

REMEMBERING NAVAJO CODE TALKERS: CELEBRATION VERSUS HISTORIC ACCURACY?



- Navajo Code Talkers helped the Allies defeat the Axis powers which proved unable to decipher the code used by the Native-Americans on duty.
- By serving the United States while using one of their distinctive ethnic qualities (the Navajo language), Navajo military men became the symbol of the army's power to integrate racial minorities into the mainstream of society.
- Yet, as shown in the movie *Windtalkers*, many Navajo soldiers were victims of discrimination because of their body appearance.
- The presence of Navajo soldiers among American military ranks illustrates the struggle of individual fighters who were bound to embrace community codes which were foreign to their traditions.
- Paradoxically, they won back respect and national recognition by accepting to use part of their cultural heritage as a military stratagem and tool.

- Windtalkers is no documentary fuelled with archive images.
 - Instead, it is a war movie loaded with special effects and mind-blowing action feats.
 - John Woo developed the Code Talkers topic insofar as it served the melodramatic dimension of the relationship between the young Navajo Code Talker and the White senior officer.
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WINDTALKERS: A CLASSIC TALE OF MANLY BRAVERY

- A classic hero-movie, a buddy-movie.
- The tragic fate of Navajo Code Talkers constitutes the background for the depiction of a moving friendship between two opposite tempers:
 - the easy-going Navajo newbie soldier, Carl Wahzee, and Joe Enders, the grumpy seen-it-all senior officer.
- Despite his disturbing post traumatic syndrome, Joe Enders becomes the mentor of Wahzee who in turns helps to acknowledge his feelings of loss and grief.

NAVAJO AND DISCRIMINATION...

- Defeated by the US army in 1864, the Navajo were deported to Fort Sumner where they were held captives until 1868. Most of them died of diseases and starvation. Unlike members of other tribes, the survivors were allowed to return to their traditional homeland.
- The Navajo issued the following statement on June, the 6th, 1940, a year and a half before the United States entered World War II: “We resolve that the Navajo Indians stand ready as they did in 1918, to aid and defend our Constitution against all subversive and armed conflict.”
- The Navajo population numbered approximately 55 000 people when the war broke out. Many Navajo men tried to join the forces but were not accepted because of language barriers. 3 600 Navajo soldiers served the USA during World War II and almost 300 Navajo died during conflict. There were 450 Code Talkers.

Doris, Paul. Navajo Code Talkers. Philadelphia : Lippincott, 1973, page 2.

Traditional peaceful life vs the horror of war...

The opening sequence draws the attention of the audience towards the majestic and arid landscapes of the Navajo reservation, home of The Code Talkers.

Choosing Monument Valley as the setting for the traditional and peaceful Navajo life offers a dramatic counterpoint to the bloody nightmare of the damp Pacific warzone.





WINDTALKERS: CLASSIC CHARACTERIZATION OF WAR HEROES?

- The Navajo Code Talker may have seemed the ideal counterpart to the Japanese hero, renowned for his sense of sacrifice and his visually striking hara-kiri.
 - In the movie, Navajo Code Talkers had to consent to being murdered by their fellow soldiers if chances to get away from an ambush were very slim. The Code had to be protected at all costs.
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- Joe Enders impersonates a psychologically disturbed officer = a recurrent character in war movies.
- Personal struggle of an individual torn between his desire to serve the establishment and his growing loath to kill.
- Marred in his mind and his flesh by the war –he’s lost part of his hearing- his animosity towards his Navajo subaltern is fuelled by his bitterness towards life.

Two Types of Officers:

- A guilt-ridden officer who resents obeying military orders because he feels responsible for the loss of his patrol.
- A compassionate officer who also reckons that sometimes the ends justifies the means.
- The heroes portrayed by John Woo are consistent with what the audience should expect from lead characters in war movies.



RECEPTION: TEACHING THE AUDIENCE.

- A great amount of expectations among the remaining Code Talkers.
- Hasbro created a Navajo Code Talker GI Joe, the first doll of the brand to speak a Native American language.
- The existence of the Navajo Code Talkers first came into light in 1968 when their story was declassified by the Pentagon.
- Code Talkers symbolize bravery and sense of duty. They also contributed to the recognition of the Navajo language. In an interview given on March 17th, 2000, Teddy Draper Jr., whose father was among the Code Talkers, declared: “They had been beating us down, and then they use our language to win the war.”

AUTHENTICITY...

