

Code talkers: rediscovering language and history in Akwesasne



Nick Dunne

Published on: September 6, 2019 | Last Updated: September 6, 2019 6:51 PM EDT



Levi Oakes, 93, is the last living Second World War 'code talker.' Oakes, from Akwesasne, served with the US Army in the Pacific, using his Mohawk language as an unbreakable code for radio transmissions. Oakes was honoured Tuesday by the Assembly of First Nations and by MPs in the House of Commons. *BLAIR CRAWFORD/POSTMEDIA*

This is the first of a two-part feature on the Mohawk language's use during the Second World War and how recognizing those who spoke it has become part of efforts to sustain its use. Part two will publish on Wednesday, Sept. 11, 2019.

AKWESASNE — On May 28, Levi Oakes, a Canadian-born Mohawk of Akwesasne, died at the age of 95.

The majority of Oakes' life had been private; ordinary for a Mohawk born in Kana:takon district, also known as St. Regis, Que. Like many young men at that time, he had volunteered for the U.S. military in the Second World War. After that, he worked as an ironworker in Buffalo, Niagara, and across North America for 30 years, and spent the remainder of his life in St. Regis, organizing construction crews.

Or at least, that's what his family had believed.

On Oct. 15, 2008, The Code Talkers Recognition Act was passed into law in Washington, D.C. The Navajo had long been recognized for their unique contribution to the war effort as coded communication specialists, using their language to pass on information and troop movements. But it had only recently come to the attention of officials that other tribes had been involved in code-talking.

The act made the secretary of the treasury strike congressional medals for the code talkers of other American Indigenous tribes.

Though the Navajos had been used most extensively and had the most organized codes, the United States determined 33 other tribes had contributed to code-talking efforts. Among those tribes was St. Regis Mohawk Tribe, the American tribal body of Akwesasne.

But the search for code talkers was far from simple. Jeff Whelan, then in association with the legion, was tasked with finding the code talkers of Akwesasne.

"You had to fish around and find places where they talked about it. And there wasn't a whole lot of that," said Whelan.

As he sought out names and met veterans of the Second World War, he drove through New York to visit Oakes. He took the small, winding streets until he got to Wade Lafrance Road and knocked on his door.

When he entered the small home and asked Oakes about the code talkers, Levi turned to a picture on the wall. He removed the frame to reveal his discharge record behind the photograph.

After more than 65 years of sworn secrecy, Oakes confirmed he had been a code talker.

Whelan and the tribe's efforts led to the discovery of 24 code talkers, mostly confirmed, others unconfirmed.

For many family members of the code talkers, the news of their relatives was a shock.

"All we knew growing up was that he was in the army," said Dora Oakes, daughter of Levi, who lived with and helped care for him in his final years. "I always thought he was a cook."

In 2016, far into their elder years, many now deceased; these men were recognized as war heroes, 70 years after their service.

Few knew

Until the search began for the code talkers in response to the act, hardly anyone knew about Mohawk code talkers.

Among the few who was aware was Todd Connors, whose grandfather Louis, visited him in New Orleans while Connors was stationed there as a marine.

"We weren't supposed to be drinking," said Todd, but Louis insisted. "He just said, 'let's have a beer. I want to sit down.'"

"It was my town, but he was in charge. You can't tell your grandfather no!"

They took a stroll down Bourbon Street, settling in at bar Conners liked. After a few drinks, his grandfather began to tell him stories of the war. It was the first he had heard from Louis in detail. As kids, he was told never to ask him about the war.

Some of the stories were light-hearted and funny. Others finished with an uneasy silence. After storming the beaches of Normandy, Louis Conners pressed further into France. As a combat engineer, he was charged with building and repairing bridges for tanks and troops to cross. It was a dangerous task, exposed to snipers at key strategic points.

As he found himself under fire one day, he came across fellow Mohawks from another unit he knew from back home. They coordinated their skirmishes by speaking Mohawk over the radio, with the enemy unable to determine their movements.

“Yeah, my grandpa was a cool dude,” said Conners.

Louis Conners would never get to see the medal posthumously awarded to him in 2016, but Levi Oakes and a handful of others got to visit Washington D.C. to be formally recognized for their war efforts.

Unfortunately, the most-documented part of the code talkers’ story was their visit and travels far after the war had ended.

