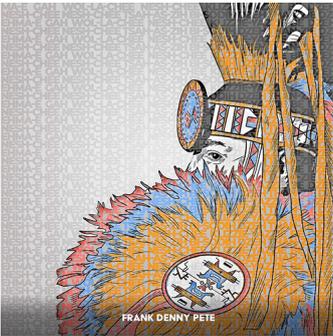


The ones they left behind

Written by By Molly Ann Howell Managing Editor
Friday, 28 July 2023 04:23



Art show focuses on families of the Navajo Code Talkers

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Three years into World War II, the U.S. military decided they needed a new approach to defeat Nazi Germany and its allies. One strategy they devised was to use young Native American men attending boarding schools across the country to craft a coded language. The idea was to use men who were fluent in both English and their traditional tribal language to send secret messages during battle.

The first class of 29 Navajo Code Talker U.S. Marine recruits completed their training in 1942. According to the National WWII Museum website, these men learned basic military training while also developing and memorizing a unique military code using their mostly unwritten language. They were placed in a guarded room until they finished the code.

Initially, 208 words were turned into code. Thus began a system that was used by more than 400 other Navajos to relay information the Japanese could not decipher.

That was 81 years ago. At first, the Code Talkers' mission and what they did overseas was classified. But it was declassified in 1968, and then in 1982, President Ronald Reagan designated Aug. 14 as "National Navajo Code Talkers Day" to honor those who served.

The Code Talkers' impact cannot be understated for many people. One author who previously spoke to the *Sun* noted the irony of a language that the U.S. tried to beat out of Navajo students wound up being a turning point in WWII. Navajo leaders credit the efforts of the Code Talkers for allowing the Navajo Nation to maintain its tribal sovereignty.

IDEA FOR THE SHOW

Nowadays, the Navajo Code Talkers are honored with parades and celebrations, and they are given opportunities to speak at events and write books.

But *Honoring the Families of Navajo Code Talkers*, an art show organized by Phoenix, Ariz. artist Shannon Gurley O'Donnell, recognizes and honors the sacrifices another group of people

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made during WWII. Those people are the families and loved ones of the Navajo Code Talkers.

Twelve artists are featured in the show, and many of them are modern-day relatives of the Code Talkers.

Anthony Anaya-Gorman and Michael Gorman are two brothers featured in the show. Their grandfather Carl N. Gorman was one of the original 29 Navajo Code Talkers, and their mother Zonnie Gorman interviewed many of the Code Talkers after what they did was declassified.

Michael said that there's a huge misconception about the Code Talkers and why they signed up for the war. He said that the young men didn't join the Marines out of a sort of patriotic duty, but rather as a necessity.

"... [When] the war started jobs were scarce on the reservation, and people needed income," Michael explained. "Just like now, young men joined the military because it's an economic opportunity or it's a chance to leave the area you grew up in and see something different."

In an interview with the *Sun*, O'Donnell said that a personal exchange nine years ago inspired the show. She was at a Gallup Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial Parade where the Code Talkers were being honored when she turned to a woman standing next to her. She mentioned how much the Code Talkers inspired her, and the woman said that her father was actually a Code Talker.

In a GallupARTS press release, O'Donnell explained what the woman said to her.

"She said that when her dad returned from the war, things were not good at home," O'Donnell said. "They were not considered 'heroes' at all ... in fact, just the opposite. Life was very difficult for these young men and their families."

O'Donnell said she wants the show to thank the families who "carried the burdens" of their loved

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ones and served the country in their own way.

“It’s almost like a ‘it’s never too late to say I’m sorry’ type thing,” O’Donnell said. “It’s never too late to say ‘I love you,’ it’s never too late to say something that needs to be said.”

NO WARM WELCOME HOME

During their time overseas, the Navajo Code Talkers fought alongside other Marines, all of them fighting for the same cause, no matter their skin color.

But when they returned home, the Code Talkers faced the same racist policies that were in place when they left.

They weren’t allowed to vote in elections in many states, and finding a job could be difficult when employers had the right to discriminate.

In his book *Code Talker: The First and Only Memoir By One of the Original Navajo Code Talkers of WWII*, Chester Nez talks about a particular interaction he had after coming home from the war.

He went to Albuquerque to get his ID and some paperwork updated, and a white man told him not to lose his papers that identified him as a Marine otherwise he’s “just another f•••ing Indian.”

DON’T TALK ABOUT THE WAR

What the Code Talkers accomplished during WWII was classified information, and they weren’t allowed to talk about it until 1968. But Michael said that the U.S. government’s request for the soldiers not to talk about what happened overseas fit right in with the Diné culture.

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“The things you do in war are not the things you would do in everyday life. So specifically in Navajo tradition, we don’t talk about war, we don’t speak of it,” Michael said. “We also don’t speak of the dead, and war is one of those things that is clouded with a lot of negative emotions, negative feelings, as well as the death that surrounds you.”

Michael said that when Carl would talk about the war, after what the Code Talkers did was declassified, he would only tell light anecdotes, stories that wouldn’t make him cry.

Anthony agreed with his brother.

“One thing he always did was make it always more of a lighthearted situation,” Anthony said. “He didn’t talk about the war in the sense of the effects of it, everything was essentially just a joke, which is a very Navajo thing to do.”

Michael’s piece in the art show plays homage to his grandfather. It is a bronze sculpture archetype of a Navajo grandfather, and it’s titled *Cheii*, which means maternal grandfather.

He described his own grandfather as a patriotic man, but also noted that Carl never went to firework celebrations during the Fourth of July. Michael chalked that up to a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Michael said that the celebration of war heroes goes against the Navajo tradition.

“... [We] ask them to relive the worst 15-minute battle of their lives, or the worst four years of their lives over and over again so that we can hear the story. And that’s something that’s very contrasting to what the Navajos would do,” Michael said.

Another artist featured in the show was Cassie Bloedel. Her father Frank T. Thompson was a

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Code Talker. She said he didn't talk much about the war either.

"He never talked about World War II at all in our family. We did not know [anything about his time in the war] until they actually kind of started to come together as an Association back in the 1970s. And then we would go with him to meetings," Bioedel said.

THE YOUNGER GENERATION'S VIEW

Skylar Blackbull is the youngest artist participating in the show. Her grandmother is related to one of the Code Talkers, although they are not one of the original 29.

Blackbull recently graduated college, and she spent her college career educating fellow students about the Code Talkers.

"Not many of my peers knew about the history of the Code Talkers, so doing a project on the Code Talkers was my way of sharing that history," Blackbull said.

Her entry for the art show was 29 prints. Each print was dedicated to one of the 29 original Code Talkers, and they are all made of some of the original code used during the war.

"Honestly, I've always loved the history of the Navajo Code Talkers," Blackbull said. "I thought it was always something that was really important for everyone to know, so this was just kind of a way for me to tell the story to the younger generation and people all over the world."

O'Donnell turned the art show into a bit of a competition by having a fellow artist judge all of the pieces, and Blackwell's prints won third place.

Irving Bahe's paintings won first place, and Christian Bigwater's entry won second.

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The ART123 Gallery, which is located at 123 W. Coal Ave., is hosting the *Honoring the Families of Navajo Code Talkers* show until Aug. 11.

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