- The Pacific-Western Productions movie was produced in association with Red-Horse Native Productions.
- Valerie Red-Horse, the company's president, of Cherokee and Sioux heritage, wanted to cast as many Navajo actors as possible.
- She said: “I think the concern of the Code Talkers is this is probably their only shot to have their story told in a big way (...) I think they know they don't have a lot of time left on this earth, and they want to leave a legacy. They want their story to be told right.”
- Sam Billison, president of the Navajo Code Talker Association and voice of the GI Joe Navajo Code Talker, declared: “When our Navajo kids look at it we want them to be proud of it and to learn from it, the things we did and said.”

TEACHING THE AUDIENCE: NAVAJO MISTAKEN FOR JAPANESE SOLDIERS.

- Code Talkers had to fight the prejudices of their military peers and hierarchy.
 - Their physical appearance also proved a military disadvantage to them.
 - To an American soldier unfamiliar with Native American ethnic features, they look like Japanese. They were sometimes mistaken for spies disguised as American soldiers.
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ADAPTING TO A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT.

- They were cut off from their medicine men and traditional healing cures. Willie is shown performing an Enemy Way. Of course, Navajo Code Talkers were afraid of being pursued by the *chindi* (bad spirit) of enemies killed in combat but as one Code Talker recalls, they did not have much opportunities to perform such rituals. He reported: “One night a screaming Japanese soldier leaped into the trench and killed my partner with a samurai sword before other marines could shoot him. I had to stay there sending messages with my friend’s blood gushing over me.”

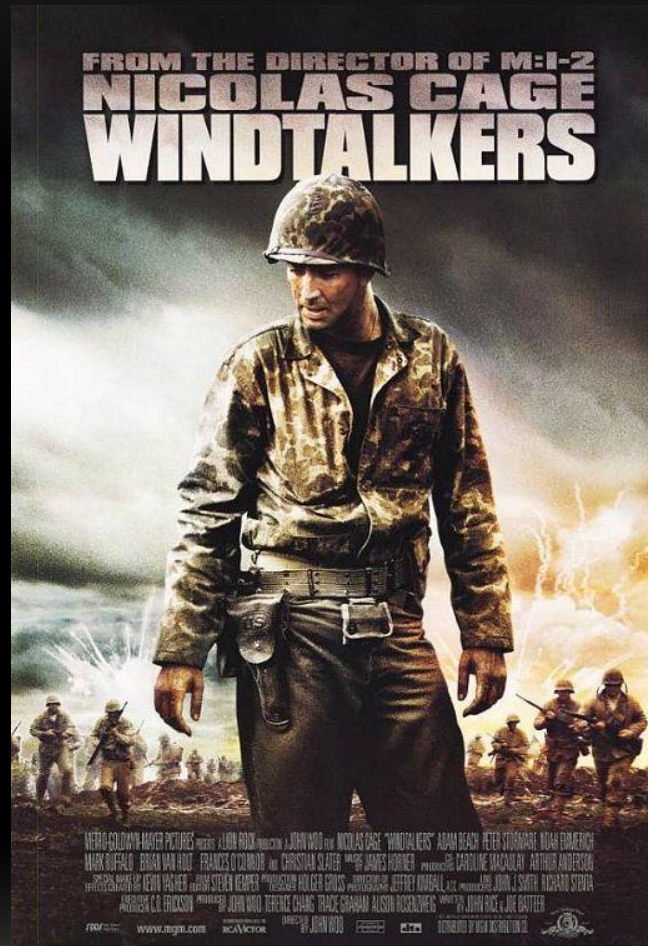
Hafford, William E. « The Navajo Code Talkers » Arizona Highways, February 1989.

ACCURACY VERSUS CELEBRATION?

- Windtalkers eventually pays a higher tribute to the Army than to the Code Talkers.
- Traditional military values such as collaboration, sacrifice of self, respect of orders are underlined.
- Saved by the Navajo he despised and harassed, the ordinary racist gets wise and hints at a possible reconciliation between American and Japanese soldiers in the future.
- The battlefield turns out to be a place of fraternal and multicultural encounter. When hearing his Navajo Code Talker playing the flute, Christian Slater joins in with his harmonica.



IS THE MOVIE ABOUT NAVAJO CODE TALKERS OR NICOLAS CAGE?



FROM THE DIRECTOR OF FACE/OFF AND M:I-2



NICOLAS CAGE
WINDTALKERS

"The Navajo Has The Code. Protect The Code At All Costs."



