

## ■ Letter Recommending Navajo Enlistment

**Date:** March 6, 1942

**Author:** Clayton B. Vogel

**Genre:** Letter

### Summary Overview

After the United States entered World War II in late 1941, American military commanders discovered that Japanese cryptographers were decoding many of their communication codes almost as soon as they were created. With the American Pacific Fleet heavily damaged by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the fact that the Japanese were uncovering American battle plans in advance did not bode well for the long-term success of the US war effort. After hearing about the potential of a code based on the language spoken by the Navajo Indians of the Southwest and seeing a demonstration in early 1942, US Marine Major General Clayton B. Vogel recommended to the commandant of the US Marine Corps, Thomas Holcomb, that Navajos be enlisted into the Marine Corps for the express purpose of becoming signalmen responsible for transmitting messages in a way that the Axis powers could not understand or decode.

### Defining Moment

As the conflict between the United States and Japan began to take shape in the early stages of World War II, the problem of transmitting secure messages became an urgent issue for American military commanders, as many of the Japanese cryptographers who were working to break American codes had been educated in the United States and were able to quickly decipher many of the codes that were being devised. As a result, new codes were constantly being devised, a cumbersome activity and one that made the logistics of communication difficult, as radio operators were constantly having to learn new codes just to be able to perform their duties.

Philip Johnston was the child of a missionary to the Navajos and, as a result, had lived much of his life on the Navajo reservation and spoke the language fluently. He was also a veteran of World War I, having fought in France before returning home to the Southwest. He was employed as a civil service engineer in Los Angeles when World War II broke out. At that point, he was too old to

serve in another war but still wanted to contribute to the American war effort. In response to a newspaper story about the problem of effectively encoding military communications, Johnston contacted the Naval Office in Los Angeles with the idea of using the Navajo language as a military code, as the Navajo language was largely unknown outside of the tribe's reservation in the American Southwest. Johnston was aware that the Choctaw language had been used to encode messages during World War I, and he was convinced that the Navajo language would prove impervious to all efforts of the Japanese to understand it.

In February 1942, Johnston took his idea to Lieutenant James E. Jones at Camp Elliott in San Diego and demonstrated the specific reasons that the Navajo language would make an excellent code. The Navajo language contains numerous words that have many different meanings depending on the inflection used by the speaker. It was not a written language at the time, meaning that very few people outside of the reservation either spoke it or even had any knowledge of it. In late February, Johnston brought four Navajo speakers to Camp Elliott to demonstrate the use of the language. The language proved completely incomprehensible to the observers and yet the messages were transferred with complete accuracy. Among the observers was Major General Clayton B. Vogel, who was in charge of the Amphibious Corps of the Pacific Fleet. Vogel wrote a letter describing the demonstration that Johnston had staged to the commandant of the Marine Corps, asking that two hundred Navajos be recruited to serve as communications specialists.

### Author Biography

Major General Clayton Barney Vogel was born on September 18, 1882, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was the son of a Civil War veteran and joined the Marine Corps in 1904 after graduating from Rutgers University. Vogel had a wide-ranging career, serving in China, Nica-

ragua, the Philippines, aboard the USS *Nebraska*, and at the White House. In 1941, Vogel was promoted to major general and took command of the Second Marine Division and the Second Joint Training Force, renamed the Amphibious Corps, Pacific Fleet. Because of his high-profile position and connections, Vogel was the perfect person to hear Johnston's idea of using the Navajo lan-

guage as an encryption code for military communication. Vogel was keenly aware of the issues faced by the Marine Corps in transmitting orders and of the problems those issues were likely to cause when his Amphibious Corps went into combat the following year. Vogel retired from the Marine Corps in 1946 and died in Philadelphia on November 26, 1964.

## HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

HEADQUARTERS,

AMPHIBIOUS FORCE, PACIFIC FLEET,  
CAMP ELLIOTT, SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

*March 6, 1942*

From: The Commanding General  
To: The Commandant, U.S. Marine Corps  
Subject: Enlistment of Navaho Indians  
Enclosures:

(A) Brochure by Mr. Philip Johnston, with maps.

(B) Messages used in demonstration.

1. Mr. Philip Johnston of Los Angeles recently offered his services to this force to demonstrate the use of Indians for the transmission of messages by telephone and voice-radio. His offer was accepted and the demonstration was held for the Commanding General and his staff.

