

The WWI Unbreakable Code



Six of the earliest code talkers here in uniform

Choctaw Indians First Code Talkers

When WWI broke out, Choctaws were not considered citizens of the United States, yet a huge percentage of Choctaw men volunteered, along with about 10,000 other Native Americans, for service in the U.S. Military. The language the Choctaws spoke was considered obsolete. That same language later helped bring about a successful end to the war by confounding German eavesdroppers.

During WWI, by the use of tapping the American Army's phone lines, the Germans were able to learn the location of Allied Forces and where they were stationed. They were also able to determine where supplies were kept. An idea was born; put Choctaw Indians on the phones and let them talk in their Native speech. The German soldiers had never heard this language before.

The Choctaw Nation also had tribal members who used their language to transmit messages in WWII. The native language was an excellent tool to use on behalf of the American forces in both wars. Until the use of the Choctaw language in WWI, the Germans had decoded all transmitted messages sent by the Allied Forces.

In WWI, according to a memo dated January 23, 1919, from the commanding officer of the 142nd Infantry Division, Col. A.W. Bloor, *"The first use of the Indians was made in ordering a delicate withdrawal of two companies of the 2nd Bn. from Chufilly to Chardoney on the night of October 26th. This movement was completed without mishap, although it left the Third Battalion greatly depleted in previous fighting, without support. The Indians were used repeatedly on the 27th in preparation for the assault on Forest Farm. The enemy's complete surprise is evidence that he could not decipher the messages."*

After the withdrawal of the regiment to Louppy-le-Petit, a number of Indians were detailed for training in transmitting messages over the telephone. The instruction was carried out by the Liaison Officer, Lieutenant Black. It had been found that the Indian's vocabulary of military terms was insufficient. The Indian for 'Big Gun' was used to indicate artillery. 'Little gun shoot fast,' was substituted for machine gun, and the battalions were indicated by one, two, and three grains of corn.

"It was found that the Indian tongues do not permit verbatim translation, but at the end of the short training period at Louppy-le-Petit, the results were very gratifying, and it is believed, had the regiment gone back into the line, fine results would have been obtained. We were confident the possibilities of the telephone had been obtained without its hazards."

“The Choctaw

Nation is very proud of the story of the original Code Talkers, and even has a granite monument at the entrance to our capitol grounds that bears the engraved names of the men who used the Choctaw language to help win World War I,” said Chief Gregory E. Pyle. “The language is so important to the tribe today that there are classes offered in 43 public schools, two colleges and three universities, as well as on the Internet and in many community centers.”



Fifteen of the original Choctaw code talkers are pictured here holding the American flag.

Verbal history, combined with written history, has revealed the names of the 18 Choctaws who were trained to use their own language to transmit messages that the enemy was never able to decipher. These men were Tobias Frazier, Victor Brown, Joseph Oklahombi, Ben Hampton, Albert Billy, Walter Veach, Ben Carterby, James Edwards, Solomon Louis, Pete Maytubby, Mitchell Bobb, Calvin Wilson, Jeff Nelson, Joseph Davenport, George Davenport, Noel Johnson, Otis Leader and Robert Taylor.

Originally, only eight men were asked to be Choctaw Code Talkers, but as the success of using their native language as a “code” was recognized, others were quickly pressed into service.

In the closing days of World War I, fourteen Choctaw Indian men in the Army's Thirty-Sixth Division, trained to use their language, helped the American Expeditionary Force win several key battles in the Meuse-Argonne Campaign in France, the final big German push of the war.

With at least one Choctaw man placed in each field company headquarters, they handled military communications by field telephone, translated radio messages into the Choctaw language, and wrote field orders to be carried by "runners" between the various companies. The German army, which

captured about one out of four messengers, never deciphered the messages written in Choctaw.

When the Choctaw tongue was spoken over the field telephones, the Germans stopped attacking the supply dumps and counter attacking the American troops. This is because they had no idea what the Choctaws were saying and couldn't effectively spy on the message transmissions. A captured German officer later said they were completely confused by the code.

The Choctaws were recognized as the first to use their native language as an unbreakable code in World War I. The Choctaw language was again used in World War II. Choctaws conversed in their language over field radios to coordinate military positions, giving exact details and locations without fear of German interception.

The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma has formalized a request to Congress that recognition be given to the Native American Code Talkers of all tribes who used their own language during WWI or WWII as a code to confuse the enemy. Honor from the United States Government to these unsung heroes is long overdue.

HEADQUARTERS, 142D INFANTRY A.E.F.

A.P.O. NO. 796

January 23, 1919



Headquarters 142d Infantry A.E.F.
A.P.O. No. 796
From: C.O. 142d Infantry.

To: The Commanding General 36th Division (Attention Capt. Spence.)
Subject: Transmitting messages in Choctaw.

In compliance with Memorandum Headquarters 36th Division, January 21, 1919, to C.O. 42d Infantry, the following account is submitted:

In the first action of the 142d Infantry at St. Etienne, it was recognized that of all the various methods of liaison the telephone presented the greatest possibilities. The field of rocket signals is restricted to a small number of agreed signals. The runner system is slow and hazardous. T.P.S. is always an uncertain quantity. It may work beautifully and again, it may be entirely worthless. The available means, therefore, for the rapid and full transmission of information are the radio, buzzer, and telephone, and of these, the telephone was by far the superior - and it could be used without let or hindrance, provided straight to the point information could be given.

It was well understood, however that the German was a past master in the art of "listening in." Moreover, from St. Etienne to the Aisne we had traveled through a country netted with German wire and cables. We established P.C.'s in dugouts and houses, but recently occupied by him. There was every reason to believe every decipherable message or word going over our wires also went to the enemy. A rumor was out that our division had given false coordinates of our supply dump, and that in thirty minutes the enemy shells were falling on the point. We felt sure the enemy knew too much. It was therefore necessary to code every message of importance and coding and decoding took valuable time.

While comparatively inactive at Vaux-Champagne, it was remembered that the regiment possessed a company of Indians. They spoke twenty six different languages or dialects, only four or five of which were ever written. There was hardly one chance in a million that Fritz would be able to translate these dialects, and the plan to have these Indians transmit telephone messages was adopted. The regiment was fortunate in having two Indian officers who spoke several of the dialects. Indians from the Choctaw tribe were chosen and one placed in each P.C.

The first use of the Indians was made in ordering a delicate withdrawal of two companies of the 2nd Bn. from Chufilly to Chardeny on the night of October 26th. This movement was completed without mishap, although it left the Third Battalion greatly depleted in previous fighting, without support. The Indians were used repeatedly on the 27th in preparation for the assault on Forest Farm. The enemy's complete surprise is evidence that he could not decipher the messages.

A. W. BLOOR,
Colonel 142d Infantry
COMMANDING.