

Meskwaki Code Talkers

by Mary Bennett

Armchair military historians know all about the critical strategic importance of the Mediterranean campaign during World War II. The British fought the Italians for control of North Africa, only to lose ground when German field marshal Rommel's Afrika Korps secretly invaded North Africa in April 1941. Even with the formal entry of the United States into the war at the end of 1941, it took nearly a year before troops and home front forces could be mobilized and outfitted.

Ready for action, but with no easy way to invade German-occupied Europe, and under pressure from Stalin to open a second front, the Americans made their first large-scale appearance as Allies—landing in North Africa in November 1942 under the leadership of General Eisenhower. Among the soldiers in the 34th Division making the initial advances on the beaches of Algeria were several Meskwaki code talkers, who would save many lives using their unique language to communicate vital military messages.

Twenty-seven young Meskwaki men had enlisted in the Iowa National Guard in January 1941, probably motivated by economic circumstances as much as by patriotism or a chance to learn new skills. No doubt Americans could sense the tension of war on the horizon, even though the cataclysmic effect of Pearl Harbor was almost a year away. As new recruits of the 168th Iowa Infantry, eight Meskwaki were selected for special instruction in elements of walkie-talkie radio and machine gunning. This training and experimentation—using a code derived from Native American languages for secret communications—predate American entry into the war and even the use of Native speakers of the Navajo language, who are more commonly celebrated as World War II code talkers.

The Comanche and the Meskwaki were probably among the first to be trained as code talkers, although more than a dozen tribes were involved. As a February

1941 newspaper explains, they “were trained to translate messages from English to their own language and relay them by radio or phone to an Indian who in turn will turn the message back into English for officers.” The headline proclaims “Army Indians to Foil Enemy Listeners,” while the accompanying photo depicts the Meskwaki wearing stereotypical feather headdresses more representative of western Plains Indians than the Meskwaki's traditional regalia.

The eight Meskwaki—brothers Frank and Willard Sanache, Dewey Roberts, Edward Benson, Melvin Twin, Dewey Youngbear, and brothers Judy Wayne Wabaunasee and Mike Wayne Wabaunasee—joined Company H, the heavy weapons company of the 168th

Infantry, just three weeks before the unit was mobilized. According to the press, the young men, who ranged in age from 18 to 22, were “induced to join up only when they realized that they were to play a strategic part helping the 168th maintain a valiant tradition in battle.” Their initial training was at Camp Dodge in Johnston, Iowa, but they were soon sent to Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, for more intensive training in the use of the walkie-talkies. As the newspaper reported, the

SHSI (IOWA CITY); MARSHALLTOWN TIMES-REPUBLICAN, FEB. 26, 1941



Willard Sanache straps a radio unit on Dewey Youngbear. The February 1941 caption read: “Man-nwe-net-da-mon! It's an Indian way of saying, ‘We don't like it’ in his native Mesquakie and what he really means is that he doesn't like to have people ask too many questions about his language, now that he knows it will play a strategic part in regimental communications of the 168th infantry.”



Resting here in their quarters in February 1941 are the eight Meskwaki trained as code talkers. From left, front row: Mike Wayne Wabaunasee, Edward Benson, Dewey Roberts, Frank Sanache, Judy Wayne Wabaunasee (reclining), and Melvin Twin. Standing in the rear are Willard Sanache and Dewey Youngbear.

shortwave radios "are carried in a pack strapped to a soldier's back, have a collapsible antenna and a three mile range." Besides mastering gunnery school, radio operators had to learn to use the code and understand electronics, mechanics, and the inner workings of a radio, such as vacuum tubes, amplifiers, transformers, and transmitters. Field communications were vastly improved using the Indian code language to send messages about enemy troop movements, battlefield tactics, and directions for artillery fire.

