

For more than a hundred years, white Americans taught Native American Indians to speak English. A member of the Navajo tribe, now in his 80s, says: 'We were told, "Don't speak Navajo", and they used to wash our mouths with soap!'

Then, during World War II, all that changed. Philip Johnston was the son of a missionary who spent much of his childhood on a Navajo reservation. He grew up with Navajo children and learnt their language and customs. One day, during the war, he read that the US army was trying to create a code for military communications. He contacted them and told them he thought that the Navajo language could be used to send radio messages. The army worked with a team of Navajos and created a code using a mixture of Navajo and English. It was an excellent, safe code because Navajo did not exist in writing, and only the Navajo Indians could speak it. So a group of them were invited to join the army and they became 'code talkers'. They worked as radio operators so that the Americans could communicate in secret, knowing that the enemy would not be able to break their code.

A lot of common military words did not exist in Navajo so, for example, *da-he-ti-hi*, the Navajo word for 'bird', became the code word for 'aeroplane' and *besh lo*, meaning 'iron fish', was the code for 'submarine'. For names of people and places, the code talkers used code words for each letter of the alphabet: for example, the word *be-la-sana* meant 'apple', so it represented the letter 'a'.

The code was a secret for many years after the war because the USA did not know if they might need to use it again one day. The code talkers could not talk about their work and their heroism was forgotten. Finally, on July 26th 2001, five elderly Native Americans received the Congressional Gold Medal – one of the USA's highest awards. They were the last survivors from a group of men who helped to change the course of history.



Tasks

A Read the text, then answer the questions.

- 1 Did white Americans use to respect the Navajo's language and culture?
- 2 Why was Philip Johnston able to speak Navajo?
- 3 Why did he contact the US army?
- 4 Why wasn't it possible for America's enemies to break the code?
- 5 After the war, why didn't anyone talk about the importance of the code talkers' work?
- 6 Did the government finally acknowledge the code talkers' achievements?

B The code talkers were heroes of the Second World War. What qualities did they need to do their work? For example:

They had to be trustworthy.

What sort of people do you admire? Think of some modern heroes, or heroes from the past. Talk about their qualities and the things they did/do.

Find the meaning of the phrase 'unsung heroes'? Can you think of any unsung heroes? Why do you think they're important?