Code Talker

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOSEPH BRUCHAC

Joseph Bruchac was raised by his maternal grandparents in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains in upstate New York. He holds a B.A. from Cornell University, an M.A. in Literature and Creative Writing from Syracuse University, and a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature. Though Bruchac also has English and Slovak ancestry, he says that his northeastern American Indian heritage has nourished him the most. Along with his younger sister, Margaret, and his two adult sons, James and Jesse, Bruchac is heavily involved in projects for preserving Abenaki language and culture, including a musical group called the Dawnland Singers. Bruchac has written more than 100 books for both adults and children. Some of these include *Breaking Silence* (winner of an American Book Award), *Sacajawea* (a historical novel), collections of traditional Native American stories, and poetry. He has been awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers Circle of the Americas, as well as the Virginia Hamilton Literary Award for his contributions to children's multicultural literature. He lives in Greenfield Center, New York.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Navajo people (or *Dine'*, which means "The People") probably moved into the American Southwest around 1,000 years ago. They may have been connected to the Athabaskan people of Alaska. They settled in the area that's known today as the Four Corners region—where New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and Utah come together. The Navajos see this region as being bounded by four sacred mountains. The enslavement of many American Indians by the Spanish was a catastrophic event for the Navajo people. When United States settlers moved into this region, rather than freeing the Navajos, they decided to wage war against them. The Navajos were brutally defeated and exiled for several years in what became known as the Long Walk, an event that's often compared to the Cherokee Trail of Tears. In the late 1860s, they were allowed to return to their homeland, which today makes up the United States' largest Indian reservation. In World War II, the Navajo language was used to create an unbreakable code that was used during some of the heaviest, most consequential fighting in the war's Pacific Theater. Because of the top-secret nature of the code talkers' work, their story was not fully told for almost 25 years after the war's end in 1945. The novel's main character, Ned Begay, and some of the white marines in *Code Talker* are fictitious, but the other named characters are based on real people, and Bruchac states that the events described, including those in the boarding school chapters, happened to real people.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Joseph Bruchac was prompted to research the code talkers in part because of his earlier work on a book for the National Geographic Society, a study of the Cherokee and Navajo nations titled *Trails of Tears, Paths of Beauty* (2000). This was followed by a picture book called *Navajo Long Walk*, coauthored with artist Shonto Begay, which tells the story of the Navajo people's forced exile in the 1860s. Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* is another novel about a World War II veteran (in this case, a Pueblo man) dealing with the aftermath of the war.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Code Talker: A Novel About the Navajo Marines of World War Two*
- **When Written:** 2001–2005
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** 2005
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical fiction, young adult fiction
- **Setting:** Navajo nation (New Mexico), the South Pacific
- **Climax:** The announcement of the Japanese surrender and the end of the war
- **Antagonist:** Anti-Navajo prejudice; the Japanese military
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Real-Life Heroes. Over the course of several years spent researching *Code Talker*, Joseph Bruchac met several surviving Navajo code talkers, including Carl Gorman, Jesse Samuel Smith, and Keith Wilson. He also drew on the experiences of his uncle, Jim Smith, a veteran of the landings on Guam and Iwo Jima.

Belatedly Recognized. After the details of the code talker program were declassified, the code talkers received numerous recognitions from the White House. In 2000, President Bill Clinton awarded Congressional Gold Medals to the original 29 Navajo code talkers. In 2008, President George W. Bush awarded Congressional Gold Medals to every Native American code talker who served during both World Wars, with distinct medals designed for each of their 33 tribes.

PLOT SUMMARY

Ned Begay tells his grandchildren about a special medal he owns. The medal commemorates Navajo Marines' special service in World War II. For many years, Ned was not allowed to speak about his role in the war. He was a code talker—a big story that will take a while to explain. He starts at the beginning.

When Ned is six years old, he says goodbye to his family and journeys to the mission school in Gallup, New Mexico with his uncle. Ned's uncle explains that Ned has to attend "the white man's" school for his family's sake. Historically, the Navajo people have been persecuted by the American government. Ned's uncle explains that, by attending boarding school, Ned and other Navajo children will have the opportunity to communicate better with white American society.

Upon arriving at boarding school, Ned and his classmates are forced to speak only English, their long hair is cut off, their traditional clothing and jewelry are confiscated, and they are given new names. Ned gets his mouth washed out with soap when he accidentally speaks Navajo, and other children receive even harsher punishments. However, rather than becoming depressed, Ned is resilient, helped by his natural love of learning. He does well in his classes, and he continues speaking Navajo and learning about his culture when the teachers aren't around. He even earns the chance to attend a better high school. However, Ned's culture is denigrated there, too, and he doubts that Navajos will ever be respected by white people.

Then, in 1941, the Japanese military attacks Pearl Harbor. Not long after the United States declares war, a call for Navajo recruits circulates on the reservation. Bilingual Navajos are wanted for a mysterious special duty. Ned is eager to join up, but his parents ask him to wait for one year, since he is only 15 at the time. Meanwhile, 29 men are recruited to form the first all-Navajo Marine platoon. After a few months, one of those men, Johnny Manuelito, returns to the reservation to recruit and train a new group of men. After hearing Johnny speak, Ned can wait no longer. His parents grant him permission to enlist, on the condition that he undergo a Blessingway, a protection ceremony, which is conducted by Hosteen Mitchell, a well-respected Navajo singer.

Like the other Navajo recruits, Ned thrives in boot camp because many of the physical demands are familiar to him from his family's rural, agricultural life. After Ned's platoon graduates from boot camp with highest honors, they finally learn their secret mission—to become code talkers. They will learn a top-secret Navajo-based code language in order to transmit crucial messages on the battlefield. Code school is a happy experience for Ned and his fellow Navajo recruits; besides getting to help the U.S.'s war effort, for most of the men, it's the first time their language and culture have been respected and celebrated by outsiders.

After further training and field maneuvers on Hawaii and Guadalcanal, Ned and his fellow marines make their first landing on Bougainville in the Solomon Islands, giving Ned his first taste of combat and code transmissions in the field. The code talkers prove themselves so effectively on Bougainville that the Marine commanders unanimously call for more Navajo code talkers, to Ned's joy. After Bougainville, Ned participates in the landing on Guam, in the Marianas Islands, including fierce hand-to-hand fighting. He is devastated by the suffering endured by Guam's native people under the Japanese occupation. Ned receives a bullet wound in the shoulder while fighting on Guam and spends some weeks recovering on a hospital ship. While there, he sees many men suffering from battle fatigue, something that his Navajo history helps him understand.

Ned participates in the invasion and brutal battle of Iwo Jima in the early part of 1945. Though most of the images of this battle are too terrible to recall, Ned remembers the strong voices of the Navajos, unfailingly transmitting messages through the chaos and helping secure the Allied victory. He also tells his grandchildren the story of the flag-raising on Iwo Jima's Mount Suribachi, which was immortalized in a Pulitzer Prize-winning photo and involved Ned's Pima Indian acquaintance Ira Hayes. Ned also fights through the devastating battle on Okinawa, and then he must pass along the news of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's death.

After the atomic bombs are dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, ending the war, Ned returns to San Francisco for debriefing with other code talkers. On his way home, in contrast to his warm reception in San Francisco, he is rudely kicked out of a whites-only bar on the edge of the Navajo reservation. This hardens Ned's resolve to fight for his people after the war, too, by promoting Navajo history, culture, and education. And he proceeds to do just that, although he must first heal from the spiritual wounds of battle, with the help of his family and Hosteen Mitchell's Enemyway ceremony.

In 1969, the code talkers' story is declassified, and Ned is finally allowed to speak of it to his family. Sharing his story is more precious to him than the accolades he and his fellow code talkers receive from the White House. He hopes that by passing his story down to his grandchildren, they, too, will be encouraged to treasure their Navajo heritage and fight for it with a "warrior spirit."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ned Begay – Ned is a young Navajo man who is roughly 15 years old when World War II starts. Ned's birth name is Kii Yázhí. His family lives on the Navajo reservation near Grants,

New Mexico. At six years old, Ned is sent to a mission school in Gallup, New Mexico, where he is taught to reject all things Navajo, especially his native language. Despite the cruelty of the school's staff, Ned loves learning and does well academically, even as he continues to speak Navajo among his friends. From a young age, Ned has a sensitive, resilient, and courageous spirit. When Ned is in high school, America enters World War II, and Ned longs to enlist in the Marines. His parents make him wait until he is 16, and then Ned joins one of the first all-Navajo platoons in the Marines. These platoons are trained for a secret mission: becoming code talkers, using a Navajo-based code to transmit messages on the battlefield. Ned loves his duties and forms close friendships with both Navajo and white marines, including Georgia Boy and Smitty. He fights in the South Pacific, on Bougainville, Guam, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. On Guam, Ned sustains a bullet wound in the shoulder, and both during and after the war, he must deal with the consequences of battle fatigue. Even in the midst of the war, Ned finds joy and pride in the code talkers' vital role in the war effort. He is especially sensitive to the sufferings of native islanders whose lands have been occupied by the Japanese. Throughout the war, he holds on to Navajo spiritual traditions to keep him grounded and balanced. Upon coming home, he works to preserve and teach the Navajo language and culture, in part by sharing this entire story with his grandchildren.

Mother – Ned's mother is tall and beautiful. Her brother, Ned's uncle, persuades her to send Ned to the mission school. When Ned wants to enlist in the Marines, she and Ned's father make him wait until he is at least 16, but they finally give him their blessing to join up.

Uncle – Ned's uncle is his mother's brother. He is sharp-featured with kind eyes and a little mustache. He convinces Ned's parents to send Ned to the mission school, which he also attended as a boy. He takes Ned to school for the first time and encourages him to remember his family and his people's history even when school is difficult.

Hosteen Mitchell – Also known as Big Schoolboy or Frank Mitchell, this Navajo singer is addressed by Ned as "Hosteen," a term of respect. He is an old friend and classmate of Ned's uncle. Hosteen Mitchell is a respected man, and Ned likes his modesty and humor. He conducts the Blessingway ceremony before Ned's enlistment and the Enemyway ceremony after Ned's return.

Jacob Benally – Jacob Benally is a kind Navajo man who works in the mission school's stables. On Ned's first day at Rehoboth Mission, Mr. Benally translates for the new students, explaining that they must never speak Navajo, only English. Ned has never seen a Navajo man in a white man's clothing or hairstyle before meeting Mr. Benally.

Corporal Johnny Manuelito – A graduate of Navajo High School, Johnny is among the first all-Navajo platoon of Marines. He is sent back to Fort Defiance to train the next group of Navajo recruits. After hearing Johnny speak, Ned decides to enlist, too. Johnny also teaches Ned and the rest of his platoon in code school.

Georgia Boy – Georgia Boy is a blond-haired, blue-eyed marine with a thick Southern drawl. He and Ned become friends in boot camp after Georgia Boy asks for Ned's help in reading a letter from home. Ned then offers to teach Georgia Boy how to read. They remain close throughout the war. Georgia Boy is seriously wounded on Iwo Jima but survives.

