Code Talkers During War

Since the Navajo Code Talker Museum is located in Arizona, about five hours from where we are, I decided to do a column on the Code Talkers. I assumed that the first time the US military used Native Americans as code talkers was in the Pacific during WWII. However, after doing some research, I learned that was not the case. In the autumn of 1918, US troops were in battle in the Meuse-Argonne offensive on the Western Front, the communications had been compromised. The Germans were tapping telephone lines, deciphering codes and capturing runners sent to deliver messages. In the 142nd Infantry Regiment, a captain overheard two Choctaw taking in their native language. He asked if there were other Choctaw soldiers at headquarters. Getting a positive answer, he had the front-line Choctaw talk to the headquarter Choctaw over a field telephone. The headquarter soldiers translated back to English. The Choctaw Telephone Squad was born and so was code talking. Within hours, several Choctaw soldiers were sent to critical front-line locations. Since many military terms weren't in the Choctaw vocabulary, code words were also used. For instance a machine gun was "little gun shoot fast" in Choctaw. Following the war, Colonel Bloor said "There was hardly one chance in a million that Fritz would be able to translate these dialects and the plan to have these Indians transmit telephone messages was adopted." At this time, Native Americans were being sent to government or religious schools and were forbidden to use their native language. The Choctaw soldiers were probably descendants of the Trail of Tears Choctaw who were moved from Eastern states to Oklahoma. Choctaw, along with the rest of the Native Americans were not granted the right to vote until 1924. In 1989 the French Government bestowed the Chevalier de L'Ordre National du Merite (Knight of the Order of National Merit) posthumously to the Choctaw code talkers of WW1.

In 1942, Philip Johnston, who grew up on a Navajo reservation proposed that the military use the Navajo soldiers with their native language to provide coded communications on the front-line. The Marine Corps gave it a test, recruiting 29 Navajo to Camp Elliott, CA to develop a code that would work for military communications. The group developed code words for military words such as assigning bird names to different kinds of airplanes. Once training was completed, the Code Talkers successfully translated, transmitted and re-translated a test message in two and half minutes. From then on, the Code Talkers were used in every major operation involving the Marines in the Pacific theater. Their primary job was to transmit tactical information over telephone and radio. During the invasion of Iwo Jima, six Navajo Code Talkers were operating continuously. They sent more than 800 messages. All of the messages were transmitted without error. The success of the Code Takers was kept secret until 2008 when the Code Talkers Recognition Act was passed in the US recognizing the hundreds of code talkers from many different tribes,