WINDTALKERS CASTING BY JON KOPPELSON. COSTUME DESIGNER JONATHAN WILSON. MUSIC BY JOHN WILLIAMS. EDITOR JAMES HAMILTON. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS JONATHAN WILSON AND JONATHAN WILSON. PRODUCED BY JONATHAN WILSON AND JONATHAN WILSON. WRITTEN BY JONATHAN WILSON AND JONATHAN WILSON. DIRECTED BY JOHN DAHL. WINDTALKERS CASTING BY JON KOPPELSON. COSTUME DESIGNER JONATHAN WILSON. MUSIC BY JOHN WILLIAMS. EDITOR JAMES HAMILTON. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS JONATHAN WILSON AND JONATHAN WILSON. PRODUCED BY JONATHAN WILSON AND JONATHAN WILSON. WRITTEN BY JONATHAN WILSON AND JONATHAN WILSON. DIRECTED BY JOHN DAHL.

PAR LE RÉALISATEUR DE
VOLTE/FACE ET MISSION:IMPOSSIBLE 2



UN FILM DE **JOHN WOOD**

NICOLAS CAGE WINDTALKERS

LES MESSAGERS DU VENT

DISTRIBUTION: BOLLORÉ PICTURES. PRÉSENTÉ EN CO-PRODUCTION AVEC JOHN WOOD. AVEC NICOLAS CAGE "WINDTALKERS, LES MESSAGERS DU VENT".
ADAM BELLIN - PETER STORHARTE - MARK CHAMBERLAIN - MARK RUFFALO - EDUARDOS ROUS - ROGER WILLE - FRANCES O'CONNOR - CHRISTOPHER PLATTEN - MORGAN JAMES BURGER - SCÉNARISTES: CAROLINE MASCALON - ANTOINETTE PAVILLON
RÉALISATEUR: JOHN WOOD. MONTAGE: STEVEN KEMPER - TONY GILLY. MUSIQUE: BOBBER LANGST. PRODUCTION: JEFFREY KIMBALL. CO-PRODUCTION: JAMES J. SMITH - RICHARD STEIN. PRODUCTION: JOHN WOOD
PRODUCTION: JOHN WOOD. TITRE ORIGINAL: "WINDTALKERS". AVEC NICOLAS CAGE, MORGAN JAMES BURGER, EDUARDOS ROUS, MARK RUFFALO, ADAM BELLIN, PETER STORHARTE, MARK CHAMBERLAIN, CAROLINE MASCALON, ANTOINETTE PAVILLON, CHRISTOPHER PLATTEN, ROGER WILLE, FRANCES O'CONNOR, JAMES J. SMITH, RICHARD STEIN, JEFFREY KIMBALL, BOBBER LANGST, STEVEN KEMPER, TONY GILLY, JOHN WOOD.

