

An Unbreakable Code

- 1 In most Hollywood movies, the Native American Navajos still fight on horses in the American Southwest. But during World War II, a group of Navajos made their language into a weapon to protect the United States. They were the Navajo Code Talkers, and theirs is one of the few unbroken codes in military history.
- 2 Navajo was the perfect choice for a secret language. It is very **complex**. One vowel can have up to ten different pronunciations, changing the meaning of any word. In the 1940s, Navajo was an unwritten language. No one outside of the reservation could speak it or understand it.
- 3 The Navajo Code team had to invent new words to **describe** military equipment. For example, they named ships after fish: *lotso-whale* (battleship), *calo-shark* (destroyer), and *beshloiron-fish* (submarine). When a Code Talker



These are some of the Navajo Code Talkers in the U.S. Marines in 1943. Their code was very valuable in the war effort.

received a message **via** radio, he heard a series of unrelated Navajo words. He would then translate the words into

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English and use the first letter of each English word to spell the message. The Navajo words *tsah* (needle), *wol-la-chee* (ant), *ah-kh-di-glini* (victor), and *tsah-ah-dzoh* (yucca)¹ spelled NAVY.

better and faster than any machine. They could encode, transmit, and decode a three-line English message in 20 seconds. Machines of the time required 30 minutes to perform the same job.

- 4 The Code Talkers kept the code a secret. They **memorized** everything. There were no code books. As a result, no ordinary Navajo soldier, if **captured** by the enemy, could understand the code. More than 3,600 Navajos served in World War II, but only 420 were Code Talkers with the U.S. Marines. They coded and decoded battlefield messages

- 5 Even after the war the code **remained** top secret. When they were asked about their role, Code Talkers just said: "I was a radioman." War movies and histories came out without **mentioning** them. The code was never used again and was finally declassified² in 1968. Only then did the secret come out.

¹ *yucca*: a desert plant with long, pointed leaves on a thick, straight stem

² *declassified*: made public after having been kept secret

COMPREHENSION

A Main Ideas

Read each statement. Decide if it is **True** or **False** according to the reading. Check (✓) the appropriate box. If it is false, change it to make it true. Discuss your answers with a partner.

	TRUE	FALSE
1. Native Americans did a great service for their country.	☐	☐
2. Machine translators worked faster than the Navajos.	☐	☐
3. The Code Talkers had to translate from one language to another.	☐	☐
4. All the Navajos in the U.S. Marines used the code.	☐	☐
5. The code can be used again in the future.	☐	☐

B Close Reading

Read the quotes from the reading. Circle the letter of the statement that best explains each quote. Discuss your answers with a partner.

1. "But during World War II, a group of Navajos made their language into a weapon." This sentence means:
 - a. The Navajo language included a lot of words about fighting.
 - b. The Navajo language had protected the Navajos from the cowboys.
 - c. The Navajo language was used in the war effort.
2. "One vowel can have up to 10 different pronunciations." This sentence means:
 - a. One vowel can be pronounced in more than 10 different ways.
 - b. One vowel can be pronounced in 10 different ways or less.
 - c. One vowel can be pronounced in less than 10 different ways.
3. "*Theirs* is one of the few unbroken codes in military history." *Theirs* refers to:
 - a. the Navajo Code Talkers
 - b. the U.S. Marines
 - c. the Navajo language
4. "Only then did the secret come out." This sentence means:
 - a. It was at that time that the secret was revealed.
 - b. Only the secret code came out.
 - c. It was at that time that the secret code was used.