

Process Paper

498 words

When I was a freshman in highschool, I volunteered at the Sioux Oglala Reservation in South Dakota and saw firsthand how the federal government disregarded the struggles of the indigenous peoples of the United States. Forward to junior year when I started the National History Day project and decided to focus on the Navajo Code Talkers, it was disheartening to learn about another instance in history where the US government had failed to provide the native people with something as basic as a customary public ceremony to praise and thank them for their work and service.

Struggling to choose a topic that would interest me, my teacher suggested combining some of my previous ideas for the NHD project and introduced me to the Navajo Code Talkers. The Navajo Code Talkers were a part of the Marine Corps and they were essentially responsible for communicating decoded messages and simultaneously decrypting them during battles. The code they used was derived from the Navajo language, a language that was complex and mostly unstudied by scholars at the time. What is special about the code created by the original 29 Code Talkers is that the Japanese, who were known for their code-breaking abilities during the war, were unable to crack the Navajo code, therefore contributing to its name, the “Unbreakable Code”. The biggest achievement made by the code was at the battle of Iwo Jima, when the Navajo Code Talkers translated and sent 800 messages without errors in 48 hours. Many generals from the battle agreed that without the Navajo Code Talkers, the US would not have been in an advantageous position for the future of the war. More of a reason to celebrate these war heroes.

Using the form of a website to show the faces of the code talkers to better allow its viewers to feel for them, I focused on what led to the Code Talker project, what work that the Code Talkers did, and ultimately, how the government responded to their sacrifices. Some of the most important information that is on my website is derived from filmed interviews with the Navajo Code Talkers before many of them passed away. Many of the interviewees recalled their time at government enforced boarding schools where they were forced to speak English and if they spoke their native languages, were punished. They also spoke about how it felt when the same government asked them to create a code using their language and then kept them a secret, preventing the Code Talkers from getting the recognition and honor they deserved.

When the war first started, the Navajo Nation was suffering from the Great Depression, dealing with cultural assimilation, had the lowest literacy rates in all of the reservations, and despite being citizens, weren't given the ability to vote. Despite these circumstances, it is thanks to the bravery of the men who would become Code Talkers that the work they would do in the war contributed to the Allied win of World War II.