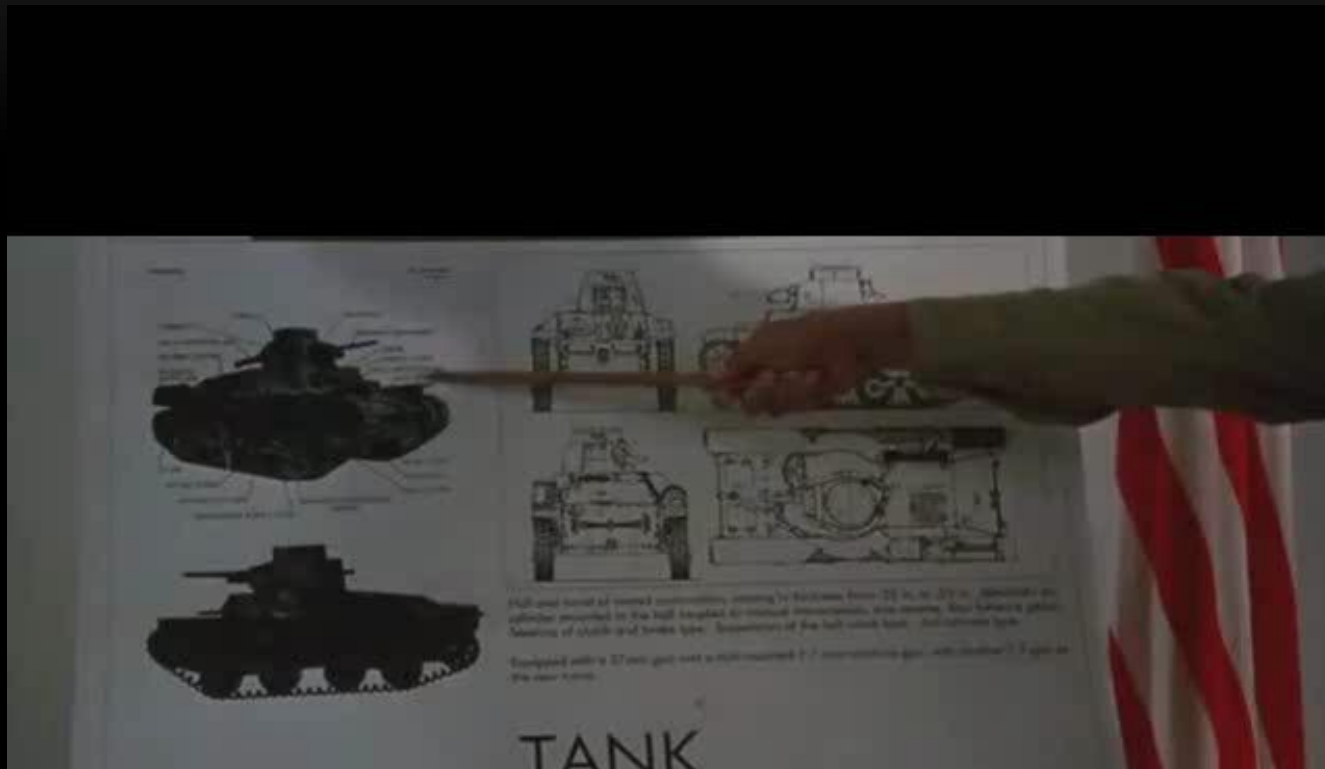


- The celebration of the action-man hero outweighs the importance granted to the historical relevance of the Code Talkers program. The different movie posters used for the film promotion shows that Nicolas Cage is the real hero of the movie.
 - The Code Talkers program is a mere pretext to describe heroic feats during World War II on the Pacific front. Nothing is ever told of the creation and implementation of the Code Talkers Program.
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- The name of the white man who persuaded the Army to use the Navajo language is never mentioned.
- During World War I, the Americans had hired eight Choctaw Indians to send and receive orders by telephone. Yet, the experiment led by the Company D of the 141st Infantry during World War I was not to be reiterated during World War II because German students had been sent to America to study indigenous languages.
- Philip Johnston, a civil engineer for the city of Los Angeles, convinced the US army to use the Navajo language as a code.
- Raised in the reservation by missionary parents, he was one of the few white men to master the language. He knew that no one could succeed in understanding Navajo unless he had learnt it from a very young age.

- The training of the Code Talkers is covered in a few minutes.
- Nothing is told about Navajo language's specificities:
 - four separate tones of voice which can change the meaning of the same word.
- Moreover, from the very beginning of the movie, the Code seems a success. It was not the case since the 211 words list Navajo soldiers had devised during their training first proved inadequate.
- Navajos used clan names to refer to the different units.
- Airplanes were given names of birds: the Navajo code word for dive bomber was their word for sparrow hawk.
- Some of the code words referred to the Navajo social conception of the world. The base was called mother mirroring the Navajo matriarchal organization of society.
- However, despite their creativeness, Navajo had to create new words to ensure that the Code kept pace with the evolution of army technology.

SEQUENCE CODE TRAINING...



CONCLUSION

- An all action movie with a misleading title?
 - The Navajo Code Talkers, though depicted as heroic soldiers, = faire-valoir / foils to the white soldier.
 - A panegyric of the US army or a narrative of forgiveness, liberty and fraternity.
 - John Woo proved unable to wrestle with the ethnic and social dilemma of the Navajo Code Talker on screen and off screen.
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- The improbability of the no-capture order.
- Marine Corps historians have denied the existence of such orders.
- Some of the Navajo Code Talkers interviewed did not remember being assigned a body-guard. Were these orders kept confidential? Is it only a melodramatic device? We may never know.



- However, as John Brown Jr., one of the five still-living Code Talkers among the first 29 who developed the code, says: “I think the movie is educational, especially as a reference for Anglo people.” And as another Code Talker, Frank Thomson, adds: “All of a sudden, the Code Talkers are starting to be known all over the world.”
- Must celebration be favored over historic accuracy when remembering? It’s up to you to answer that question but with Windtalkers, Navajo Code Talkers at least became legend.