Smitty – Smitty is a fellow marine and close friend of Ned's. He is originally from Boston, and his real name is John Smith. Though Ned doesn't know it at the time, Smitty has been assigned to keep a close watch on Ned to make sure he isn't mistaken for an enemy soldier by other marines.

Ira Hayes – Ira Hayes, a historical figure, was a Pima Indian who served as a marine. He is especially remembered for his appearance in Joe Rosenthal's prize-winning photo of the flag-raising on Iwo Jima. Ira struggled with alcoholism after the war and died in 1955. Ned mentions having met Ira when they were both young men.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Father – Ned's father's Navajo name translates as Gray Mustache. When Ned wants to enlist in the Marines, he and Ned's mother make him wait until he is at least 16, but they finally give him their blessing to join up.

Great-grandfather – Ned's great-grandfather was a young boy when Kit Carson forced the Navajo people into exile in 1864, a memory that remains vivid for the entire family.

Principal O'Sullivan – Principal O'Sullivan is an angry, red-faced, and red-haired man who leads the Rehoboth Mission School. He beats the children if they persist in speaking Navajo.

Mr. Reamer – Mr. Reamer is a skinny blond man who teaches at the Rehoboth Mission School. It's his job to assign English names to each new student, including Ned Begay. Mr. Reamer thinks he understands the Navajo language, but his comprehension isn't very good.

Mr. Straight – Mr. Straight is Ned's social studies teacher at Navajo High School, a tall, thin, pale man with glasses. He praises Ned's research on Japan but makes him wear a dunce cap for speaking a single word of Navajo.

Tommy Nez – Tommy Nez is Ned's friend at the mission school and Navajo High School.

Jesse Chee – Jesse Chee is Ned's friend at the mission school and Navajo High School. He helps Ned after Ned gets his mouth washed out with soap as a new student.

First Sergeant Frank Shinn – First Sergeant Shinn is the Marine recruiter on the Navajo reservation. Ned hears his first recruiting speech from Sergeant Shinn and enlists in his office a

year later.

Corporal John Benally – John Benally is one of Ned's platoon's code school instructors.

Corporal Radant – Corporal Radant is one of Ned's platoon's instructors. He teaches Morse code. He is good-natured, and the recruits love to play tricks on him and tease him during breaks in class.

Gene-gene – Gene-gene is a Solomon Islands chief whom Ned meets during training maneuvers on Guadalcanal. They have a conversation about their love for their respective homelands.

Lieutenant Stormy – Stormy leads Ned's platoon in training maneuvers in desert terrain on Hawaii. Ned and his fellow Navajos trick Stormy by getting water from prickly pear cactuses instead of drinking from their canteens.

John Roanhorse – John Roanhorse is a friend of Ned's at Rehoboth Mission School who is cruelly beaten and later chained in the basement for defiantly speaking Navajo.

Bill Toledo – Bill is a fellow code talker marine. He and Ned are a team and work together to send messages.

Wilsie Bitsie – Wilsie and Ned share a tent on Guam. While there, they give shelter to an orphaned Chamorro boy, Johnny.

Johnny – Johnny is an orphaned Chamorro boy (a native of Guam) whom Ned and Wilsie Bitsie take care of during their weeks on Guam.

Sam Begay – Sam Begay is a veteran from the first platoon of Navajo code talkers.

Bill McCabe – Bill McCabe is a veteran from the first platoon of Navajo code talkers.

Wilfred Billey – Wilfred Billey is Ned's fellow Navajo marine, who fights on Saipan.

Harry Tsosie – Harry is one of the original group of code talkers. He is killed by friendly fire on Bougainville.

Charlie Begay – Charlie is a code talker whom his friends left for dead on Guam, but he ends up recovering and returning to duty.

Joe Rosenthal – Joe Rosenthal is an Associated Press photographer who reached the top of Iwo Jima's Mount Suribachi two hours after it was taken by the U.S. Marines. He took the flag-raising photo which included Ira Hayes and which became one of the most famous photographs from World War II.

TERMS

Navajo – The Navajo or *Diné* people are native to the southwestern United States. *Navajo* also refers to this people's native language. Historically, the Navajo practiced agriculture and shepherding, like **Ned**'s family does. In 1864, 8,000 Navajo people were forcibly marched 300 miles by Colonel Kit Carson from their homeland to Fort Sumner, New Mexico. After four years, the Navajo signed a treaty with the U.S. government, allowing them to return to a reservation in the Four Corners region. Today, that reservation is the largest such territory in the United States. Bilingual Navajos were especially sought out for service in World War II, during which they transmitted secret code using their native language and had an impact that went far beyond their small numbers.

Dinetah – *Dinetah*, simply meaning "among the people," refers to the traditional Navajo homeland. It encompasses northwestern New Mexico, southwestern Colorado, southeastern Utah, and northeastern Arizona. Traditionally, four mountain peaks corresponding to the four cardinal directions mark the boundaries of *Dinetah*.

Bilagáanaa – This term is simply used to refer to "white people" in the Navajo language. **Ned** often uses the term when describing interactions between Navajos and white people in the story.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MEMORY, LANGUAGE, AND IDENTITY

Joseph Bruchac's *Code Talker* is a fictionalized account of a group of Navajo marines who fought in World War II with a top-secret mission: using the Navajo language to transmit crucial information during battle in the South Pacific. Through a character named Ned Begay, a Navajo man who is telling his grandchildren his experiences, Bruchac conveys both the shame and triumph such marines encountered throughout their lives because of their Navajo identity. By contrasting Ned's repressed childhood with his wartime heroism, Bruchac argues that although one's cultural roots might be devalued in certain contexts, a person should never give up their identity (and their language in particular) because even the most denigrated and marginalized members of society are worthwhile and highly valuable.

Throughout his childhood and youth, Ned is forced by the majority culture to try to devalue and forget his Navajo identity. When Ned first arrives at the mission school (a boarding school where Navajo children are taught to assimilate into white culture), he and the other young Navajo children formally greet one another as they've been taught to do at home, identifying the clans from which they're descended and figuring out how they are all related. "[D]espite the fact that some of those other

children spoke our sacred language differently, what we were doing made me feel happier and more peaceful. We were doing things as our elders had taught us. We were putting ourselves in balance." In the unfamiliar (and, it turns out, hostile) environment of the mission school, the greeting ritual reorients Ned's world, however briefly, to the way it should be—it helps him and the other children remember who they are.

However, it isn't long before the Navajo children lose "balance" again. The school's white staff tries to eliminate everything about the children that's specific to Navajo culture: "'Navajo is no good, of no use at all!' Principal O'Sullivan shouted at us every day. 'Only English will help you get ahead in this world!' [...] It was no good to speak Navajo or be Navajo. Everything about us that was Indian had to be forgotten." Ned is taught that his very identity must be forgotten because it is allegedly useless to the larger world.

Over his years in the mission school, Ned excels because of his thirst for learning and his compliant demeanor. However, the repressive atmosphere and unjust punishments take their toll on him, too. After being singled out for speaking just a word of Navajo, he remembers "how that dunce cap felt and how foolish I must have looked to everyone [...] I was both sad and angry. Would the bilagáanaas [white people] never respect me because I was a Navajo? Did I really have to give up everything Navajo to succeed in the modern world?" Even though Ned has earned a tiny bit of respect through his academic gifts, he, too, has absorbed his white teachers' message that everything distinctly Navajo about him must be forgotten if he is to be considered valuable by the larger world. However, when the Pearl Harbor attack occurs, things begin to change for Ned.

During World War II, Ned and other Navajos gain respect—both self-respect and outsiders' respect—for *remembering* rather than rejecting their Navajo identity. After America enters the war in the South Pacific, a call is put out for Navajos specifically. When Ned is accepted into the Marines, he learns that the Navajo language has been chosen for use in a top-secret mission: "Our job was to learn a new top-secret code based on the Navajo language. [...] Using our code, we could send battlefield messages that no one but another Navajo code talker could understand." Because the Navajo language is so complex, non-native speakers have proven unable to gain proficiency in it, which makes it a perfect code language for use in war. What's more, the "code talkers" are totally reliant on their memories of their native language. Ironically, then, what white educators tried to stamp out of the Navajo people as children is now valued as a precious resource by the U.S. military. Where they had previously been forced to forget their sacred language as worthless, now Navajo speakers are not just encouraged, but depended upon, to remember it.

Ned explains how code talking was a transformative experience for him: "I had grown up hearing only criticism and hard words from the *bilagáanaas* about our people. [...] To hear what was now being said truly made the sun shine in my heart. *The Navajos have proved to be excellent Marines, intelligent, industrious, easily taught to send and receive [coded messages] and excellent in the field.* That is what the commanding general of the Sixth Marine Division put in his official report." In stark contrast to their childhood humiliations, Navajo marines are now praised and valued for doing precisely what they were once shamed for doing—remembering their language. Not only that, their language makes them uniquely suited for their wartime role, making Navajo marines sought-after not only for this skill, but for the other battlefield skills they've now had the chance to demonstrate.

Ned concludes his story to his grandchildren by putting it into a larger perspective: "It is not just my story but a story of our people and of the strength that we gain from holding on to our language, from being *Dine'*. [...] I also pray that you will fight to keep our language, to hold on to it with the same warrior spirit that our Indian people showed in that war. Let our language keep you strong and you will never forget what it is to be Navajo." In other words, he urges the children to remember their language by fighting for it as courageously as the "code talkers" used the language during combat. In doing this, future generations will remember not just the words of the language itself, but also the "story" and "strength" embedded therein—and in that way, they'll remember who they are.

THE NAVAJO WAY AND THE LIFE OF THE WARRIOR

Throughout *Code Talker*, Ned Begay's story is interwoven with many aspects of what he simply calls "the Navajo Way"—basic survival skills, personal empathy, religious beliefs, and coping strategies that prepare him for Marine service, sustain him during World War II, and help him heal afterward. In fact, because of the physical strength, wisdom, and spiritual resilience Ned gains from the Navajo way of life, he is portrayed as an ideal American warrior. By portraying the Navajo Way as an integral part of Ned's warrior identity, Bruchac argues that Native American marines like Ned weren't excellent soldiers *despite* their cultural background, but precisely *because* of it.

The skills, knowledge, and empathy that many Navajos possess make them natural marines. When Ned hears that not one of the first group of Navajo recruits washed out of basic training, he is "not surprised. Those things that [...] a Marine recruit needed to learn were part of our everyday Navajo life back then. We were used to walking great distances over hard terrain while carrying things," sleeping in the open, and surviving on little food. In other words, unlike many other recruits, the Navajo recruits' previous way of life has prepared them for the military: they already possess some of the rigorous abilities needed in order to be successful marines.

Knowledge gained from growing up in the desert helps the Navajo marines in unexpected and sometimes amusing ways, like during a training exercise on similar terrain: "Pretty soon the other Marines, including [Stormy] the lieutenant, were drinking from their canteens. But not us Navajos. [...] We knew there was a lot of water inside a prickly pear [cactus]," which they secretly drink when nobody's looking. They jokingly convince the other marines that Navajos just don't need to drink water as often, privately delighted by the ways their upbringing has suited them for their role.

