

Behind the Shingle, the Untold Stories of D-Day

Nicholas Coddington and Caitlin Cutrona

Soldiers disembarking on Omaha Beach. Paratroopers dropping from the Normandy skies. Rangers scaling Pointe du Hoc. These are but some of the iconic mental images students may form when reflecting on D-Day, the World War II amphibious assault on Nazi-occupied France on June 6, 1944. Many of these mental images are informed by cinematic depictions such as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *Band of Brothers* (2001). Hollywood portrayals of D-Day, however, are often problematic as they lack the context needed for students to grapple with the complexities of this historical event. Primary sources from the National Archives, on the other hand, offer a critical link to understanding D-Day, as the stories told through these sources demonstrate that this moment in history is more complex than students may initially think. The archival records highlighted in this article uncover compelling stories and heroes from that June 1944 day that are often overlooked by the traditional narrative: support soldiers who established air-space security on the beaches,

covert code talkers who provided secure communications, and cryptologic experts who furnished intelligence that contributed to the operation's success. By highlighting voices often missing from D-Day depictions, we can encourage students to extend their definition of heroism as it relates to this Allied amphibious assault.

320th Barrage Balloon Battalion

While the heroic exploits of the Red Tail Tuskegee Airmen of the 332nd Fighter Group and 477th Bombardment Group have attained legendary status in popular memory of World War II, there is scant knowledge of the important role African American servicemen played on D-Day. Watch any accurate Hollywood movie or archival film reel of the D-Day invasion and you will notice the absence of German fighter aircraft during the beach landings. The reason for the missing aircraft can be found in the National Archives.

In the early morning hours of June 6, 1944, men from the 320th Barrage Balloon Battalion came ashore under withering

fire. This 600-man unit, composed entirely of African Americans, was assigned the daunting task of erecting low level balloons tethered by reinforced steel cables. These balloons impeded enemy fighter planes from strafing the landings and prevented German shore artillery from identifying targets at sea.¹ Shortly after the invasion, a U.S. Coast Guard combat photographer captured a panoramic view of Omaha Beach with the balloons in flight, providing direct aerial protection to the U.S. troops and supplies coming ashore (see photo page 93).²

For members of the 320th, getting on shore was more difficult than for the average infantryman carrying only a rifle and rucksack. These soldiers, by contrast, hauled 35-foot rubberized balloons, helium canisters, 2,000-foot steel cables, and other cumbersome equipment.³ Undaunted by the hail of machine gunfire from the bluffs above Omaha Beach, the men focused on their mission of emplacing balloons above the beaches. One observer, Academy Award-winning director John Ford, watched in awe



Photograph of defensive balloons above the beaches on D-Day, June 6, 1944 (National Archives)

as a soldier unloaded cargo, seemingly unfazed by the chaos and danger around him:

He dropped them on the beach, unloaded, went back for more. I watched, fascinated. Shells landed around him. The Germans were really after him. He avoided every obstacle and just kept going back and forth, back and forth, completely calm. I thought, By God, if anybody deserves a medal, this man does.⁴

While many on the Normandy beaches exhibited courage and selfless service, some displayed gallantry under fire that rose above and beyond the call of duty. One such man was Corporal Waverly B. Woodson, Jr., an African American medic assigned to the 320th.

According to *Congressional Record*, Woodson was heading toward shore when a naval mine and an 88mm shore artillery round struck his landing craft. Despite receiving shrapnel wounds to his groin, inner thigh, and back, he continued toward the beach. After treating his own wounds, Woodson established an aid station on Omaha Beach and began tending to other wounded men. He worked steadily from 10 am on June 6th until 4pm on June 7th—30 continuous hours under fire. He single-handedly set fractured limbs, amputated a foot, removed bullets, and, through artificial respiration, revived at least three men who had nearly drowned.⁵ Finally, suffering from blood loss and exhaustion, Woodson collapsed. After three days recuperating from his wounds,

Woodson requested to rejoin his fellow servicemen to resume treating the wounded. Later, he was nominated for the Medal of Honor, though the recognition never came to pass.⁶

Comanche and Choctaw Code Talkers

Photographs at the National Archives help convey the story of the 320th Barrage Balloon Battalion and the critical role this unit played during and after the invasion. Holdings connected to Native American servicemembers reveal additional unsung heroes of D-Day. To prevent Axis forces from deciphering Allied communications, Army leaders drew upon a secret intelligence tactic that had contributed to the Allied Expeditionary Force's battlefield successes during World War I: Native American Code Talkers.