There are few other details about the code talkers in wartime: what they did, their codes, or any tales of their communication or who their radio partners were. As primarily informal code talkers, there wasn’t an official military program or code the Mohawks followed. Information from the national archives was limited, as they were unable to release service records without next of kin filing the correct paperwork.

“It was one of the hardest projects I’ve ever worked on,” said William Meadows, a professor from Missouri State University who

specializes in the Navajo code talkers. Meadows had been involved in the committee for the code talkers' recognition act.

He said part of the challenge in confirming code talkers, especially for non-Navajo tribes, was that there had been no military occupation specialty code that listed someone as a code talker. They were often listed as radiomen, but even then, they weren't all given that specialty.

One of the few documented methods of confirmation was searching through written accounts from commanding officers.

Oakes hadn't said much about his time as a code talker. He said his radio partner was a man from Kahnawake, and that he fought in the jungles of the Philippines in the Pacific theatre. While there was scant information on his wartime exploits, he was known to be a joker, using the word "anougee" as a code word for his commanding officers — Mohawk for "not smart," according to Whelan.

Now that Oakes and the others have passed, so has the opportunity to learn more about their stories.



Levi Oakes, the last Mohawk Code-Talker, was special guest at the Take A Veteran to Dinner event on Sunday October 28, 2018 in Cornwall, Ont. More than 200 people attended the event at the Ramada Inn to honour veterans and their families. Lois Ann Baker/Cornwall Standard-Freeholder/Postmedia Network *LOIS ANN BAKER / LOIS ANN BAKER/STANDARD-FREEHOLDER*

A sense of loss exists among those who were close to the code talkers, a yearning to have learned more.

RELATED

The last Mohawk code talker passes away in Akwesasne
(<https://www.standard-freeholder.com/news/local-news/the-last-mohawk-code-talker-passes-away-in-akwesasne/wcm/43d6b7d0-7df8-4c4d-95a4-6294e5aae4bd>)

Cornwall's first take a veteran to dinner a huge success
(<https://www.standard-freeholder.com/news/local-news/cornwalls-first-take-a-veteran-to-dinner-a-huge-success/wcm/efff51ee-d770-4569-a46d-635ac4f86fcb>)

"It just hit us. It's like, dang, they should've done this 40 or 50 years ago when the code talkers could've enjoyed it," said Dora. "It's kind of late now. It just happens, I guess."

The fragments they do have are precious.

For one, those who were able to make it were recognized during the congressional medal ceremony.

Levi was also able to travel around the country and meet politicians like Bob Dole and Justin Trudeau. He nearly met U.S. President Donald Trump, but fell ill before the visit.

Dora was thankful for missing that one, though. Levi was supposed to meet Trump with the remaining Navajo code talkers in a now-infamous meeting. As Trump stood by the two Navajo war heroes, he took a moment from their time of recognition to insult a political opponent of his by casting out a native stereotype, calling Sen. Elizabeth Warren Pocahontas.

“Levi was kind of pissed,” said Dora of Trump’s address, “especially to be a president and to treat people like that.”

Still, Dora said Levi was thrilled by the attention people gave him, soaking in the honours and respect given to him by those who took time to thank him.

“He always wanted to go Washington to see the monuments,” Dora said.

Though Levi used his language in the war effort, the language wasn’t fully passed on to his children. Dora could speak when she was young, until she went to school on Cornwall Island.

“We couldn’t talk in school and stuff. We’d get punished,” she said.

Recognition respects the language

Through a push towards revitalizing language and culture, however, her grandchildren are able to speak their language. She’s happy her children have a space where they can feel proud to be Mohawk.

“My grandkids are learning more than what I know, and they’re in elementary now,” she said.

In the U.S. Legion hall in Akwesasne, there’s a poster of newspaper clippings, photographs, and the names of the code talkers set up behind a glass cabinet. The park behind the legion was named after the code talkers. And after decades where the Mohawk language and culture was beaten out of people in residential schools, American boarding schools, the day schools and through other government institutions, the Mohawk language can be celebrated not only as an integral part of their culture, but as a tool that helped win the war.

“It has really elevated the morale of the community. I really think it’s done good and positive things,” said Whelan.

"It'll last in the history books, at least here."

ndunne@postmedia.com (mailto:ndunne@postmedia.com)

twitter.com/NickFDunne (http://twitter.com/NickFDunne)