However, other advantages are more solemn. Ned's Navajo history gives him a deep empathy and a sense of kinship with some of the oppressed indigenous people he meets in the South Pacific: "It was a familiar story to me [...] It made me feel I had much in common with [the Solomon islanders]. So I spoke more often to the islanders than most white Marines did." Through a wordless exchange with a chief named Gene-gene, Ned discovers that they cherish their sacred lands in a similar way: "He understood that the land of my own heart was there, far across the wide ocean. He placed his left hand on my chest and I did the same. We stood there like that for a while [...] It was one of the best conversations I ever had." Ned's empathy, grounded in his culture, gives him a deep sense of connection with some of the peoples on whose behalf he's fighting—implicitly one that white Marines don't necessarily share, and one that makes Ned a better warrior.

Additionally, Navajo spiritual blessings equip Ned to be a strong marine for the duration of the war. Before shipping out to war, Ned undergoes a special blessing led by a revered Navajo singer: "Hosteen Mitchell took **pollen** from his pouch and used it to bless my body. [...] I took five steps toward the dawn and stood there, feeling the warmth of the sun touching me. I reached into the pollen bag and took some out to scatter from north to south. [...] With [...] my spirit and my emotions in good balance, I was ready to begin my journey as a warrior for America." The blessing ceremony specifically restores "good balance" to Ned by connecting him to his home and people—and it's that very balance that equips him to be a successful American warrior.

Not only that, the balance Ned receives during the blessing ceremony stays with him all throughout the war: "Each morning [...] I took corn pollen from the pouch I always carried at my waist [...] then lifted it up to the four sacred directions as I greeted the dawn. [...] The blessing of that corn pollen helped keep me calm and balanced and safe." The daily corn pollen ritual keeps Ned connected to his home and family no matter where the war takes him, meaning that the balance of the Navajo Way is what continuously sustains him as he fights.

Even after the war, the Navajo Way grants Ned resilience to cope with the traumatic fallout from his experiences in battle. When talking about how many soldiers turn to drinking in order to wipe out memories of combat, Ned reflects on an alternative way of coping: "What helped me through those times of uncertainty were thoughts of my home and family. [...] Being a Navajo and keeping to our Navajo Way helped me survive not just the war, but all those times of quiet and anxious waiting that were not yet peace." Ned is just as affected by combat fatigue as his fellow marines, yet the corn pollen ritual, thoughts of the Navajo belief in the ancient, protective Holy People, and being grounded in his family give him resilience to deal with both combat and the traumatic memories it brings.

As upsetting as combat memories can be, Ned also has good memories from the war: "I also hear clear voices when I remember that time. [...] Navajo voices speaking strongly in our sacred language. Speaking over the concussions of the exploding shells [...] above the deadly whirr of shrapnel[.] [...] As the battle for Iwo Jima raged all around us, our voices held it together." Even amid the unforgettable horrors of battle, the enduring, resilient strength of the Navajo language—which was used to communicate critical coded messages during battle—resisted the chaos all around, helping the United States to prevail on Iwo Jima and eventually in the war overall.

Back home after the war, Ned continues to cope with terrible memories, and once again his rootedness in the Navajo Way restores him: "I began to have awful nightmares. I woke up from seeing men die and hearing the sounds of their cries. [...] But [...] I had my family and our traditional ceremonies. I had the Holy People to help me. Finally, when it seemed I was about to go crazy, my family insisted that I have an Enemyway. [...] [After this ceremony,] my balance [was] restored. I could go forward on a path of beauty." Thus, Ned's war experience is bookended by blessing ceremonies that keep him grounded in the Navajo Way, enabling him to move on from traumatic memories so that he can continue serving his family, his people, and his larger society in the future.

CULTURE AND PATRIOTISM

As a Navajo person, Ned Begay's story is filled with an understated dignity and pride, both in his people's heritage and in their role within the United States. Because the Navajo people have suffered so much, often at the hands of the U.S. government, Ned feels a particular obligation to do what he can to improve the circumstances of his family and people. Yet that very devotion to his people, and his gratitude for what he's received from them, also compel him to fight for the U.S. in World War II. By embedding Ned's patriotism within a lifetime of grateful service to his own people, Bruchac suggests that Navajo soldiers' American patriotism emerged from their history and culture, rather than being at odds with it.

Ned's childhood prepares him for a life of serving others. When Ned's uncle takes him to boarding school for the first time, his uncle explains that schooling isn't just for Ned, but for all his people: "You are not going to school for yourself. You are doing

this for your family. To learn the ways of the bilagáanaa, the white people, is a good thing. […] We must be able to speak to them, tell them who we really are, reassure them that we will always be friends of the United States. That is why you must go to school not for yourself, but for your family, for our people, for our sacred land." From a young age, Ned learns that he must do difficult things for the sake of his people as a whole—even when doing those things takes him away from his loved ones and the environment that's most familiar to him.

Even while excelling in school, Ned remains sensitive to the struggles of his peers and the ways in which he might serve his people's needs in the future. A lover of learning, Ned "read and studied and wrote, and my teachers noticed. I still didn't speak up much in class—that would have been calling attention to myself or embarrassing to the other students who did not do so well in their studies. […] *Someday*, I said to myself, *I will become a teacher, one who does not just teach, but also shows respect to all his Indian students and expects the best of everyone.*" In other words, although Ned distinguishes himself academically, he does not allow himself to become cut off from his classmates' struggles and he seeks ways that his learning can someday serve *others*, not primarily himself.

Ned's strong patriotism is linked to his love of his land and desire to serve his people. "*Nihimá*, 'Our Mother.' That is the Navajo word we chose to mean our country, this United States. It was a good name to use. When we Indians fought on those far-off islands, we always kept the thought in our minds that we were defending Our Mother, the sacred land that sustains us." Ned's and other Navajos' love for the United States is expressed in terms of their devotion to the land that's belonged to them since long before white settlers colonized the region.

All his life, Ned carries in his wallet the words of a special resolution passed by the Navajo Tribal Council in 1940, before the United States had even declared war: "Whereas […] there exists no purer concentration of Americanism than among the First Americans […] we resolve that the Navajo Indians stand ready as they did in 1918, to aid and defend our government, and its institutions against all subversion and armed conflict and pledge our loyalty to the system which recognizes minority rights and a way of life that has placed us among the greatest people of our race." This statement is at once a strong assertion of his people's pride, an expression of national loyalty, and a recognition that America belongs to the Navajo people in a unique way, which makes them specially obligated to protect it. Ned's lifelong admiration for these words also shows that his sense of duty to his people, and thus to his nation, remains unwavering.

Ned observes that the Navajo marines' eagerness to fight isn't diminished by the fact of the United States's cruelty to their ancestors; rather, those memories spur them to fight so that their people's land and way of life can continue in peace: "We Navajo Marines were tough and determined, perhaps even more so than most of the non-Indian Marines who later served by our sides. Why was this so? It may have been because we remembered the suffering and courage of our grandfathers who fought as warriors to protect our land and our people. We were not just fighting for the United States. We were going into battle for our Navajo people, our families, and our sacred land." Far from seeing their history as setting them at odds with their duties as U.S. citizens, Ned and his fellow Navajo marines draw on their people's warrior heritage to defend the United States—including hopes that their people will remain free and protected.

The connection between culture and patriotism is summed up by Ned's happy memories of code talker training, when his Navajo language is employed to communicate important battlefield messages and is thus valued and celebrated by outsiders for the first time: "It was so good. It was good to have our language respected in this way. […] It was good that we could do something no one but another Navajo could do. Knowing our own language and culture could save the lives of Americans we had never met and help defeat enemies who wanted to destroy us." Ned's experiences as a code talker are good because, finally, he is free to use his language and culture on behalf of his country, rather than protecting them from it.

WAR, HEALING, AND PEACE

Though Ned Begay is unwaveringly committed to the U.S. effort in World War II from beginning to end, he never glorifies war. He describes the terrors of the battlefield, the loss of friends, and most of all, the traumatic aftereffects of war in soldiers' minds, which he believes can only be healed through an intentional effort to restore spiritual balance. As one example of the imbalance wrought by war, Ned describes his struggles to come to terms with the humanity of the Japanese enemy, who remain all but invisible to him except through their victims. By portraying Ned as a committed yet compassionate and spiritually sensitive warrior, Bruchac argues that war is never a good thing in itself, and that everyone—soldiers, victims, and civilians—must strive to heal from the wounds of war and ultimately to achieve peace.

War itself, though necessary, throws the world—and the individual soldier—out of balance. Ned explains that during reprieves from combat, some Marines, including some Navajos, begin to drink heavily in order to forget what they experienced during combat. Sometimes this drinking continues long after the war, as dark memories persist in the veterans' minds: "Never think that war is a good thing, grandchildren. Though it may be necessary at times to defend our people, war is a sickness that must be cured. War is a time out of balance. When it is truly over, we must work to restore peace and sacred harmony once again." Ned means that war must not be glorified—just because it is sometimes necessary doesn't mean

it is good. When war is over, people must actively seek balance again in order to heal.

Periodically recalled to Hawaii for additional training, Ned gets a preview of the trauma that will linger after the war: "At times [...] I felt as if the things around me were not real. It was too quiet and beautiful. There were no guns being fired, no shells exploding around me, no muddy foxholes [...] I should have been happy, but instead it made me feel ill at ease." At such times, he says, he relives violent memories and worries about future battles. In other words, Ned sees that even outwardly beautiful, peaceful things are thrown out of balance by the trauma of war. War steals happiness and invades quiet times with painful memories and fearful anticipations.

Ned's cultural memories also give him insight into the cruel aftermath of war: Some soldiers "had kept going forward until not just their bodies were worn out but their spirits. They hadn't been physically wounded, but now were unable to do anything. Some just stayed in bed and cried. [...] Others just stared off into space. [...] Navajos understood it well. Our ancestors saw what war does to human beings. When we must fight other humans, injure and kill them, we also injure a part of ourselves." Again, while sometimes unavoidable, war has consequences even for those who fight honorably. From his people's history of battle with oppressors, Ned recognizes that war causes emotional ailments as well as physical ones, which can only be healed after an intentional process of restoring the spirit.

Such spiritual "injury" manifests itself in imbalanced relationships with other human beings, making it difficult to remember enemies' humanity. From the beginning, Ned struggles to humanize his enemies. Because so much of the Japanese defense is waged from hidden foxholes and caves, Ned experiences the eeriness of seldom laying eyes on a physical enemy: "As I drifted off to a fitful, exhausted sleep [...] I thought about what was the strangest thing of all that first day of combat. All that fighting had happened without seeing even one Japanese soldier." In this sense, the Japanese people remain a mystery to Ned and his fellow soldiers for much of the war.