Native Americans have played important roles in American military history since the Revolutionary War.⁷ During World War I, as the Army searched for the most secure way to send and receive radio messages, it turned to Native American languages as one solution. Beginning in 1918, the Army deployed Code Talkers from the Choctaw Nation to the Western Front. These Native soldiers proved invaluable to the Army units' tactical successes by providing a covert means of discussing time-sensitive information.⁸

Understanding the criticality of secure tactical transmissions during the initial D-Day landings, the Army once again drew

upon Native American Code Talkers to support battlefield operations. Students with some knowledge of World War II may have heard of the renowned Navajo Code Talkers who served with the U.S. Marine Corps in the Pacific Theater. However, few have heard about the heroic exploits of Comanche Code Talkers who landed in the first waves on the Normandy beaches and were vital to the success of the day. As part of the 175 Native Americans estimated to have landed on June 6th, the Comanche Code Talkers were instrumental in providing secure communications from the beaches and ensuring that follow-on forces landed at the correct spot to avoid further casualties.⁹ Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., the only general officer to come ashore during the first wave, entrusted his communications to Comanche Code Talker Larry Saupitty.¹⁰

Although World War II Native servicemen garnered fame through Hollywood films like *Windtalkers* (2002), the Code Talkers' unparalleled contributions were not made public until 1968. At the end of the war, Native soldiers signed non-disclosure forms prohibiting discussion of their combat experiences.¹¹ As we help students consider the complexities of the mainstream historical narrative surrounding D-Day, the secrecy of the Code Talker program can highlight that there may be stories students do not know, that are not yet declassified. Using the Native



Courtesy of the Oklahoma Senate

Yuchi artist Wayne Cooper's commemorative painting *Indian Code Talkers; 2000* (©The Oklahoma State Senate Historical Preservation Fund, Inc. and Wayne Cooper)

Code Talker example when teaching about D-Day enables educators to use an inquiry-based approach and help students cultivate the habit of being open to new information as it comes to light.

Women Codebreakers

In addition to the untold stories of male African American and Native soldiers' heroism on D-Day, from the homefront to the frontlines, women made indispensable contributions, including as codebreakers. The National Archives has many records that reveal women codebreakers' roles on D-Day and beyond, helping to further expand students' conception of heroism.

During World War II, women accounted for about 11,000 of the estimated 20,000 American codebreakers employed by the U.S. Army and Navy.¹² While these women came

from diverse backgrounds, many of them had college degrees, showed proficiency in code breaking-related skills (e.g., math and languages), and were considered loyal Americans of good character. For many women codebreakers, World War II was the first time that they were recruited for a job because of their education or specialized skills. Codebreaking, in particular, was a more accessible field for women due to its relative newness and the stereotypical notion that women thrived in positions requiring attention to detail and repetition.

World War II codebreakers provided intelligence on everything from enemy ship movements to battlefield strategies. Women codebreakers served in various capacities, including breaking and rebreaking enemy code systems, verifying the security of U.S. encryption,



Cryptanalysis of U.S. Message Traffic during World War II. (National Archives).

creating “dummy traffic” to redirect the enemy’s focus, and performing traffic analysis. Records from the National Archives illuminate the various roles women codebreakers played during World War II. The photograph above depicts women codebreakers analyzing U.S. message traffic.¹³

In preparation for the D-Day invasion, women codebreakers passed on valuable information from the Purple machine, a cipher utilized by Japan’s diplomats. The Purple machine team’s initial breakthrough came from Genevieve Grotjan, a junior cryptanalyst at the time. This information, along with other intelligence, provided significant insight into weak points in Hitler’s defensive fortifications along Europe’s western coast and influenced Allied commanders’ decision to land in Normandy. Additionally, Allies engineered a deception campaign, known as Operation Bodyguard, to spread disinformation among the German Army about where and when the D-Day invasion would commence. As a part of

the diversion tactics, the Allies created a fictional First U.S. Army Group to convince the Germans that an Allied invasion of France would launch across the Strait of Dover on the Pas de Calais. To sustain the charade, women codebreakers engineered “dummy traffic.” While fake, this “dummy” radio traffic had to mirror real communications closely enough that enemy forces would believe it to be credible.

