

During World War I the United States government was looking for a way to deliver messages that the enemy could not decipher, so they turned to the Native American languages. They began by using the Choctaw language in WWI to create a code and recruited mainly Choctaws as code talkers.<sup>1</sup> When the Germans and Japanese began sending students to the United States to study Native American languages and culture, however, the US became uneasy about using code talkers in WWII and began looking for other options.<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of WWII, the United States decided to use the Navajo language, essentially an unbreakable code because of the complexity of the language and its limited access to only those of Navajo origin.<sup>3</sup> The Navajo code talkers received the most recognition after WWII but there were Native Americans from many other tribes who made significant contributions to code talking and the war. It was not until 1968 that the United States government declassified the Navajo code talker program and only the original 29 code talkers received Certificates of Recognition in 1982.<sup>4</sup> It took many more years for the rest of the tribes and code talkers to receive recognition for their hard work and sacrifice in World War II. The Sioux code talkers, for example, have not received much recognition until recent years for their work. They are a group of eleven men from the Lakota, Nakota, and Dakota tribes that served in World War II who helped develop code from their native language for the United States to send messages that the enemy was unable to decipher. Two of these WWII Lakota code talkers are buried at Black Hills National Cemetery: John Bear King and Clarence Eugene Wolf Guts.

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<sup>1</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, last modified November 16, 2016. <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/2008-featured-story-archive/navajo-code-talkers/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Clarence Eugene Wolf Guts was born on February 26, 1924, on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota, where his grandfather, Hawk Ghost, and grandmother, Hazel Medicine Owl, taught him the Lakota language.<sup>5</sup> This proved to be an extremely valuable skill that allowed him to be very influential and unique during WWII. On June 17, 1942, at the age of 18, Clarence left the eleventh grade with his cousin to enlist in the United States Army.<sup>6</sup> Before he was accepted into the army he had to pass his physical. This could have been a problem because he had a perforated eardrum from a bug that his grandmother pulled out of his ear as a child.<sup>7</sup> Although this could have stopped him from joining, the U.S. army accepted him because they needed all the men they could get. Clarence was sent to training in places all across the country. While in basic training in Alabama, a captain approached Clarence and asked him if he spoke “Indian” and when Clarence told him yes the captain found a new duty for him.<sup>8</sup> The captain taught Clarence proper military etiquette and told him to stand two feet from the general, salute, and say his name, rank and serial number, but when Clarence met Major General Paul Mueller this etiquette was not needed.<sup>9</sup> The general poured them a whiskey and asked to speak casually man-to-man, which is where the general realized he “hit the jackpot.”<sup>10</sup> Clarence became Major General Paul Mueller’s personal code talker as they navigated through the Pacific on their way to Japan. Code talkers were given two bodyguards for extra protection against the Japanese, who wanted to capture them in order to decipher the

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<sup>5</sup> Bernie Hunhoff, “The Last Lakota Code Talker,” *South Dakota Magazine*, May/June 2007, <http://www.southdakotamagazine.com/clarence-wolf-guts>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

code.<sup>11</sup> Other code talkers claim that the bodyguards were ordered to shoot the code talkers before the enemy ever captured them, in order to preserve the code.<sup>12</sup> Clarence used Lakota language to create messages so complex that only other Lakota code talkers could understand them, and the enemy was never able to decipher the messages. Clarence described the war as “hell” and while at service they “drank quite a bit [because] it was easier to take another man’s life” that way.<sup>13</sup>

After being honorably discharged from the U.S. Army on January 13, 1946 he returned to the reservation but did not speak much about his time as a code talker. Much like many other veterans, he wanted to forget about his time in the war and used alcohol to forget. At home, Clarence began to participate in Bronc riding and competed in rodeos across South Dakota until 1949, when he broke his ankle.<sup>14</sup> In 1950 Clarence began to settle down and married Allegenia Brown. They had two daughters and a son together but ultimately got a divorce in 1959.<sup>15</sup> Clarence lived the rest of his life on or near the reservation working various jobs on farms and ranches.<sup>16</sup> On June 16, 2010, Clarence, the last living Lakota code talker, passed away at the South Dakota State Veterans Home in Hot Springs at the age of 86.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Mary-Jayne Mckay, “The Code Talkers,” May 22, 2009, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-code-talkers-29-05-2002/>

<sup>13</sup> Heidi Bell Gease, “Oglala Lakota code talker last link to history,” June 16, 2002, [http://rapidcityjournal.com/oglala-code-talker-last-link-to-history/article\\_906ed1ce-e70d-5db7-b58d-751790c42096.html](http://rapidcityjournal.com/oglala-code-talker-last-link-to-history/article_906ed1ce-e70d-5db7-b58d-751790c42096.html)

<sup>14</sup> Bernie Hunhoff, “The Last Code Talker.”

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Holly Meyer, “Last Lakota code talker Clarence Wolf Guts dies at 86,” June 18, 2010, [http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/last-lakota-code-talker-clarence-wolf-guts-dies-at/article\\_9668c6fe-7a8a-11df-ab6b-001cc4c002e0.html](http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/last-lakota-code-talker-clarence-wolf-guts-dies-at/article_9668c6fe-7a8a-11df-ab6b-001cc4c002e0.html).

Because of his extraordinary service, Clarence Wolf Guts has become one of the most celebrated World War II veterans in South Dakota history though the United States government unfortunately did not formally honor the Native Americans' work until they passed the Code Talkers Recognition Act in 2008.<sup>18</sup> Senators Tim Johnson and John Thune, and Rep. Stephanie Herseth fought for a bill to give Clarence and the other forgotten code talkers awards and recognition for their service. They gave 33 Congressional Gold Medals to the non-Navajo tribes involved in the classified code talker program that were not previously recognized, while 200 individuals received Silver Medals.<sup>19</sup> South Dakota senator John Thune said, "While long overdue, this honor is very well deserved. Code talkers provided secure communications that the Axis powers were never able to decode, ultimately helping save lives and enabling Allied victory. These brave men, their families, and tribes are to be honored for their service and their story remains an inspiration to all Americans."<sup>20</sup> But Clarence was a humble man who said, "I'm no hero. I done my part as a soldier. That's it."<sup>21</sup> He saw his service as his duty rather than a heroic sacrifice. Clarence loved America so much that even in his late 70s he asked his son Don to call the U.S Department of Defense after the tragedy of 9/11 to see if they needed his code talking abilities to fight the terrorists.<sup>22</sup> Clarence Wolf Guts is an American hero that made extraordinary contributions to the victory of the United States in World War II.

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<sup>18</sup> "Delegation to Celebrate Contributions of Code Talkers in Gold Medal Ceremony," November 7, 2013, <https://www.thune.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2013/11/delegation-to-celebrate-contributions-of-code-talkers-in-gold-medal-ceremony>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Heidi Bell Gease, "Oglala Lakota code talker last link to history."

<sup>22</sup> Holly Meyer, "Last Lakota code talker Clarence Wolf Guts dies at 86."

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