



Choctaw Telephone Squad at Camp Devens, Mass.

Left to right: Solomon Louis, Mitchell Bobb, James Edwards, Calvin Wilson, James Davenport and Capt. Elijah W. Horner

THE FIRST CODE TALKERS

CHOCTAW NATION 'TELEPHONE WARRIORS'

USED THEIR ONCE-FORBIDDEN LANGUAGE

IN WORLD WAR I

By Kit Bernardi

NAVAJO AND COMANCHE CODE talkers' contributions to the Allied victory in World War II are widely documented. Lesser known, however, is that Native American languages were briefly used by the U.S. military to encrypt combat operations messages near the end of World War I.

"Historically, because Native American languages were not well recorded and written, they were not part of a national library somewhere in the world readily available for study," says William C. Meadows, a professor of anthropology and Native American studies at Missouri State University and author of *The First Code Talkers: Native American Communicators in World War I*.

"Germany's expert linguists could not easily compare documented languages to the grammar and syntax of Native American languages used to code U.S. military messages."

There were seven documented groups of Native American code talkers in World War I — Choctaw, Oklahoma Cherokee, Eastern Band Cherokee, Comanche, Lakota, Osage and Ho-Chunk, Meadows says. "Beyond saving lives in World War I, the greatest contribution of World War I Native American code talkers was that they created a code-talking strategy expanded upon in World War II."

LINES CROSSED, SECRETS LOST

Few official military documents detail Native American languages used in World War I combat operations. However, reports of two battles fought against the Germans at Forest Ferme and Montbrehain, France, in October 1918 exemplify how coded messages in Choctaw and Cherokee languages were instrumental in American Expeditionary Force (AEF) victories.

Both battles were part of the Meuse-Argonne Campaign, the largest Allied offensive in World War I fought from Sept. 26, 1918, until the Armistice ended the war on Nov. 11.

Choctaw soldiers were mostly serving in the 141st, 142nd, 143rd and 144th Infantry Regiments of the AEF's 36th Infantry Division, which was attached to the Fourth French Army. Col. Alfred W. Bloor's 142nd regiment had six companies. Company E led by Capt. Elijah W. Horner was called the "Indian Company" because, of its 250 soldiers, 70 were Oklahoma Choctaw.

The 36th Division's first combat engagement was the Battle of Saint Étienne in late September 1918. The Germans retreated across the Aisne River on Oct. 9, leaving behind evidence of how easily they had been intercepting AEF military messages by tapping into telephone lines and killing or capturing runners.

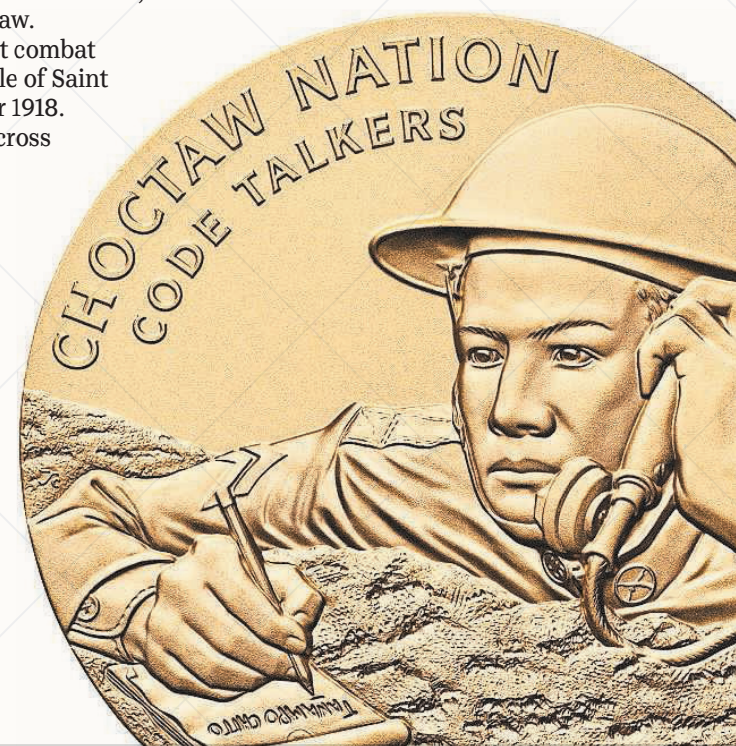
It is difficult to pinpoint whom to credit with the idea of using Choctaw language as code for communicating military orders. Meadows says it wasn't part of a grand AEF strategic plan, but a decision made in the heat of war to solve this deadly problem.