Acting as scouts, those in the lead assaults had to move quickly with heavy equipment across any terrain to establish observation and communication posts, whether in open, flat country, in the desert, or in mountainous regions like Italy. The Meskwaki code talkers, with their special language skills, were assigned to the 168th Infantry, 34th Red Bull Division. By October 1942, it was reported that Judy and Mike Wayne Wabaunasee (and probably the others) had been assigned to Northern Ireland, but they were soon dispatched to the deserts of North Africa, a place Frank Sanache described as "the worst place this side of hell." Landing in Algiers and moving eastward towards Tunisia, the green recruits were decimated by the veteran

Afrika Korps. Frank Sanache was captured by Italian soldiers in Tunisia in 1943, while Dewey Youngbear and Judy Wayne Wabaunasee were captured by the Germans.

With the support of the vast American fleet, airpower, and ground troops, the Allies regained territory in North Africa before launching attacks on the coast of Italy in September 1943. Dewey Roberts remembered how the troops would advance, put up a defense line, dig foxholes, and stop for a short time before moving forward—all the while getting shelled by artillery. "The 34th Division got chewed up," he recalled. "From Salerno to the Naples area we lost a lot of men. They were killed, wounded, and captured." While near Naples in March 1944, Roberts had the opportunity to meet up with his younger brother, Ernie, who had joined the service a year earlier. The

Italian campaign moved forward slowly, with heavy fighting because of the mountains north of Naples and mighty German defenses, but the Allies finally liberated Rome on June 4, 1944.

Besides suffering harsh treatment, beatings, and near starvation, American Indians, rarely seen on the European continent, faced racial prejudice in Italian and German POW camps. The Meskwaki, like other POWs, had to learn the German language quickly; if they didn't respond to a command, they would be beaten. Donald Wanatee, adopted son of Frank Sanache, said, "They didn't treat them well. They worked them to death."

The sense of desperation felt by these men is reflected in the multiple escapes made by Dewey Youngbear, who no doubt paid a heavy price each time he was recaptured. On his third attempt, he managed to find an Italian soldier's uniform to wear as a disguise. Driven by hunger, Youngbear risked eating and drinking at a local restaurant, only to be discovered when he could not understand or speak to the German and Italian soldiers who approached him. Judy Wayne Wabaunasee also escaped his captors in Italy, but later, when he arrived at the same prison camp in Germany, guards noticed that Youngbear and Wabaunasee knew each other. Youngbear received "rough treatment from the Germans" for refusing to give information about the other Meskwaki code talker.



SHSI (IOWA CITY); DES MOINES REGISTER, OCT. 11, 1942, SEC. 5, P. 1

Annie [Waseskuk] Wabaunasee displays a service flag in her home on the Meskwaki Settlement. Each star represented a son in the Armed Forces: two were code talkers, and the third, Walter, was stationed on the West Coast (October 1942).

Like many POWs, they required hospitalization after their release, and their ravaged bodies suffered lingering effects. Dewey Youngbear died in 1948 of tuberculosis, Wanatee recalled, a disease he contracted in Germany as a POW. Other Meskwaki veterans also had war-related health problems.

Back home in Iowa, life on the Meskwaki Settlement in Tama County had remained essentially the same for many generations, with relatively few encroachments from white civilization. The tribe had purchased the settlement land in the 19th century rather than live on a government reservation. Though economically impoverished in the 1940s, the tribe had retained a rich cultural heritage by preserving their language, customs, and ceremonies over the years. Approximately 420 Meskwaki lived in frame houses without modern amenities like telephones, electricity, or indoor plumbing. Most of the women had a traditional wickiup near their homes because they liked to cook over an open fire. Younger members of the tribe scattered during the war, joining the military or moving to

large cities to work in war industries. Others worked on railroads and at local factories in communities like Marshalltown, while some like Nell G. Ward pursued educational opportunities. Ward became the first formally trained Meskwaki nurse after enlisting in the Cadet Nurse Corps and attending the University of Iowa.

The Meskwaki participated in scrap drives, canned vegetables, and contributed to the war effort in the noblest manner by sending warriors off to fight and die. Because of the war overseas, the swastika—an American Indian symbol long before Hitler was born—was replaced by a thunderbird on powwow advertisements, especially after the swastika caused an uproar in nearby Tama about whether the Indians were joining Hitler. Attendance at the annual powwow celebration was down in 1942, and no powwows were held in 1943 and 1944 because of the war.