However, Ned quickly learns to distinguish between the Japanese military and civilians, who have often been placed in a cruel position. He is grieved when a friend describes the situation on Saipan: "The Japanese women and children ran from the Marines in terror. They'd been told that Americans were devils who would kill and torture them. [...] They climbed to the tops of cliffs and threw their children off before hurling themselves onto the rocks below. Hundreds jumped from the cliffs [...] before our shocked Marines could reach them. There were tears in Wilfred's eyes as he remembered it." Ned shares his friend's compassion, recognizing that the Japanese people themselves cannot all be viewed as the enemy.

After describing how the Japanese mistreated the Chamorros (natives of Guam who were U.S. citizens and refused to cooperate with the occupiers), Ned reflects that "for a long time even after the war, it was hard for me to have any good thoughts about the Japanese. What troubled me the most was the way they treated the native people of the islands they conquered. [...] Never forget, grandchildren, that we must always see all other people as human beings, worthy of respect. We must never forget, as the Japanese forgot, that all life is holy." As happens elsewhere in the story, Ned's own experiences of being treated in dehumanizing ways by a majority culture make him especially compassionate to other mistreated minorities. He recognizes that such mistreatment stems from a failure to recognize others' humanity. At the same time, he acknowledges that his anger at such mistreatment inclines him to forget the humanity of the Japanese, too—even their lives must be regarded as "holy."

Ned himself finds healing by immersing himself in his community after the war. He fulfills his dream of becoming a teacher and he works for educational reform on the Navajo reservation. Finally, telling this story of being a code talker (a marine who used a top-secret Navajo code to send messages during battle) is itself an expression of restoring balance to the world—the code talkers' mission had remained classified for decades, but now Ned can speak freely of the realities of war, thereby encouraging others to pursue peace.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

CORN POLLEN

Corn pollen is used in many Navajo sacred ceremonies. Though Ned does not explain the precise religious meanings of using corn pollen (an ancient practice), it nonetheless symbolizes his connection to his sacred land, to his people, and to the Navajo sacred spirits, or Holy People. It is first used in the Blessingway, a ceremony of protection, before Ned departs for service in the South Pacific. While at war, Ned carries a pouch containing corn pollen at all times, and each morning he scatters a tiny amount while praying. This gesture connects him to his family and makes him feel spiritually balanced no matter where he happens to be or what dangers he is facing, just as his connection to the Navajo Way always gives him strength.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Speak edition of *Code Talker* published in 2006.

Chapter 1 Quotes

I turned to look up at my uncle's kind face. [...] I was frightened by the thought of being away from home for the first time in my life, but I was also trying to find courage. My uncle seemed to know that.

"Little Boy," he said, "Sister's first son, listen to me. You are not going to school for yourself. You are doing this for your family. To learn the ways of the *bilagáanaa*, the white people, is a good thing. Our Navajo language is sacred and beautiful. Yet all the laws of the United States, those laws that we now have to live by, they are in English."

Related Characters: Uncle, Ned Begay (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the book, when Ned Begay (then known as Little Boy, or *Kii Yázhí*) is only six years old, he leaves his family to attend boarding school for the first time. Prior to World War II, formal schooling was not traditional for the Navajo people, but Ned's uncle persuades his parents that immersing Ned in the ways of white society will be best, both for him and his family. (Though Ned's schooling is depicted as his family's choice, historically many Navajo children were forced to attend white schools for the sake of assimilation to American culture, even being forcibly taken from their parents.)

Here, his uncle tries to explain his reasoning to Ned as well. Most significantly, his uncle teaches Ned that he is not attending boarding school for his own sake, but for the larger benefit of his family and people—enabling Ned to better represent his people's interests within a majority culture that doesn't value them. The importance of sacrificing and striving for the sake of others characterizes Ned's actions as he grows up and eventually fights in the war. Even though Ned is just a young child at the time, this quote also reveals his characteristic resilience and courage. Even when he finds himself in foreign and frightening situations, Ned looks for ways to adapt and survive.

Chapter 2 Quotes

It was not always easy for me to understand what those other boys and girls were saying. Even though we all spoke in Navajo, we had come from many distant parts of Dinetah. In those days, our language was not spoken the same everywhere by every group of Navajos. But, despite the fact that some of those other children spoke our sacred language differently, what we were doing made me feel happier and more peaceful. We were doing things as our elders had taught us. We were putting ourselves in balance.

Related Characters: Ned Begay (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

When Ned first arrives at the Rehoboth Mission School, it is a disorienting experience. His uncle is required to leave immediately, leaving Ned disconnected from everyone he knows and loves. Though he has never been separated from his family before, Ned quickly begins to gain a sense of community with fellow Navajo students. Navajo culture is not uniform; today, the Navajo Nation spans the entire Four Corners region, including Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, and Colorado. But the linguistic differences aren't significant enough to present a barrier, and the children at the mission school quickly follow the customs they've been taught by introducing themselves and learning one another's clans and family relationships. Ned explains that following their ancestral ways helps to put the children "in balance," to reorient themselves and remember who they are, in an environment that tries to suppress their cultural identity. Throughout the book, what Ned calls "the Navajo way" continues to serve this purpose in his life, becoming his bedrock in any new or threatening experience.

"Navajo is no good, of no use at all!" Principal O'Sullivan shouted at us every day. "Only English will help you get ahead in this world!"

Although the teachers at the school spoke in quieter tones than our principal, they all said the same. It was no good to speak Navajo or be Navajo. Everything about us that was Indian had to be forgotten.

Related Characters: Ned Begay, Principal O'Sullivan (speaker)

Related Themes: NAV

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Though Ned and his classmates find a delicate balance by speaking Navajo to one another, the staff of the Rehoboth Mission School quickly try to suppress their efforts, often with great cruelty. In the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, such American Indian boarding schools generally enforced an English-only policy, harshly punishing any student who persisted in speaking his or her native language. Ned and his classmates have their mouths washed out with soap, and they are beaten and, in one student's case, locked in a basement until the student's spirit is broken. At the Rehoboth Mission School, the justification for such practices is that "progress" requires the use of English, so any lingering remnants of Navajo language or culture must be forcibly repressed in order to make the Indian students useful American citizens. In 1929, a government report detailed the repressive policies and other shortcomings of these boarding schools, but even after President Franklin Roosevelt's administration recommended many reforms—such as more humane treatment and more incorporation of Navajo—the reforms were not quickly or uniformly implemented. The irony of Ned's childhood experience is that, later in life, Navajo will become a precious resource to the United States government—far from the "no good" Principal O'Sullivan proclaims.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ However, I was stubborn in ways the teachers could not see. I spoke nothing but Navajo whenever I was alone with other Indian students. In the basement of the school or out back behind the wood shed, I learned Navajo songs and stories. Some students in that school, especially after being beaten enough times for talking Indian, reached the point where it became hard for them to speak Navajo, even when they wanted to. But it was not that way for me. If anything, rather than taking my language away from me, boarding school made me more determined never to forget it.

Related Characters: Ned Begay (speaker)

Related Themes: NAV

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Ned sums up the effect that his early boarding school education had on him. He has just observed that while some students responded to the ban on the Navajo language by becoming openly defiant, he was not one of those himself—he remained outwardly compliant and also enjoyed his studies, excelling in the classroom. But that does not mean that Ned complied with everything at the school, or that his love for his language and culture were successfully suppressed by the school's policies. Instead, he looked for every opportunity to speak Navajo and explore his native culture more deeply with the resources at hand (namely, his fellow students). Sadly, some of Ned's classmates are so traumatized by abusive teachers that they begin to associate their native language with that abuse. But Ned only becomes more dedicated to its preservation, which highlights his resilience. This quote also highlights the book's theme of memory and forgetting—particularly the importance of holding on to one's culture when surrounding influences devalue and even denigrate it. For Ned, his culture remains a lifeline in an unfriendly environment.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ Even though my body would not grow tall, somehow I knew that there was no limit to the growth of my mind. I read and studied and wrote, and my teachers noticed. I still didn't speak up much in class–that would have been calling attention to myself or embarrassing to the other students who did not do so well in their studies. Instead I just did well on my written work, passing tests with high grades and handing in assignments done in perfect English. […]

Someday, I said to myself, *I will become a teacher, one who does not just teach, but also shows respect to all his Indian students and expects the best of everyone.*

Related Characters: Ned Begay (speaker)

Related Themes: NAV

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

This quote further illustrates Ned's response to his early schooling environment. Ned has a natural aptitude and love for learning, so the teachers' low expectations don't discourage him. But even as Ned excels at boarding school, he doesn't forget about his less successful peers or think himself above them. He is sensitive to the shame his classmates are constantly made to feel because of their identity, and he is careful not to deepen that shame by showing off. Ned is also motivated by a goal—to become an

educator himself, but a very different kind of teacher than those he's seen. His desire to become a teacher shows that Ned has taken his uncle's words to heart—he is not just learning for his own sake, but for the sake of helping his people. So, in addition to the perseverance to keep learning and excelling under difficult circumstances, Ned is also able to imagine a different approach to teaching other than what has been modeled for him. In that way, this quote provides a good summary of Ned's character.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ For most Navajos, though, the possibility of war was very far away. Caring for their herds and trying to make ends meet was all they had time to think about. But our Navajo Tribal Council passed a special resolution in June of 1940. I liked their words so much that I made a copy of them on a piece of paper to carry with me in my wallet. I've kept those strong words all these years, though I have had to recopy them several times when the paper they were printed on grew worn from being folded and unfolded or when it was soaked by the salt water as we landed on those beaches. It is often that way, you know. Strong words outlast the paper they are written upon.

Related Characters: Ned Begay (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

After Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, Ned can't stop thinking about the possibility of enlisting and going to war himself. This quote shows that, among his people, Ned isn't alone in his strong feelings. The Navajo Tribal Council's special resolution declared that the Navajo people stood ready to defend the United States against foreign enemies. After all, the resolution points out, there is no one more American than the First Americans. These patriotic words resonate with Ned and stay with him, both emotionally and physically, for the duration of his service in the Marines. This illustrates that for many Navajo and other American Indians (Bruchac points out that they have always served in disproportionately high numbers in the Armed Forces), love for the United States went hand in hand with love for one's own people and sacred land. While white Americans have not always appreciated it, in other words, Native Americans have loved their country the longest and are just as eager to defend it from invasions like Pearl Harbor. Ned's reference to "strong words" outlasting paper also looks ahead to his own work as a "code talker," since his military code had to be committed entirely to memory, without reference to a codebook.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ Johnny Manuelito's duty was to recruit from our eastern half of the big Navajo reservation. He did so in style, wearing his spotless new corporal's uniform as he spoke on street corners and in chapter houses. People were impressed, not just by his words but by how he looked. Those who had known him before said that he truly seemed to be a different person. He looked to have grown taller during the short time he was gone and he carried himself more like a white man than an Indian. When he came to our high school and spoke to the student body, his words reverberated in my mind like drumbeats.