From the 320th Barrage Balloon Battalion to women codebreakers, the primary sources and teaching activities outlined in this article unveil often overlooked stories related to the Allies’ D-Day invasion. By highlighting individual and collective acts of perseverance, these stories provide a richer perspective on D-Day and the many different forms of heroism demonstrated during the war.

Suggested Teaching Activities

1. Records at the National Archives depict the important contributions that women codebreakers made during

World War II. Close analysis of two of these records, a diagram and a photograph, invites discussion about broader social issues of the time—namely, stereotypes surrounding “women’s work”—and encourages student reflection about gendered notions of wartime heroism. First, introduce the diagram, “A Message From Originator to Military Intelligence Service” available at <https://docsteach.org/documents/document/message-from-originator-to-mis>. Using the Project Zero thinking routine *See, Think, Wonder* (<https://pz.harvard.edu/thinking-routines>), pose the following questions to the class:

- What do you see? What details stand out to you? (*Ask students to focus on observations, not interpretation.*)
- Why do you say that? *I think this information is in the diagram because ... (Have students transition to interpretation.)*
- What questions does the diagram raise? What questions does it not answer?

Explain to students that the diagram, produced by the Signal Security Agency (SSA), represents the various steps involved in deciphering enemy messages, including interception, cryptanalysis, and translation. Next, show students the photograph, “A Typical SSA Unit at Work,” available at

<https://docsteach.org/documents/document/typical-ssa-unit-at-work>, which captures a group of officers, enlisted men, and both male and female civilians working together on the same project. Similar to the diagram, have students analyze the photograph with the See, Think, Wonder thinking routine. Ask students to identify differences between the diagram (which represents an idealized scenario) and the photograph (which depicts a real situation). What do these differences reveal about the stereotypes surrounding “women’s work” prior to and during World War II? How do the diagram and photograph extend our thinking about D-Day and the types of heroes and heroic actions performed as a part of this amphibious assault?

2. Show students the famous D-Day photograph of the initial landing on Omaha Beach available at www.docsteach.org/documents/document/landings-at-omaha-beach-during-normandy-invasion). Have students, in small groups, list what they see in the photograph: the bluffs, beach obstacles, Higgins boat, soldiers in the surf, smoke from enemy fire, etc. Now, show students the photo on p. 93, available at www.docsteach.org/documents/document/photograph-french-invasion-beach, taken of Omaha Beach from the hillside. Ask students to compare and contrast the two scenes. What new information is available? Remind students that photographs are

useful primary source records; however, they may omit important details because the camera cannot capture what falls beyond the frame. Have students hypothesize what happened before and after the snap of the shutter. Invite them to imagine what is happening beyond the edges of the scene. How does perspective (e.g., from a boat at sea vs. the bluffs) change what they know and how they feel about the landing?

3. Begin by showing the class Yuchi artist Wayne Cooper’s 2000 commemorative painting *Indian Code Talkers* on p. 94 (available online at <https://americanindian.si.edu/why-we-serve/img/indian-code-talkers@1600w.jpg>). Ask students to describe the image and try to determine what is happening. Have them record as many observations (setting, people, and objects) as possible from the image. Once students have offered some guesses, introduce the U.S. Army photograph of Comanche soldiers taken at Fort Moore (formerly Fort Benning), Georgia, c. 1941 ([https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/comanche-code-talkers](http://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/comanche-code-talkers)). Reveal that the Comanche Code Talker program remained classified until 1968 and that there are no known photographs of these World War II soldiers engaged in combat. Instead, Cooper may have relied on records such as this archival image to reconstruct the covert operations depicted

in his painting. Ask students to imagine being a researcher for this project, hired to assist the artist with this challenging task. What other sources—primary and secondary—might they use to gather information about Native servicemembers’ combat experience, now that it is declassified? Discuss the advantages and limitations of different sources (e.g., oral history, newspaper clippings, diaries, military records), considering who created it, who was the intended audience, and why this information matters. Finally, ask students to look again at Cooper’s painting, reflecting upon how and why it was made. In what ways does this artwork extend our understanding of D-Day? ■

