uniforms, his fatigues, and placed them in the mail. Soon the package reached his father's home on the reservation. Dine Nez gathered up the package and had a medicine man perform a *ách'ááh tsodizin* over them. Then he sent the clothes back to his son.

The creation of the code was only the first part of the 382nd Marine Platoon's orders. Once the encryption system was written, the men would go to war. In August 1942, Chester Nez put on his uniform and boarded a ship for New Caledonia. As he went, he said, he carried the power of the prayer shield to protect him from the harm that would be inflicted.

The men of the 382nd Platoon sent messages informing U.S. command of Japanese tactics, strategy and troop movement in battles at Iwo Jima, Peleliu and Guadalcanal. Nez and his friend Begay were part of an assault team and helped gather intelligence. They would land on beaches, go behind battle lines and relay back information about the enemy. The group worked in pairs, carrying 30 pounds of radio equipment. Using walkie-talkies, the men sent messages in Navajo and a Navajo soldier on the other end translated. The language was familiar, but the reality of war was very far away from the reservation. Nez shakes his head to make the vision disappear. *"Tábaahjii' nihil nida'iiz'éél, Nááts'ósí nidaaztseedgo ákóó nideeztaad*. We would land on the beaches, which were littered with dead Japanese bodies," Nez says in Navajo. "My faith told me not to walk among the dead, to stay away from the dead. But which soldier could avoid such? This was war. War is death. I walked among them." The battles thundered with the sounds of artillery. And they were so far away from their dry Navajo lands. "I remember sitting in the foxhole with Roy and rain poured," Nez said.

Other groups of Navajos would eventually become Code Talkers as well. By war's end, there were about 420 Code Talkers, and the code had expanded to more than 500 words. But Nez's platoon was the first. Nez said he felt safe during the war because of the shield of prayer. He believes it is the reason he survived.

## *Ya'at'eeh shíye'*
## "Hello, my son."

When Nez finished his military service in 1945, he jumped off the bus in Gallup, N.M., harboring a secret. Like the other Code Talkers, he had been ordered to keep silent about the Navajo code he helped create. He didn't breathe a word about it for more than 20 years. Unlike jubilant celebrations in metropolitan cities for returning American troops, Nez's Navajo community of Chi Chil Tah, 23 miles southwest of Gallup, was subdued. He hitchhiked to Cousins Brothers Trading Post, and the store's owner dropped him off near his father's hogan. For Nez, there would be no ticker-tape welcome, just the quiet of the reservation and his father's home.

He admired his father deeply. His father had raised him and eight other siblings. Their mother had died when Nez was young. But as he returned home, he remembered his mother, too, whom he would never see again. He reached the hogan, and his father appeared. The man reached out and shook Nez's hand. *"Ya'at'eeh shíye,'*." he said. The words mean "Hello, my son." But in Navajo they mean much more. The message brimmed with a

father's affection, recognized a son's place in an extended family and spoke to a trusting father-son relationship. Six decades later, Nez's eyes tear up when he remembers the words. "To say something like that, which is very, very close to you, is very, very moving, if not uncomfortable," Nez said. "It's real sad to come home and see your parent."

Soon after his son's return, Dine Nez hired *Hastiin Tsé Lichíí' Nééz*, Tall Red Rock, to perform the Enemy Way, a religious ritual meant to bring peace to a returning warrior by re-enacting a war party. It's believed the rite cleanses a soldier of war's taint and heads off post-war ailments. It is still practiced today for returning soldiers. When Tsé Lichíí' Nééz repeated the final prayers during the ceremony for Nez, the grief, trauma and stress of war was bundled up, buried in the ground, and with a shot of a gun, symbolically returned to the earth. The code was included in the memories of the war that were to be forgotten.

**Nez is wheelchair-bound after losing his legs to diabetes**.

"I felt better. … I felt I was like a new man," Nez said. "I forgot all the things that I went through during World War II." People inquired of his whereabouts in the Pacific, Nez said, but no one probed him about his role in the war.

## *Shil nilí*
## "I appreciate it."

Nez finished high school at Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kan., then studied fine arts at the University of Kansas. He stayed in the Marine reserve and served in the Korean War, returning again to the reservation, where he married and raised a family. For two decades, Nez painted murals at Raymond G. Murphy VA Medical Center, in Albuquerque, where he retired in 1974. Nez returned to his roots, once more, to Chi Chil Tah where he cared for a sibling and a flock of sheep. He moved in with his son's family in Albuquerque in 1990. More than a half-century after he was discharged from the Marines, Nez met President George W. Bush. On July 26, 2001, Bush handed Congressional Gold Medals to five living original Navajo Code Talkers who had come to Washington, D.C. The medal is an expression of national appreciation for distinguished achievements and contributions. "President Bush was the nicest man I met," Nez said. "He seemed very glad to shake hands with the Code Talkers. I thought we deserved the medal."