2. The demonstration was interesting and successful. Messages were transmitted and received almost verbatim. In conducting the demonstration messages were written by a member of the staff and handed to the Indian; he would transmit the messages in his tribal dialect and the Indian on the other end would write them down in English. The text of messages as written and received are enclosed. The Indians do not have many military terms in their dialect so it was necessary to give them a few minutes, before the demonstration, to impro-

vised words for dive-bombing, anti-tank gun, etc.

3. Mr. Johnston states that the Navaho is the only tribe in the United States that has not been infested with German students during the past twenty years. These Germans, studying the various tribal dialects under the guise of art students, anthropologists, etc., have undoubtedly attained a good working knowledge of all tribal dialects except Navaho. For this reason the Navaho is the only tribe available offering complete security for the type of work under consideration. It is noted in Mr. Johnston's article (enclosed) that the Navaho is the largest tribe but the lowest in literacy. He stated, however, that 1,000 – if that many were needed – could be found with the necessary qualifications. It should also be noted that the Navaho tribal dialect is completely unintelligible to all other tribes and all other people, with the possible exception of as many as 28 Americans who have made a study of the dialect. This dialect is thus equivalent to a secret code to the enemy, and admirably suited for rapid, secure communication.

4. It is therefore recommended that an effort be made to enlist 200 Navaho Indians for this force. In addition to linguistic qualifications in English and their tribal dialect they should have the physical qualifications necessary for messengers.

CLAYTON B. VOGEL

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### Document Analysis

In early 1942, after being convinced by World War I veteran and Navajo speaker Philip Johnston of the efficacy of the Navajo language as an encryption code, Major General Clayton B. Vogel wrote a letter to the commandant of the United States Marine Corps, Thomas Holcomb, in order to convince him that Navajo speakers could be a solution to the problems the US military was facing with having their codes broken by Japanese cryptographers. Vogel recommends a program to recruit Navajo speakers to the Marine Corps as signalmen, as their messages could be transmitted and deciphered quickly and “almost verbatim.”

Vogel begins his letter by stating the circumstances that led him to his recommendations. He describes in terse prose Johnston’s offer to demonstrate the usage of the Navajo language to transmit coded information and the efficacy of the demonstration in accurately translating and sending messages. Vogel notes how the Navajos in the demonstration had to invent some words for specific military terms, as there were no Navajo words to directly convey terms such as “dive-bombing” and “antitank gun.”

Vogel cites Johnston as having offered another rationale for the use of the Navajo language—the fact that the Navajos were “the only tribe in the United States that has not been infested with German students during the past twenty years.” After the successful use of the Choctaw language in World War I, many German scholars had come to the United States to study tribal languages. However, as Johnston had spent much of his life living on the Navajo reservation, he could accurately report that no Germans had shown up to study the Navajo. Had they done so and learned the language, its usefulness as a military encoding cipher would have been limited. Johnston estimated that no more than twenty-eight non-Navajo Americans had knowledge of the language, thus making it assuredly unknown to the Axis powers.

Vogel reports Johnston’s assurances that he could locate approximately one thousand Navajos who would have the combination of the knowledge of the Navajo language and fluency in English to serve as Marine communication specialists and asserts that Navajo would be “admirably suited for rapid, secure communication.”

### Essential Themes

As a result of Philip Johnston’s idea and Major General Vogel’s letter, the commandant of the Marine Corps approved a pilot program in which thirty Navajos were

recruited and trained as communication specialists. Though many of the Navajos who were initially recruited had hardly ever left the reservation and were not accustomed to the military discipline expected of them during their training at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego, all but one successfully made it through basic training.

By the time the initial twenty-nine recruits had successfully completed their training, they had created words to express military terms and a complex alphabet system to spell out English words that did not exist in the Navajo language. The original code talkers, as they became known, reported for duty in August 1942 and proved to be so impressive to Major General Alexander Vandegrift of the First Marine Division that in December 1942 he requested an additional eighty-three Navajos be recruited, trained, and deployed to his division alone. By April 1943, more than two hundred additional Navajos had been trained. Johnston, though too old for regular duty, volunteered and was assigned to be the staff sergeant in charge of the code talker program.

The code talkers saw action throughout the Pacific, serving in each of the six Marine divisions as well as with the parachute units. They played an indispensable role in the Marine landings on Okinawa, the Solomon Islands, the Mariana Islands, Peleliu, and the iconic landing on Iwo Jima. Over the course of the war, more than four hundred Navajos completed the code talker training at Camp Pendleton, California, and the vast majority served in combat units in the Pacific.

—Steven L. Danver, PhD

### Bibliography and Additional Reading

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