In the last week of October 1918, an order conveyed by Adjunct Capt. David R. Nelson to Capt. Elijah W. Horner requested he choose Native American soldiers to send messages in their languages. Horner selected eight Company E Choctaw soldiers.

In a 1942 report titled the "Indian Telephone Operators," Horner confirmed how the "Telephone Squad" was formed and recalled the names of five of the eight original Choctaw communicators under his command: Pfc. Mitchell Bobb, Pvt. James H. Davenport, Cpl. James M. Edwards, Cpl. Soleman Bond Louis and Cpl. Calvin Wilson.

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Congressional Gold Medal for Choctaw Code Talkers





The Choctaw Cultural Center in Calera, Okla., will unveil a life-size bronze sculpture of World War I Choctaw Code Talkers created by Choctaw artist Jane Semple Umsted early in 2025.

WON IN TRANSLATION

The only battle in which Choctaw code talkers transmitted messages in combat operations was at Forest Ferme, where the 36th Division engaged the Germans in combat on Oct. 27-28, 1918.

Prior to the 36th Division's arrival, the French Army had launched two assaults and was repulsed with heavy losses. The Allied Powers prevailed when the 36th joined the fight and used the Choctaw code talkers to transmit orders.

"The speed in which Choctaw code talkers could communicate messages in the moment without having to spend precious time to encode and decode made a significant difference during combat," Meadows says.

It worked like this: As English-speaking officers standing next to the Choctaw code talkers relayed orders, they were translated into vernacular Choctaw language spoken over signal corps field telephones. Messages went back and forth between the battlefield and command posts in rapid-fire fashion.

Because the tactic proved effective, an order was issued to expand the group of Choctaw communicators to 18, according to a report Bloor submitted in January 1919.

After the battle, the 142nd Regiment moved to the village of Louppy-le-Petit for eight days of rest and retraining. Choctaw communicators whose names do not appear on an official military document trained in coded telephone message transmission. Lt. Templeton Black, who was Cheyenne, oversaw their instruction.

According to Bloor's report and the Choctaw Code Talkers Association's educational material, the new recruits helped create code words for approximately 15 U.S. military terms that did not easily translate into vernacular Choctaw

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language. For example, “artillery” became “big gun” — tanampo chito in Choctaw.

But few of the new Choctaw code words were used because Forest Ferme was the last battle the 36th Division fought, and the Germans surrendered shortly thereafter.

HONORING CODE TALKERS TODAY

The Choctaw Code Talkers Association based in Durant, Okla., identifies 19 Choctaw soldiers as World War I code talkers.

While there is no documentation listing all their names, military records, postwar personal accounts, newspaper articles and statements of descendants of World War I Choctaw service members have

helped identify who they likely were.

Judy Allen sits on the association’s board and is the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma’s historic projects officer. She conducts research and maintains the tribe’s archives. In 2023, she traveled to France with nation members to personally experience Saint Étienne and Forest Ferme.

“To touch the bullet-riddled walls, visit Choctaw soldiers’ graves and war memorials, attend church and share meals with French soldiers’ descendants, and trod the very ground where Choctaw code talkers freely spoke their language that was banned back home in U.S. government-funded Indian boarding schools, well ...” Allen says as her voice fades and she takes a deep breath. “It’s emotional.”