After the war, people moved more freely in and out of the life on the Meskwaki Settlement, and new ideas competed with old. More than fifty Meskwaki had served in the military during World War II, and the returning veterans established their own American Legion post in tribute to young Robert Morgan, the first Meskwaki casualty of the war. Ironically, these men were the first generation of Meskwaki to enjoy the full rights of U.S. citizenship, granted to Native Americans only as recently as 1924. Yet they honorably defended this country, fighting as warriors for both their homeland and adopted nation. ❖

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A wealth of historical information is available about the Meskwaki, and the State Historical Society of Iowa, continuing its active role in documenting the cultural heritage of the tribe, has produced an interactive program full of photographs, documents, and cultural history. The Meskwaki History CD-ROM will be available for distribution in the fall of 2004. Contact Mary Bennett, 319-335-3916, for more information.

NOTE ON SOURCES

The author wishes to thank Meskwaki historian Johnathan L. Buffalo, who conducted oral histories with Frank Sanache and Dewey Roberts in 1978 and shared useful newspaper articles and photos. Donald Wanatee also graciously shared his insights. Also useful were articles in the *Marshalltown Times-Republican* (2/21/1941, p. 11; 2/26/1941, p. 11); *Des Moines Register* (10/11/42, section 4, p. 1); a February 18, 1941, clipping (newspaper not known); and several clippings rescued by the volunteers working on the World War II Clippings Project (SHSI-Iowa City). Timothy Jones and staff from the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., have been researching the lives of the code talkers, conducting oral history interviews with Frank Sanache and others from a dozen different tribes. Upcoming traveling exhibitions developed by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition (SITES) will showcase photographs, text, and artifacts such as radios and uniforms. Untranscribed oral histories with the code talkers and other Iowans in the 34th Infantry, held at the Gold Star Museum at Camp Dodge, may yield more information. Robin Roberts (Dewey Roberts's nephew) and others have been working with Iowa's U.S. senators to obtain the Congressional Medal of Honor for the Meskwaki code talkers.



SHSI (DES MOINES); DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE

The war broke traditions and brought new ideas—and faces—to Iowa. Above: Sgt. Joseph W. Donahey came home to his family in Clinton with a Filipino wife in February 1945. A survivor of the Bataan Death March, Donahey had organized a guerrilla band. Among the Filipinos fighting with him was Corajon Mangrovang, the woman he married.

Right: Women acquired new skills during the war. Here, WACs at Fort Des Moines learn to operate a transmitter in radio and television school (undated).



SHSI (DES MOINES)

SHSI (DES MOINES): DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE



Wearing helmets, boys play war with toy soldiers, tanks, and airplanes, while two girls look on (August 1942, probably Des Moines). The war fueled the imagination of American children—some dreamed of becoming war heroes, others had nightmares of being bombed or losing their fathers.





SHSI (DES MOINES)

Three basic training companies from the WAC training center at Fort Des Moines march down Locust Street in Des Moines (Memorial Day, 1945).



SHS (DES MOINES); OES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE

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SHSI (DES MOINES): L. H. DAVIS COLLECTION



Opposite: Boy Scout Bill Free milks cows on the Rex Helfinstine farm near Farrar. Some 50 scouts from Polk County worked on farms in the summer of 1942 to help build United Nations' food supplies.

Left: Students in Hampton contribute scrap metal to a salvage drive in November 1942. The photograph was captioned: "Barbed wire was hard to handle but the students brought it in just the same."

ALL THREE PHOTOS: SHSI (DES MOINES); DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE



Baby Helen Marie Radosevich holds a letter from her father, Tony P. Radosevich, stationed in Ireland since before her birth. The letter read in part: "We have to make our country a safe and peace-loving state so we can all live happily" (October 1942).



Christmas Day, 1944: Susan Minkel opens a card from her father, bearing the "Red Bull" icon and the silhouette of Italy. Newton physician Roger Minkel had been overseas since February 1941. Susan and her mother were living in Fort Dodge for the duration.



Dressed in a pint-size military uniform and with his white toddler's shoes peeking out the bottom, David Carroll Veach studies the controls of a tiny tank in a toy store in Des Moines (November 1942).

SHS (DES MOINES); DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE

