



# Mission Possible: Decoding WWII Navajo Marine Code

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**Grade Level** 7  
**Duration** 1-2 class periods

## National Standards

### GEOGRAPHY

#### Element 1: The World in Spatial Terms

1. How to use maps and other geographic representations, geospatial technologies, and spatial thinking to understand and communicate information

#### Element 2: Places and Regions

4. The physical and human characteristics of places

#### Element 6: The Uses of Geography

17. How to apply geography to interpret the past

## AZ Standards

### ELA

#### Language Knowledge of Language

7.L.6 Acquire and use accurately grade-appropriate general academic and domain-specific words and phrases; gather vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

## Arizona Social Science Standards

### GEOGRAPHY

**The use of geographic representations and tools helps individuals understand their world.**

7.G1.1 Use and construct maps and other geographic representations to explain the spatial patterns of cultural and environmental characteristics.

**Human-environment interactions are essential aspects of human life in all societies.**

7.G2.2 Analyze cultural and environmental characteristics that make places both similar and different.

### HISTORY

**The development of civilizations, societies, cultures, and innovations have influenced history and continue to impact the modern world.**

7.H1.2 Trace the development and impact of scientific, technological, and educational innovations within historical time periods.

**Economic, political, and religious ideas and institutions have influenced history and continue to shape the modern world.**

7.H3.4 Explain the influence of individuals, groups, and institutions on people and events in historical and contemporary settings.

**Patterns of social and political interactions have shaped people, places, and events throughout history and continue to shape the modern world.**

7.H4.1 Evaluate how the diversity of a society impacts its social and political norms.

## Overview

The novel, *Code Talker* by Joseph Bruchac, provides an insight into World War II that is often

overlooked. Navajo code talkers were called upon to help create a unique military language to discreetly transmit top secret messages without fear of enemy decoding. This novel not only speaks to the heroism of WWII Navajo

## Mission Possible: Decoding WWII Navajo Marine Code

marines but also offers an understanding of the Navajo culture, and a unique geographic perspective with rich reference to terrain and locations encountered.

### Purpose

Students will gain a better understanding of how the Navajo language and people played a significant role in the U.S. strategy to win World War II. In this lesson, the code names of several places involved in the conflict will be identified and examined.

### Materials

- *Code Talker* by Joseph Bruchac
- Navajo Culture Vocabulary Cards
- Decode: Place Locator worksheet and Answer Key
- Navajo Code Talkers' Dictionary,
- World map, centered on Pacific Ocean <http://alliance.la.asu.edu/maps/World-pa.pdf>
- Atlas or map of world with latitude and longitude
- Colored pencils
- Handheld devices for determining latitude and longitude (optional)
- Code Talker Locations map [http://geoalliance.asu.edu/sites/default/files/maps/Code Talkers Location Map.pdf](http://geoalliance.asu.edu/sites/default/files/maps/Code%20Talkers%20Location%20Map.pdf)

### Objectives

The student will be able to:

1. Analyze the Navajo code to help identify and locate places involved in the WWII conflict.
2. Examine elements of Navajo culture and how they were applied to a military situation.

### Procedures

*Prerequisite Skills: Students should have basic background knowledge of World War II from regular classroom activities and instruction. Students should be in the midst of reading or have completed reading *Code Talkers* by Joseph Bruchac.*

### SESSION ONE and TWO

*Work these activities into the reading of the book as they seem appropriate.*

1. Begin the lesson by writing the word "Navajo" on the whiteboard. Engage the class in a discussion to gauge their knowledge of this group of people.
2. Project the Navajo Culture Vocabulary Cards to build the academic vocabulary necessary to better understand the book, *Code Talker* by Joseph Bruchac.
3. Distribute Decode: Place Locator worksheet. Tell students they are on a mission to crack the Navajo code used during WWII. Have students work individually for about five minutes and ask them to try and fill in as much of the worksheet as possible (preferably in pencil), using only the information provided (do not offer any further instructions or clarifications). Ask students to share their findings- answers, patterns, confusions, complications, etc.
4. Distribute the Navajo Code Talkers' Dictionary, Names of Places key. Go over and clarify what each column represents (1- English place name, 2- Navajo code place name, 3- Navajo meaning).
5. Explain they will use the Dictionary and their atlas or world map to now complete the Decode: Place Locator worksheet, now that the code has been "broken".
6. Distribute World map, centered on Pacific Ocean. Students may need to be oriented to the non-traditional view of the world, with East longitude on the left and West longitude on the right.
7. Ask students to add an 8-point compass rose to the lower right corner. Next direct them to label the four major world oceans (Pacific, Atlantic, Indian, Arctic). *NOTE: Having students use blue colored pencil to label waterways may make it easier for them to differentiate land from water. Also, if earlier geography instruction has included a fifth ocean (Southern or Antarctic), add that ocean as well.*
8. Explain to students that they will need to locate each of the 16 places from the Decode: Place Locator worksheet on the map, using numbers only (U.S. = 1, Japan = 2). Remind students that if they are having trouble identifying a place, to use the latitude/longitude coordinates.
9. Once students have finished identifying the 16 countries, write the following on the

## Mission Possible: Decoding WWII Navajo Marine Code

board Allied and Axis. Using the countries identified, call on students to try and identify them as either Allied or Axis (Axis-Germany, Italy, Japan; Allied- all others).

- Using the list from the board, have the students shade all Allied powers purple and all Axis powers red. Lastly have them add a map key/legend to the bottom of the map with this distinction.
- Have students look back at the Navajo meaning for Japan, France, etc. Have the students make guesses as to why the Navajo gave those descriptions to those places. Hold a class discussion: Would these descriptions be used today?
- Project the Code Talker Locations map and have students discuss the differences between where the code talkers were from and where they were sent by the military.

### Assessment

#### Social Science and ELA

The Decode: Place Locator worksheet can be scored in the following way: 1 pt for each of 48 open fields. Mastery will be 39/48 fields correctly labeled or 80%.

#### Social Science

The World map can be scored in the following way: 4 pts- compass rose, 5 pts- oceans, 16 pts- places, 5 pts-map key/legend, 5 pts Allied/Axis powers shaded. Mastery will be 28/35 labeled correctly or 80%.

### Extensions

Write a literary response to the book, *Code Talker*.

Assign vivid geographic terrain descriptions of various locations in the book to create a visual imagery to compile into a class gallery.

### Sources

*Code Talker* by Joseph Bruchac, 2005, ISBN 0-14-240596-5

Navajo Code Talker's Dictionary  
<https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/n/navajo-code-talker-dictionary.html>

Arizona Geographic Alliance map, The World (centered on the Pacific Ocean), <http://alliance.la.asu.edu/maps/World-pa.pdf>