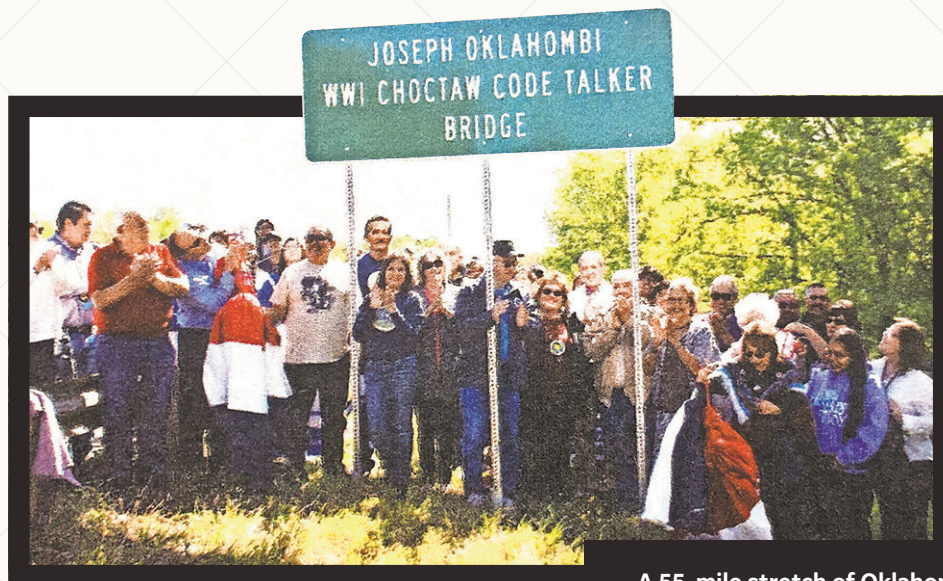
Nuchi Nashoba, president of the Choctaw Code Talkers Association, is the great-granddaughter of World War I code talker Ben Carterby. “It has taken years of work and will take many more to educate people about our nation’s first code talkers,” she says.

The association leads projects designed to honor Choctaw code talkers and tell their stories. Projects include tribal ceremonies and events; exhibits at Choctaw Nation museums in Calera and Tuskahoma, Okla.; monuments across the state of Oklahoma; the designation of a 55-mile stretch of Oklahoma State Highway 3 as World War I Choctaw Code Talker Highway; and Oklahoma State

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Choctaw soldiers training at Camp Bowie in Texas. Noel Johnson and Calvin Wilson are second and third from the right, respectively.



A 55-mile stretch of Oklahoma State Highway 3 was designated as the World War I Choctaw Code Talker Highway in 2013. Descendants of those soldiers gathered at the dedication.

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— NUCHI NASHOBA, president,
Choctaw Code Talkers Association

highway bridges named in honor of 23 World War I and World War II Choctaw code talkers.

In 1989, former French Prime Minister Pierre Messmer visited Oklahoma to honor the World War I Choctaw code

talkers. He awarded them the French Republic's highest military honor, the Chevalier de l'Ordre National du Mérite Medal (Knight of the National Order of Merit Medal).

“This recognition made national and international news, thus elevating their stories to the global stage,” Nashoba says.

In 2008, President George W. Bush signed the Code Talkers Recognition Act. Five years later, members of Choctaw Nation and 25 other Native American tribes with World War I and World War II code talkers received Congressional Gold Medals in Washington, D.C.

Today, Choctaw code talkers' stories are being shared with the public through creative business partnerships, inter-tribal initiatives, high-tech platforms and fine art.

Acclaimed Choctaw master artist DG Smalling's signature contemporary designs are rendered in one continuous line. Smalling is the great-grandson of

Corp. Calvin Wilson, one of the original eight World War I Choctaw code talkers.

“As a sovereign nation, it is important for Choctaw to honor our warriors by sharing their stories, which are an integral part of Native American and U.S. defense histories,” Smalling says. “Our people must continuously explore new ways to accurately and contextually tell our own stories to a global audience now and in the future.”

Smalling attended the SXSW festival in 2022 to view Our Worlds' award-winning virtual reality experience Choctaw Code Talkers 1918. Our Worlds co-founders Catherine Eng and Kilma Lattin, a member of the Pala Band of Mission Indians and a retired Army aviation officer, donated their sensory-laden, simulated trench warfare exhibit to the Choctaw Cultural Center in

Calera, Okla. It is scheduled to open in 2025.

Also in 2025, the Choctaw Cultural Center will unveil a bronze statue of World War I Choctaw Code Talkers created by Choctaw artist Jane Semple Umsted. The life-size sculpture portrays a team of three code talkers in a battlefield littered with rubble and shell casings.

To accurately portray the code talkers in action, Umsted researched the encrypted message transmission process. Through Army surplus stores and private collectors, she sourced original World War I infantry soldiers' uniforms, insignia, weapons, gear and maps.

While the statue has taken three years to complete, Umsted feels as though it has been a lifetime in the making. “I consider this sculpture the most important piece of art I've ever created because it honors Choctaw Nation's courageous warrior spirit and my people's proud legacy of U.S. military service,” she says.