Related Characters: Ned Begay (speaker), Corporal Johnny Manuelito

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Ned has wanted to enlist in the U.S. military ever since Pearl Harbor. At first, it looks as though American Indian volunteers will be overlooked and rejected, as they've been in many other areas. But soon "Navajos Wanted" messages circulate on the reservation. Although Ned's parents say he is too young to enlist in the first group of Navajo recruits, Ned cannot wait very long. Seeing Johnny Manuelito hardens his resolve to become a warrior himself. Johnny Manuelito is from the first group of Navajo recruits. Not just his crisp uniform, but also his bearing and demeanor make a big impact on Ned and others watching. Ned is not used to seeing a Navajo man carrying himself so tall and proudly, especially among white men. Johnny Manuelito looks like he fits right in among the non-Indian marines. For Ned, Johnny's speech turns military service from a hypothetical idea to a reality. He sees firsthand that a Navajo warrior can find success and respect within broader society. Seeing this destroys any lingering doubts in Ned's mind about whether Navajo identity has a place in the outside world.

"Do you know how many of the twenty-nine men in our platoon washed out?" Johnny Manuelito asked us. "Not even one!"

I was not surprised. Those things that he said a Marine recruit needed to learn were part of our everyday Navajo life back then. We were used to walking great distances over hard terrain while carrying things. We would stay out with our herds of sheep overnight and in the worst weather. Going for two or three days without eating was not unusual for us, even those of us who had gone off to boarding school.

Related Characters: Corporal Johnny Manuelito, Ned Begay (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

Listening to Johnny Manuelito talk about Marine Basic Training, Ned begins to get the idea that not only can Navajo men become warriors, but they can also far surpass expectations. Plenty of recruits "wash out," or fail to meet the physical fitness requirements they are introduced to in Boot Camp. These very requirements, however, are aspects of everyday life for many Navajos—whether because of living in remote parts of the desert, the ordinary demands of shepherding life, or because of the deprivations experienced in boarding school.

From Johnny's descriptions of the Navajo recruits' excellence, Ned learns that young men like himself—who have spent much of their childhoods being denigrated by white teachers—will finally have an opportunity to distinguish themselves and have their valuable contributions recognized. This further sharpens Ned's resolve to become a marine, and it's an indication that other aspects of Navajo life and culture will prove valuable to marine service, too, as Ned will learn when he has the chance to train as a code talker himself.

Chapter 9 Quotes

I took five steps toward the dawn and stood there, feeling the warmth of the sun touching me. I reached into the pollen bag and took some out to scatter from north to south. I inhaled the dawn four times, giving a prayer to myself, to the new day, and to all that exists.

There was truly blessing all around me and all through me. With that new dawn, with my mind and my body, my spirit and my emotions in good balance, I was ready to begin my journey as a warrior for America.

Related Characters: Ned Begay (speaker), Hosteen Mitchell

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

When Ned's parents consent to let him enlist in the Marines, they have one condition—that Ned participate in a Blessingway, a protection ceremony, which is one of the most central Navajo spiritual practices. The ceremony lasts for two nights and is conducted by Hosteen Mitchell, a respected Navajo singer, tribal leader, and family friend. Hosteen Mitchell sings songs of blessing all night long, recounting the Navajo creation story, and the next morning, to conclude the ritual, Ned scatters corn pollen. Corn pollen is a highly significant and complex aspect of the Navajo creation story and spiritual practice. Ned does not explain the significance of his actions throughout the ritual, but in general, sprinkling the pollen symbolizes the restoration of balance between himself and the earth, as well as a good relationship between himself and the Holy People to whom the Navajo people pray. These actions give him a deep sense of balance and preparedness to become a warrior. This quote is a good example of the strong connection between what Ned calls the "Navajo way" and the life of the American warrior. He continues to pray and scatter corn pollen each morning while he is at war, showing that his traditional beliefs give him ongoing strength and rootedness in a larger sense of purpose, enabling him to fight well.

Chapter 10 Quotes

You see, grandchildren, Fort Defiance is the place where our Navajo people were herded together in 1863 to start them on the Long Walk. Their first stop along that hard and painful way was Fort Wingate. Now, eighty years later, Navajos were making that same trip again. This time, though, it was not to go into exile. This time we were going to fight as warriors for the same United States that had treated our ancestors so cruelly.

Related Characters: Ned Begay (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

In 1863, Kit Carson and the United States Army forced the Navajo to march from their homeland to a place called Fort Sumner, in the eastern part of New Mexico. They spent four years there, suffering from poor harvests, cold, sickness, and attacks from other tribes, until they were allowed to return home. That march, or "Long Walk," began at Fort Defiance. In 1943, Ned and his fellow Navajo marine recruits also begin a journey from Fort Defiance, to their boot camp at Fort Wingate. This journey is filled with historical irony, as Ned observes—the Navajo recruits are now preparing to fight in defense of the United States, instead of being persecuted by it. This quote shows how powerful history is within Ned's culture—while 80 years is a lifetime ago, the memory is fresh, having been carefully passed down in his family. The quote also shows the complexity of Ned's patriotism as it's portrayed throughout the story. His devotion to his country is deep and sincere, but it's especially rooted in his family's ancient roots in their sacred land—which were established long before the United States existed.

> All through Indian school we had been taught that white men knew everything. That day, for the first time, I realized several things. The first was that *bilagáanaas* are not born knowing everything. The second was that in many of the most important ways, white men are no different from Navajos. The third? That no matter who they are, people can always learn from each other.

Related Characters: Ned Begay (speaker), Georgia Boy

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

Boot camp is Ned's first opportunity to spend time with non-Indian peers on relatively even ground. This is a marked contrast from his upbringing in the mission school, where everything Navajo was relentlessly denigrated and white people were elevated as superior. Though Ned still faces discrimination, such as being overlooked for promotion, overall Bruchac portrays the military as being a far more racially integrated place by comparison, where Ned feels appreciated and valued. When Ned meets an illiterate white man nicknamed Georgia Boy who asks for Ned's help reading a letter from home, the views that Indian school imposed on him are challenged—Ned has something to offer that Georgia Boy does not have. Touched by Georgia Boy's confession that he can't read and his willingness to ask for help, Ned offers to teach him, and the two quickly form a heartfelt friendship. Georgia Boy's homesickness and gratitude upon hearing from his family are also points of commonality between the two, an example of how war provided a context in which men of very different backgrounds could form genuine relationships.

Chapter 11 Quotes

> "You have done well," Johnny Manuelito said. "But you must learn to be perfect if you wish to become a code talker."
>
> Code talker. It was the first time I had ever heard that name, but it sounded good to me. Then our two Navajo instructors began to explain our duties to us. The more they said, the better it sounded. Our job was to learn a new top-secret code based on the Navajo language. We would also be trained to be expert in every form of communication used by the Marine Corps, from radios to Morse code. Using our code, we could send battlefield messages that no one but another Navajo code talker could understand.

Related Characters: Corporal Johnny Manuelito, Ned Begay (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes the moment when Ned, newly graduated from Marine boot camp, learns what his wartime duty will be. The Navajo code talkers were not the first Native Americans who used their languages to aid United States military efforts. In World War I, for example, the Cherokee and Choctaw peoples served as code talkers. However, the Japanese military figured out this tactic and sent people to learn those languages in order to prepare to crack future codes. That's why a Navajo code was developed—the Navajo language's complexity makes it very difficult for non-native speakers to master, certainly not with the speed and accuracy required for sending crucial messages during battle. It's believed that the Navajo code was never successfully cracked. Other Native American languages were used in code talking throughout the Pacific, European, and North African theaters of World War II, including Lakota, Mohawk, Tlingit, and Hopi. The Navajo-based code continued to be used during the Korean War and was retired during the Vietnam War.

Chapter 12 Quotes

[The] warning did not frighten me. It made me proud that our sacred language was so important to America. It felt good to know that we were the only ones who could do this useful thing. We swore that we would protect the code with our lives, and we kept our word. I am not sure how many of us became Navajo code talkers during World War Two, but I know that it was close to four hundred men. While it remained classified, not one of us ever told about the code, not even to our families. We kept it secret throughout the war and long after.

Related Characters: Ned Begay (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

As he trains to become a code talker, Ned Begay is warned that he must never reveal the newly developed Navajo code to anyone, or even tell his own family the real nature of the work he's doing in the Marines, or else he will spend the rest of the war in jail. Ned does not mind this secrecy, and his attitude reflects his patriotic stance throughout the novel as a whole. Having been told all his life that his Navajo language is useless to the modern world and must be forgotten, he is now proud to be called upon to use that language as a precious resource on his country's behalf. And after constantly being told that a Native American could never be as intelligent or valued as a white man, now Ned and his fellow code talkers are needed to perform a task that only Navajos can do. Their code remained unbroken during the war, and their quickness and accuracy in communication was a vital factor in the American victory in the South Pacific.

It was so good. It was good to have our language respected in this way. It was good to be here in this way. It was good that we could do something no one but another Navajo could do. Knowing our own language and culture could save the lives of Americans we had never met and help defeat enemies who wanted to destroy us.

Related Characters: Ned Begay (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

This quote sums up Ned's feelings about code talker training, one of the happiest times in his life. Code school is an unprecedented experience in Ned's life, because as a child, he had been taught that the Navajo language must be forgotten—he and his peers at boarding school were even punished for using a single word of their native language. Historically, such suppressive measures have been a big factor in the loss of native languages across the United States. In a great irony, though, Ned and his fellow Navajo marines are asked to remember the very language they'd been taught to forget in order to help win the war. Ned shows no bitterness over this reversal, but instead takes great pride and joy in being able to save lives by speaking his language. His wartime experiences also lead Ned to work hard for language preservation and the teaching of Navajo culture and history among his people after the war.

Now, grandchildren, when I say we were proud I do not mean that we became self-important. [...] We remembered that the language that now could be of such great use, our sacred language, had been passed down to us by our elders. [...]

Each morning, I thought of my home and my family. I stood facing the rising sun. I took corn pollen from the pouch I always carried at my waist, touched it to my tongue and the top of my head, then lifted it up to the four sacred directions as I greeted the dawn. That pouch stayed with me wherever I went during the war. The blessing of that corn pollen helped keep me calm and balanced and safe.

Related Characters: Ned Begay (speaker)

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

Ned tells his grandchildren about the code talkers' attitudes about their unprecedented role in World War II. Although they take pride in their work, it's a pride characterized by humility at the same time. That humility is grounded in the code talkers' connection to their people. Ned and his peers feel obligated to honorably serve not just their nation, but their own people through their wartime efforts. This sense of connectedness to his family sustains Ned throughout the entire war. After undergoing the traditional Navajo ceremony of the Blessingway for protection during the war, Ned continues to pray each morning while scattering corn pollen, calling upon the Navajo sacred spirits, or Holy People, for protection. These prayers and ritual actions bring Ned a sense of balance and tangible connection to his

family and community. His attitude of familial obligation as well as his prayers show how Ned's position as an American warrior is closely connected to his understanding of what he describes as the "Navajo Way." For Ned, being a proud American soldier and a proud Navajo man are not opposed to each other; instead, they go hand in hand.

Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ [Gene-gene] took me by the arm and led me to a big rock near the ocean. We sat together there for a time without saying anything. Then he bent over, pressed his palm on the ground, and lifted his hand up to rest it against his chest. I understood. He was telling me this land was in his heart. I knelt down on one knee and did the same, then swung my hand in the direction of the rising sun. Gene-gene nodded. He understood that the land of my own heart was there, far across the wide ocean. He placed his left hand on my chest and I did the same. We stood there like that for a while feeling each other's hearts beat with love for our sacred homelands. It was one of the best conversations I ever had.

Related Characters: Ned Begay (speaker), Gene-gene

Related Themes:

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

While the Marines are going through training maneuvers on the Solomon Islands, they have the opportunity to meet some of the native islanders, who have often been cruelly treated by the occupying Japanese. Ned observes that the Navajo marines tend to speak with the islanders more often than the white marines do. This quote suggests that, as a Navajo, Ned feels a deep kinship with the Solomon islanders that other marines might not—an aspect of his background that implicitly makes him a better, more empathetic warrior. Gene-gene, a leader among his people, underwent torture by the Japanese rather than reveal the American position, then swam through shark-infested waters to warn American rangers of the Japanese position. Gene-gene's gesture of love for his homeland speaks volumes to Ned, explaining why Gene-gene has been willing to endure so much, and also resonating deeply with Ned himself—hence Ned's return gesture toward his home. The silent exchange communicates the two men's shared sorrow over the takeover of their beloved lands, as well as their deep resolve to keep fighting for their respective homes and people.

Chapter 19 Quotes

❝ Some of the things those generals wrote made me feel so good that I almost laughed out loud. Remember, grandchildren, like so many other Navajos, I had grown up hearing only criticism and hard words from the *bilagáanaas* about our people. We Navajos were stupid. We were lazy. We could not be taught anything. We could never be as good as any white man. To hear what was now being said truly made the sun shine in my heart.

The Navajos have proved to be excellent Marines, intelligent, industrious, easily taught to send and receive by key and excellent in the field.

That is what the commanding general of the Sixth Marine Division put in his official report. [...] Each Marine division was expected to have at least 100 code talkers.

Related Characters: Ned Begay (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

Navajos of Ned's generation typically did not grow up hearing positive things about themselves from white people, as Ned's own boarding school experience proves. As Ned summarizes in this quote, they more often heard that they and their people were stupid, lazy, unteachable, and inferior. So when the Marine commanders' evaluation of the code talker program is released, their glowing reports are all the more welcome. The Marines' evaluation of the Navajos describes them as everything Ned's teachers had said he could never be. In fact, by the nature of their task, they are doing crucial work that nobody *but* a Navajo can do. The Marine commanders call for an immediate expansion of the program. These comments confirm Bruchac's argument that Navajo people not only are well suited to the life of a marine by virtue of their upbringing, but that they are equipped to excel above and beyond the call of duty—helped by their love of their own culture rather than hindered by it.

> At times, while I was back on Hawaii, I felt as if the things around me were not real. It was too quiet and beautiful. There were no guns being fired, no shells exploding around me, no muddy foxholes. [...] I should have been happy, but instead it made me feel ill at ease. [...] Never think that war is a good thing, grandchildren. Though it may be necessary at times to defend our people, war is a sickness that must be cured. War is a time out of balance. When it is truly over, we must work to restore peace and sacred harmony once again.

Related Characters: Ned Begay (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Ned describes his experiences while being recalled to Hawaii for further code talker training. Although this should have been a relaxing and restorative time for Ned, he is instead unsettled by the contrast between the chaotic combat zone and the peace and beauty of Hawaii. This feeling of being "ill at ease" anticipates the struggles that Ned and many other veterans will experience after the war, as they fight to reconcile their traumatic memories with the very different demands of peacetime.

The eeriness of peace in the midst of war also supports Bruchac's argument that war is, as Ned describes it, "time out of balance." Even though Ned is eager and willing to serve in the war, that does not mean that war is good in itself. It is actually a "sickness" which creates deep wounds that must be actively healed once fighting is done, not ignored. War, in other words, cannot restore balance to the world—only the pursuit of peace can do this.

> I was not one of those who tried to forget through drinking, although I was tempted. [...] What helped me through those times of uncertainty were thoughts of my home and family. It comforted me to know that my family was praying for me during those times. I felt close to them when I rose each morning and used corn pollen at dawn. In that way, even when I was sad and afraid, I kept it in mind that the Holy People would not forget me. Being a Navajo and keeping to our Navajo Way helped me survive not just the war, but all those times of quiet and anxious waiting that were not yet peace.

Related Characters: Ned Begay (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Ned describes his ways of coping with the stresses of war. He has just finished describing the methods employed by other Marines he knows, including some Navajos—forgetting what has happened by drinking heavily as soon as they are away from the front. Ned readily admits that he is not immune to combat fatigue (the term used during World War II to describe psychological fatigue from prolonged battle), and even that he is tempted to "treat" the condition the same way that some of his peers do. Instead, however, he draws on the same resources that have sustained him as a warrior thus far—his family and his heritage. His daily ritual of praying and scattering corn pollen makes him feel connected to his loved ones, as well as to the Holy People, the Navajos' term for their spiritual beings. This practice keeps him feeling balanced and reminds him who he is, no matter where the war takes him or whatever dangers he's facing. This is another example of how Ned's Navajo Way makes him fit for battle—not just by making him strong and courageous during battle, but by giving him resilience to cope with the aftermath as well.

Chapter 26 Quotes

> I also hear clear voices when I remember that time. I hear those voices and my own heart grows calm again. They are Navajo voices speaking strongly in our sacred language. Speaking over the concussions of the exploding shells so close that the pressure in the air made it hard to breathe. Speaking above the deadly whirr of shrapnel, the snap of Japanese rifles, and the ping of bullets bouncing off our radio equipment. Speaking calmly. Speaking even when our enemies tried to confuse us by getting on our frequency to scream loudly in our ears and bang pots and pans. [...] Even when our voices grew hoarse, we did not stop. Our Navajo nets kept everything connected like a spider's strands spanning distant branches. [...] As the battle for Iwo Jima raged all around us, our voices held it together.

Related Characters: Ned Begay (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Ned talks about one of the fiercest battles in the Pacific Theater, Iwo Jima. He has just told his grandchildren of the terrible memories of that fight, some of which he is grateful not to be able to recall. But the memories are not all violent ones. He is calmed when he remembers the steady voices of Navajo code talkers, persisting even through the terrifying noises of war. Ned describes these Navajo voices as if they are ultimately the strongest, most consistent thread throughout the battle, and indeed the code talkers were a major factor in winning this battle and ultimately the war. This is all the more remarkable in light of Ned's childhood experiences. When Ned was a young boy, speaking Navajo was the worst thing he could do if he hoped to survive boarding school emotionally. Now, as a soldier, speaking Navajo is the best thing Ned can do for his survival—and not only his survival, but his fellow marines' survival, too. It is a matter of literal life and death.

❝ During the taking of Iwo Jima, I lost some of my white buddies, too. I have not said enough about how many of the white men who fought in the Pacific became my pals. I had many friends–too many friends. I say "too many" because having a lot of friends during war can be a painful thing. It is not like having friends here at home in peacetime. If you have a good buddy, grandchildren, do you not look forward to seeing him when each new day dawns? [...] It is different in war. Another friend is another person you might lose at any instant. Each new day, each minute, may be the last one when you will see your friend.

Related Characters: Ned Begay (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

During the war, Ned has the opportunity to make close friends with white peers for the first time. The environment of war seems to lessen social barriers that might have made friendship difficult in other contexts, as fellow marines gain respect and trust for one another while serving side by side in the field. In a larger sense, though, war changes the very nature of friendship—it even gives it a kind of ambivalence. While bonds become deep and tough on the battlefront, they are also very fragile. A soldier like Ned knows that each new friend is someone he might never see again. In peacetime, he explains to his grandchildren, each new day offers the chance to enjoy friendship anew. In war, it's almost the opposite—each new day brings the dread of possibly losing someone you love. So even though wartime friendships are genuine, there is also a guardedness about them. This point is another example of the distorting effect war has for Ned, throwing even good things out of balance, and it also backs up Bruchac's larger argument that war is never a good thing.

❝ As soon as the first flag was down, Joe Rosenthal began to take pictures of the Marines putting up that second one. One of those pictures became the most famous photograph from World War II. Ira Hayes, a Pima Indian friend of mine from Arizona, is the one farthest on the very left. You can see him reaching for the flagpole but not quite touching it. He and the other five became famous because of that one photograph. It embarrassed some of them, because they all knew it was a replacement flag.

Related Characters: Ned Begay (speaker), Joe Rosenthal, Ira Hayes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

One of the most famous photographs from World War II is an iconic image titled *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima*, taken by Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal in February, 1945, not long after marines had made it to the top of Mount Suribachi after weeks of intense fighting. The photograph even won a Pulitzer Prize later that year. However, as Ned points out in the novel, the flag-raising depicted wasn't the first time an American flag was raised on Mount Suribachi. A smaller flag had been erected earlier that morning after marines first took the summit, prompting celebration across Iwo Jima even as the fighting continued. Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal wanted to keep the flag as a souvenir, so a second raising, with a larger flag, took place and was documented by Rosenthal later that day. One of the men captured in that photo is Ira Hayes. Hayes, a real-life historical figure, was a Pima Indian who was never comfortable with the fame garnered by his presence in the photo, finding it worsened his struggle with difficult memories and alcoholism after the war. Hayes died 10 years after the war ended, at age 32, and was buried in Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors. Hayes's story again reinforces the point that war is always destructive; even those who find the most glory in war can still be

immeasurably harmed by experiencing it.

Chapter 29 Quotes

Although I had changed, the things that had made me feel sad and ashamed when I was a child in boarding school had stayed the same. It didn't matter that I had fought for America. It didn't matter that I had made white friends who would have sacrificed their lives to save me when we were at war. In the eyes of those prejudiced *bilagáanaa* in that bar, I was just another stupid Navajo.

But I did not walk away thinking that things were hopeless. [...] I had learned to be self-confident as a Marine, to believe that I could succeed even in the hardest battle.

Related Characters: Ned Begay (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 210

Explanation and Analysis

After the war ends, Ned returns to the United States and spends time debriefing with other code talkers in San Francisco. While there in uniform, he is warmly greeted and thanked wherever he goes. When he travels home to the Navajo reservation, however, he receives a jarringly cold welcome, being thrown out of a whites-only bar where he stops for a Coca-Cola. Though so much has changed for Ned over the past few years—he's felt respected and valued by outsiders for the first time—at home it's as if he is still a little boy at boarding school, being derided as worthless because he is Navajo. This quote shows how difficult assimilating into "normal," postwar life could be, especially for someone like Ned who comes home to prejudiced attitudes which were relatively absent on the battlefield. Yet Ned reacts to this situation with characteristic resilience, which he attributes to his Marine service—he will face prejudice as a new "battle" rather than letting it dishearten him or rob him of his hard-won confidence.