Note

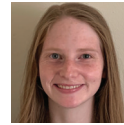
1. Ben Sherman, “All-Black Balloon Unit Served with Distinction on D-Day,” U.S. Army (May 1, 2014), www.army.mil/article/119639/all_black_balloon_unit_served_with_distinction_on_d_day.
2. 26-G-2517; Photograph of the French Invasion Beach; 1944; Europe - Normandy Invasion; Photographs of Activities, Facilities, and Personalities, 1939–1967; Records of the U.S. Coast Guard, Record Group 26; National Archives at College Park, MD [www.docsteach.org/documents/document/photograph-french-invasion-beach]
3. Thomas Paone, “Protecting the Beaches with Balloons: D-Day and the 320th Barrage Balloon Battalion,” 75th Anniversary of World War II, National Air and Space Museum (June 4, 2019), <https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/>

protecting-beaches-balloons-d-day-and-320th-barrage-balloon-battalion.

4. Kevin L. Stoehr and Michael C. Connolly, *John Ford in Focus: Essays on the Filmmaker's Life and Work* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: McFarland & Co., 2008), 115.
5. "Black History Month and Honoring Brigadier General Charles E. McGee and Staff Sergeant Waverly B. Woodson, Jr.," *Congressional Record* 168, No. 27 (February 10, 2022): S643-S644.
6. "Waverly Bernard Woodson, Jr.," Charles Young Buffalo Soldiers National Monument, U.S. National Park Service, www.nps.gov/people/waverly-woodson-jr.htm.
7. James P. Collins, "Native Americans in the Antebellum U.S. Military," *Prologue* 39, no. 4 (Winter 2007).
8. "Code Talkers," Native American Heritage, National Archives and Records Administration, last reviewed October 4, 2016, www.archives.gov/research/native-americans/military/code-talkers.html.
9. Alexis Schultz, "New Memorial in France Honors Native American D-Day Sacrifice," Press Release, U.S. Department of Defense (June 7, 2017).
10. Cindy McIntyre, "Comanche Language Helped Win World War II," U.S. Army (November 14, 2017), www.army.mil/article/178195/comanche_language_helped_win_world_war_ii.
11. "Chapter 7: Recognition: Native Words, Native Warriors," *Native Words, Native Warriors*, National Museum of the American Indian.
12. The definitive source on American women codebreakers in World War II is Liza Mundy, *Code Girls: The Untold Story of the American Women Code Breakers of World War II* (New York: Hachette Books, 2017). Unless otherwise noted, all information in this section comes from Mundy's work.
13. Cryptanalysis of U.S. Traffic; 8/1945; Historic Cryptographic Records, 1952–1981; Records of the National Security Agency/Central Security Service, Record Group 457; National Archives at College Park, MD [<https://docsteach.org/documents/document/cryptanalysis-of-us-traffic>]



Nicholas Coddington is the head of Education and Public Programs in the Museum Programs Division, Office of Legislative Archives, Presidential Libraries, and Museum Services at the National Archives. Prior to joining the NARA staff, he served as a high school teacher for 10 years. Nicholas received his PhD in Education from Teachers College, Columbia University.



Caitlin Cutrona is an Education Specialist at the National Archives. She helps lead in-gallery educational programs at the National Archives Museum in Washington, D.C. She began her career as a middle school social studies educator teaching in Nairobi, Kenya.

Breanne Robertson served as editor of this article. Dr. Robertson is an education specialist in the Museum Programs Division of the Office of Legislative Archives, Presidential Libraries and Museum Services at the National Archives and can be reached at Breanne.Robertson@nara.gov.

Advocacy Toolkit

Visit socialstudies.org/advocacy for the new NCSS Advocacy Toolkit and other resources for advocating the importance of social studies education.