Only long after the Enemy Way ceremony had buried his memories would Nez share his stories. He wanted people to know what he and the others did in the war. After all, noted his son, Michael, the story was kept a secret for so long. It is an obvious point of pride for the former Marine. *Baa' ahééh nisin*, "I'm pleased and grateful about it," Nez said. *Shil nilí*, "I appreciate it."

## *J'o ako téé'go nise báá*

**"That's my journey to war and back."**

Nez, who has had a long life with many children, is wealthy according to Navajo beliefs. The father of six children, he has nine grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren. He has outlived all but two of his children and shares a home with Michael and his family. Today, Nez uses a wheelchair. Diabetes has claimed his legs. Time has dulled his hearing. Nez tells his story seated in the living room of his son's home. Behind him, the wall is covered with family portraits. The afternoon sun glows through the window. He wears the recognizable uniform of the Code Talkers, brown pants that symbolize the earth, gold shirt for the color of corn pollen and a red cap that represents the tint of blood.Asked how he wants to be remembered, Nez said he wants his legacy to be when his country, America, called on him. Of the 29 original Code Talkers, he's the only one left, and he struggles to convey how he feels about being the last living symbol. Proud, patriotic, happy to be among his family. *J'o ako téé'go nise báá*, "That's my journey to war and back," he said. Soft evening twilight moves over the Sandia Mountains east of Michael Nez's home. The gold in Chester Nez's shirt deepens. The faces in the family photographs are no longer sharply defined. Darkness creeps into the living room. Nez wheels himself into the bedroom. A grandson prepares him for bed.

## THE
## CODE TALKERS' NAVAJO ALPHABET

**A**

*Navajo word:*

*Wol-la-chee*

Meaning: Ant

**B**

*Navajo word:*

*Shush*

Meaning: Bear

**C**

*Navajo word:*

*Moasi*

Meaning: Cat

**D**

*Navajo word:*

*Be*

Meaning: Deer

**E**

*Navajo word:*

*Dzeh*

Meaning: Elk

**F**

*Navajo word:*

*Ma-e*

Meaning: Fox

**G**

*Navajo word:*

*Klizzie*

Meaning: Goat

**H**

*Navajo word:*

*Lin*

Meaning: Horse

**I**

*Navajo word:*

*Tkin*

Meaning: Ice

**J**

*Navajo word:*

*Tkele-cho-gi*

Meaning: Jackass

**K**

*Navajo word:*

*Klizzie-yazzie*

Meaning: Kidd

**L**

*Navajo word:*

*Dibeh-yazzie*

Meaning: Lamb

**M**

*Navajo word:*

*Na-as-tsosi*

Meaning: Mouse

**N**

*Navajo word:*

*Nesh-chee*

Meaning: Nut

**O**

*Navajo word:*

*Ne-ahs-jah*

Meaning: Owl

**P**

*Navajo word:*

*Bi-sodih*

Meaning: Pig

**Q**

*Navajo word:*

*Ca-yeilth*

Meaning: Quiver

**R**

*Navajo word:*

*Gah*

Meaning: Rabbit

**S**

*Navajo word:*

*Dibeh*

Meaning: Sheep

**T**

*Navajo word:*

*Than-zie*

Meaning: Turkey

**U**

*Navajo word:*

*No-da-ih*

Meaning: Ute

**V**

*Navajo word:*

*A-keh-di-glini*

Meaning: Victor

**W**

*Navajo word:*
*Gloe-ih*

Meaning: Weasel

**X**

*Navajo word:*
*Al-an-as-dzoh*

Meaning: Cross

**Y**

*Navajo word:*
*Tsah-as-zih*

Meaning: Yucca

**Z**

*Navajo word:*
*Besh-do-gliz*

Meaning: Zinc

***Source:*** *"Navajo Weapon: The Navajo Code Talkers," by Sally McClain*

President Bush was the nicest man I met. He seemed very glad to shake hands with the Code Talkers."

**—Chester Nez**

[Source: http://www.azcentral.com/news/native-americans/?content=codetalker#ixzz1boGVgxPz