It was not easy and I did not do it quickly. For one thing, I still had to be healed. Those of us who came back to Dinetah from the war were all wounded, not just in our bodies, but in our minds and our spirits. You know that our Navajo way is to be quiet and modest. So when we Navajo soldiers came back, there were no parties or big parades for us as there were for the *bilagáanaa* G.I.s in their hometowns. We Navajos were just expected to fit back in.

Related Characters: Ned Begay (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 211

Explanation and Analysis

When Ned gets back from the war, he is determined to finish his education and begin a career of teaching and educational reform on the Navajo reservation. However, he cannot jump right into these goals. Earlier in the book, Ned spoke of the imbalance and spiritual sickness created by war. Simply winning the war, while important, does not resolve the inner wounds experienced by veterans. When Ned returns to Dinetah, he is expected to quietly resume his normal place within society. In one sense, this helps him reconnect with his roots as he's been longing to do. But in another sense, it leaves the wounds of war unaddressed. He begins having vivid nightmares and feeling as if he is coming apart in his mind and spirit. Eventually, his family insists that Ned undergo an Enemyway, a blessing ceremony intended for the healing of warriors. After that, Ned finally has a peaceful vision of Bougainville, the island where he first fought, and begins to feel that balance is restored. This conclusion highlights the way that Ned's war experience is framed by the blessings of the Navajo Way—initially equipping him to fight, protecting him during his service, and finally healing him afterward.

Finally, in 1969, we were told that we could speak about being code talkers. [...] Books were written about us and we were invited to speak at special events. We were invited to the White House by one president after another. We were given medals like this one.

All of that was good, grandchildren. But more important than any praise was the fact that we could now tell this story. We could tell our children and our grandchildren about the way our sacred language helped this country.

Related Characters: Ned Begay (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

After the war, almost 25 years passed before code talkers could speak about what they had done. Navajo code continued to be used during the Korean War and in

Vietnam, but its use was phased out after computer technology became the most accurate and efficient way to transmit code on the field. After this happened, code talkers could share their experiences and also receive recognition themselves.

In 2001, each of the original 29 Navajo code talkers received a Congressional Gold Medal from President George W. Bush, and all other men who qualified as Navajo code talkers received a Congressional Silver Medal. Ned does not specify which medal he is showing to his grandchildren during the story, but his role in the second group of Navajo marines suggests that it would have been a silver medal. In any case, he tells his grandchildren that there is something more important than praise and recognition—being able to tell them about the role their language played in helping to win the war. This is another way of restoring balance to the world after the war and helping to ensure that the legacy Ned himself received will continue to be treasured by future generations.

> So, my grandchildren, that is the tale this medal has helped me to tell. It is not just my story but a story of our people and of the strength that we gain from holding on to our language, from being Dine'. I pray that none of you will ever have to go into battle as I did. I also pray that you will fight to keep our language, to hold on to it with the same warrior spirit that our Indian people showed in that war. Let our language keep you strong and you will never forget what it is to be Navajo. You will never forget what it means to walk in beauty.

Related Characters: Ned Begay (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

This quote concludes Ned's narrative and sums up what he hopes his listening grandchildren will take away from what he's shared with them. He makes it clear to them that it isn't just a story about him and what he has achieved. Rather, it's a story about the Navajo people and their language. When Ned was a boy, struggling in an oppressive boarding school, he could have allowed his knowledge of Navajo to slip away from him. But by holding on to his language as a precious treasure, he not only drew strength for himself but was able to become an immense asset to his country and even to the world. Though he hopes his grandchildren will never have to fight in a physical war, it's this kind of "warrior spirit" he hopes to instill in them. By holding on to their language, they will remember who they are, thereby becoming a blessing to their people and to broader society in their own ways. The reference to "[walking] in beauty," finally, is a reference to a traditional Navajo blessing called "The Beauty Way" which sums up Ned's reverent attitude to his sacred land and his people—in other words, the Navajo Way that has shaped his entire life.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

LISTEN, MY GRANDCHILDREN

The narrator, Ned Begay, addresses his grandchildren. They have asked him about a medal he owns. Ned explains that, for many years, he wasn't allowed to tell the story behind this medal. It's the story of Navajo marines' role in the American victory in World War II. It is a big story, but Ned thinks he can do it justice. After all, during the war, the lives of many others depended on the memories of Ned and other Navajo men like him.

The author uses Ned's storytelling to his grandchildren as a narrative device. This device frames the entire story as a passing down of Navajo tradition, something that's extremely important to Ned. It also reflects the reality that Navajo marines' special role remained classified (kept secret) for an entire generation after they had served.

Ned shows his grandchildren the medal. Among other men, it depicts a Pima Indian man named Ira Hayes. Ned knew him when they were both young men, and they fought together on a Pacific island. That was a terrible battle, but Ira fought to the top of Mount Suribachi and helped raise the flag there—a scene which was famously photographed. Ned wasn't among those men, but he had a special role, too—he sent the message reporting the Marines' victory and many brave deeds.

Ned refers to the iconic photo of the flag-raising on Iwo Jima, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1945. Ira Hayes, too, was a real historical figure, best known for his appearance in the photo. With the exception of Ned himself and some of the white marines, most people named in the story (especially Navajos) are actual historical figures.

Ned refers to the United States as *Nihimá*—"Our Mother." He explains that while fighting on faraway islands, he and other Indians always remembered that "we were defending Our Mother, the sacred land that sustains us." They also made up names for other lands, based on something they knew about a country or its people. But Ned is getting ahead of himself—he hasn't explained why the Navajo language was so important during World War II. It's because he was a Navajo code talker. To explain what this means, he will have to start at the beginning.

Ned's reverence for his sacred land is a recurrent theme in the story. It was also a primary motivation for his service in the war. He believes that Native Americans, having lived in America longer than any white person, have the best motivation to fight in its defense.

CHAPTER 1: SENT AWAY

A worried six-year old Ned hears his mother calling his name. Dragging his feet, he emerges from behind the family's hogan to see his beautiful mother dressed in her finest clothes and jewelry. She is also carrying a bundle of his clothes. She gestures Ned inside, where he says goodbye to his great-grandfather, who is frail and shrunken. Great-grandfather embraces Ned and tells him to be strong, calling him *Kii Yázhí*, "Little Boy."

Ned senses that a big change is about to take place in his life—one he isn't sure he wants. His mother's fine dress and his great-grandfather's words confirm this. A hogan *is a traditional Navajo home, built from earth and logs. At this point in the story, Ned is only known by his Navajo name,* Kii Yázhí.

Outside, Ned's parents embrace him sadly. His father lifts him into the seat of Ned's uncle's waiting wagon. His uncle drives off, and Ned waves until the wagon goes behind a hill and he can no longer see his family. Ned's uncle, his mother's brother, is the only member of their family who has attended the white man's school. He convinced Ned's mother to send Ned to the mission school, too, in Gallup.

Ned has a close bond with his family, but his uncle thinks it is important for Ned to attend a faraway, culturally unfamiliar school. Ned later describes his home as being located near Grants, New Mexico, which is more than 60 miles from Gallup. It was common for Native American children to attend boarding schools staffed by white teachers in the first half of the 20th century.

Ned's uncle, sensing that Ned is looking for courage, tells him to look ahead, not backward. He tells Ned that Ned is not going to school for himself. He is doing it for his family. It's a good thing for Ned to learn the ways of the white people, or bilagáanaa, because the laws the Navajo must live by are in English. Ned tries to understand. Earlier generations had not gone away to school—they had learned everything from their families and from tribal elders.

From the time he's a little boy, Ned is taught to sacrifice for the sake of others, especially for his family and the Navajo people at large. This lesson takes root deeply in Ned, as later events will show. Formal schooling is necessary because of events beyond the Navajo reservation—to a certain extent, the shape of Ned's life is governed by the majority culture.

After a thoughtful silence, Ned's uncle talks about the family's history. He explains that when Great-grandfather was Ned's age, the Americans, led by "Red Shirt," or Kit Carson, waged their last war against the Navajos. This war happened, he says, because the Americans did not know the Navajos, and they did not understand about the Mexicans. Ned knows that, for a long time, Mexicans had raided Navajo camps and enslaved their people. In turn, Navajos raided Mexican villages to rescue their people. Because the Mexicans could communicate with the Americans better than the Navajo could, the Americans believed the Mexican account of the Navajos' actions, and they made war on those Navajo bands that refused to stop raiding the Mexican villages. Then they drove the Navajo people into exile, on what is called the Long Walk.

The Navajo Long Walk took place in 1864. The memory of this forced march and exile would not have been distant history, but tangibly present, since the most affected generations were still alive. Ned would have grown up hearing these stories and feeling they were part of him. From a young age, he knows that the American government has a history of repressing his people and that his culture is not always valued by the broader world.

Ned has heard a lot about the Long Walk from his great-grandfather. The people were forced to journey hundreds of miles to a place called Fort Sumner. Hundreds died along the way and after they arrived. Their corn crops couldn't thrive there, and they were attacked by other tribes. They called Fort Sumner "the place where only the wind could live." Ned "knew this history as well as [his] own name."

Fort Sumner is located in the eastern part of New Mexico. In the 1860s, it was a military fort where Navajo and Apache groups were imprisoned after the war with Kit Carson.

Ned's uncle says that although it was hard for their people to be so far away from home, they persevered, remembering their homeland, praying, and doing a special ceremony. At that point, the white men permitted the Navajos to return home. But the Navajo people would have to learn the white men's ways and abide by their laws. That's why some Navajo children now attend white schools—so that they can "speak to them, tell them who we really are, reassure them that we will always be friends of the United States." That is why Ned himself must go to the mission school—for the sake of his family, his people, and his land. Ned promises his uncle that he will do his best.

Ned's uncle tells their people's history in such a way that young Ned can see his place in it. Like his great-grandfather's generation, he must persevere while far from home, praying and remembering his people. Ned's uncle hopes that by sending Ned to the white school, Ned and his generation will be able to influence white people to look more favorably upon the Navajos. While this sounds farfetched at the time, circumstances will give Ned that very opportunity later in life.

CHAPTER 2: BOARDING SCHOOL

Ned and his uncle journey several days to reach Rehoboth Mission in Gallup. Ned never forgets the journey—they sleep under the stars, cook delicious meals over the campfire, and share precious time together. When they reach the school, Ned's uncle is told to leave right away. He tells Ned, "You will remember," and drives away without looking back.

Ned's journey with his uncle gives him precious memories of his family's and people's ways. He doesn't realize it yet, but he will later need these memories to survive in a hostile environment.

Ned, clutching his few belongings, sees other Navajo children standing around uncertainly. Like Ned, they are all dressed in their finest clothing and jewelry—meant to show their new caregivers how precious they are to their families. The children begin to introduce themselves to one another in the Navajo way. They tell each other their names and clans and where they are from. They tell each other the names of the clan they were born to (the mother's clan) and the clan they were born for (the father's). This helps them recognize their relatives. The familiar greeting ritual makes Ned feel less sad.

The children instinctively fall back on traditional Navajo greetings to help them navigate their uncertainty and fear. The ritual comforts Ned, making him feel grounded and balanced. Seeking balance through familiar customs will be a key to Ned's survival throughout his life.

Ned does not always understand the other children's dialects, since they come from far-flung areas of Dinetah. But the greeting exchange makes Ned feel peaceful, because they are following their elders' ways and "putting [themselves] in balance." Suddenly, however, a large, red-faced white man appears on the school's porch and roars at the children to be quiet.

Dinetah is the word for the entirety of the traditional Navajo homeland. Finding balance is an important part of Navajo practices—as here, such practices help people orient themselves in the world. But the children are abruptly thrown off balance again, as Ned will be challenged over and over again throughout his story.

Although most of the children have met white people before, they've never seen one with red skin, hair, and beard before. The man continues to yell at the children to look up at him. The children don't yet understand that among white people, it's considered polite to make eye contact. For the Navajo, this is only done when you are about to attack an enemy.

This is an example of a dramatic cultural difference that easily leads to miscommunication. However, the white teacher seems to have made no effort to understand such a basic difference, which hints at the suppression of Navajo culture that Ned will soon experience.

Then, a Navajo man steps forward and introduces himself as Jacob Benally. The children have never seen a short-haired Navajo man before, or one who is dressed like a white man. Jacob Benally sadly explains to the children that they must never speak Navajo—only English. He teaches the children how to say "hello." Then he has to return to his job in the stables.

The Navajo translator's "white" appearance is another example of something that throws the children off balance, reminding them that they are on unfamiliar turf. As it turns out, it's unfriendly turf, too—their very language is being taken away from them.

Looking back on it, Ned can see how this policy forced him to master English quickly. On the other hand, he always remembers the sadness he felt when he understood Principal O'Sullivan's words: "Navajo is no good [...] Only English will help you get ahead in this world!" Ned soon hears the same message from his other teachers—everything Indian must be forgotten.

From their arrival at the school, the message is forced on the children that most of the important aspects of their identity are worthless and must be abandoned if they are going to be of any use to the larger world. Ironically, though, it's exactly these aspects of themselves that will eventually become crucial assets to the United States and the world more broadly.

CHAPTER 3: TO BE FORGOTTEN

Mr. Benally leads the children into a shed where older students are cutting the hair of all the new students. Ned explains to his grandchildren that in those days, long hair was considered sacred; cutting it short was believed to bring misfortune. Ned is first in line, and his hair is cut so quickly that it's over before he understands what is happening. He feels like a sheep being sheared. From the other children's faces, Ned sees that they, too, feel "naked and ashamed."

Cutting off the children's hair is likely an intentional way of cutting them off from their cultural identities more generally. By making the children feel vulnerable and exposed, the school makes it more likely that they'll embrace the new culture that's now being forced on them.

After the haircuts, the children are made to take off their beautiful clothing and jewelry. Ned later learns that the precious family jewelry and ornaments are sold to white people. In place of their traditional clothes, the children are dressed in rough, itchy uniforms. When the children are reassembled outside, they all look nearly identical.

The children's precious family jewelry is treated like trinkets, instead of as symbols of the children's value, as their families had intended it. This treatment reflects the school's attitude about the children themselves; they're only valuable to the extent that they're willing to conform to white society.

After that, the children are brought to a skinny white man named Mr. Reamer. Mr. Reamer tries to speak Navajo while Mr. Benally translates. He creates surnames for each child based on the name of his or her father, or sometimes assigns a historical name like Washington, Lincoln, or Jefferson. When it's Ned's turn, he tells Mr. Reamer that he is "the son of the One with a Gray Mustache." Because Mr. Reamer doesn't really understand the Navajo language, he hears *Biye'*—"son of"—as "Begay." That's how Ned and many other Navajo children of that era got the surname Begay. Mr. Reamer also gives him the name of his dead uncle, Ned.

The practice of giving surnames of dead men is shocking to Ned because, in Navajo culture, no one is ever deliberately named after someone who has died. Ned starts his day with one name— Kii Yázhí*—and ends it with a new name, Ned Begay. Basically, everything distinctly Navajo about him has been forcibly taken away within the space of a few hours.*

CHAPTER 4: PROGRESS

On the sign at the front of the mission school are the words, "TRADITION IS THE ENEMY OF PROGRESS." It's the first thing the children are taught to read. They quickly learn what it means—that anything associated with the Navajo way is bad, especially the language.

The children are indoctrinated with the notion that everything Navajo about them is the "enemy" of progress. This message makes it clearer than ever that Navajo culture is completely denigrated in white society.

On his second day of school, Ned unthinkingly greets Mr. Reamer with polite Navajo words. Mr. Reamer immediately scoops up Ned like a naughty puppy and carries him to a sink, forcing a big bar of soap inside Ned's mouth. He scrubs the inside of Ned's mouth so vigorously that foam comes out of Ned's mouth and nose. Then he drops Ned on the ground and walks away.

The use of even a single Navajo word is met with harsh punishment, which soon has the cruel effect of making the children fearful of speaking their traditional language.

As Ned falls to the ground outside, two boys—his new friend Tommy Nez and a bigger boy, Jesse Chee— help him back to his dormitory. Jesse whispers to Ned in Navajo that he will "return to balance again." He promises that the Holy People haven't forgotten Ned. Ned knows he's discovered another friend.

As bad as things are, Ned quickly learns that friends are never far away, and that even his language has not been totally erased here. Such tenacity in holding onto Navajo will become key to Ned's survival.

Ned never wants to get his mouth washed out again, so he does his best to avoid speaking Navajo when any teachers are around. Most other kids do the same. However, some kids are defiant, and Principal O'Sullivan beats them to the point that they're unable to walk the next day. One of the most defiant, Ned's friend John Roanhorse, is eventually chained in a dark corner of the basement for a whole week, given nothing but bread and water. When he's finally released, his eyes look lost.

Though Ned's punishment was upsetting, some children are treated even more brutally—some of them to the point of breaking their spirits. This was the goal of the most backward policies in mission schools such as this one—to destroy the Navajo (or other Native American) in the child so as to redeem their humanity, which white people believed could only exist in white society. However, the effect is plainly the opposite.

Ned is neither defiant nor careless about speaking Navajo. He works hard at learning English, and other subjects, too—especially history and geography. He loves learning about the past and about faraway places. He also learns that saying, "Yes, teacher," whenever called upon is like a magical way of gaining the teachers' approval.

Ned finds other ways of coping. He genuinely loves to learn, and this becomes a lifeline for him. He is observant, finding ways of cultivating the teachers' approval, and this is an aspect of his overall resilience.

However, Ned is stubborn in other ways—he speaks Navajo whenever he's alone with other kids and learns Navajo songs and stories. Some kids are so traumatized from beatings that they lose the ability to speak Navajo. For Ned, though, the school policies only make him more determined to master the language. He has no idea that "the very language those bilagáanaa teachers tried to erase […] would one day be needed by important white men."

Ned remembers his uncle's advice to remember where he comes from. He finds his strength in this, avoiding the traumatic outcomes faced by some of his peers. Even though he is outwardly compliant, Ned is actually more devoted to his language and culture than ever.

CHAPTER 5: HIGH SCHOOL

Though Ned is bored and lonely at first, he keeps working hard at school—a survival strategy. Other kids, rather than fighting, retreat inside themselves. Most of the teachers don't expect very much from Navajo students, and the students, in turn, give them little. But Ned's lifelong love of learning helps him press on.

Ned copes by throwing himself into learning, even though his teachers do not expect him to be capable. His learning, then, is not just a way of pleasing his teachers—it's a key to his own survival and thus a way of indirectly serving his family and his people.

Even though Ned remains small—too small to find a refuge in sports, like some of his friends do—he knows there's no limit to the growth of his mind. Not wanting to draw attention to himself or shame his classmates, he keeps quiet in class, but he earns high marks on all of his tests and written work. His teachers notice and praise him, saying he's "almost as bright as a little white child." Ned resolves to become a teacher himself—one who expects the best from *all* his students.

Though Ned thrives academically, he avoids showing off or doing anything that would make his peers for ashamed for not doing as well. This shows that Ned is attentive to others' needs and doesn't put his own success first. His goal of becoming a teacher also illustrates his commitment to his people and desire to work hard for their sake—even though white society, as embodied by the mission school, clearly doesn't believe that Navajo people are worthy of respect.

Because of his love of learning and his newfound goal, time begins to pass more quickly for Ned. One day, he graduates from the mission school. He does so well academically that, to his joy, he is accepted into the high school program. Navajo High School is much closer to his parents' home, meaning that he can visit his family every weekend. Also, the quality of the teaching and classes is much higher. There is even a real library.

Ned's hard work pays off, giving him the first of many rewards that his persistence and resilience will lead to throughout the novel.

In his first year of high school, Ned writes a social studies paper about Japan. At that time, the Japanese people were suffering from starvation and devastating earthquakes. Soon after, the students of Navajo High School hold a food drive for the Japanese people. Even though their families are relatively poor themselves, they collect two big crates of canned goods for the relief of the Japanese people.

Ned has a natural interest in faraway places, but he doesn't suspect how significant his interest in Japan will later prove to be. The Navajo people show a natural sympathy toward others who've suffered hardship like they have, even people thousands of miles away whom they might never meet.

CHAPTER 6: SNEAK ATTACK

After the food drive, Ned remains fascinated by Japan. He reads whatever he can find in the school library about Japan. Soon, however, Japan's leaders turn to military solutions to their people's problems. Building a massive army and navy, they invade and defeat the Chinese and many Pacific island nations. Something similar occurs in Germany, which soon allies with Japan. America begins to worry.

The major powers in both the Pacific and Europe are beginning to build up to World War II. In both cases, countries undergoing economic hardship seek imperialistic solutions to their problems, attacking others in order to gain needed resources.

For most Navajos, the threat of war seems distant. However, in 1940, the Navajo Tribal Council passes a special resolution. Ned likes the resolution so much that he keeps a copy of it in his wallet, recopying it over the years as the paper grows worn and faded. On behalf of its 50,000 people, the Tribal Council acknowledges the mounting crisis and the fact that there is "no purer concentration of Americanism" than among the First Americans. The Council resolves that the Navajos are ready to defend the U.S. government and pledges its loyal support.

For the Navajo Tribal Council, past oppression by the United States government is not a deterrent from the desire to defend their land and even to come to the defense of the United States. In fact, a commitment to protecting the U.S. is seen as the natural result of the Navajos' love of their land and people. These words resonate with Ned as well.

As it turns out, when an attack comes, nobody is prepared. That Sunday, December 7, 1941, Ned is sitting in the dormitory, still feeling ashamed about something that happened two days ago. Ned's social studies teacher, Mr. Straight, overheard Ned greeting his friends in Navajo. For this one word, he puts Ned in front of the classroom with a dunce cap on his head. Ned feels sad and angry, doubting that bilagáanaas will ever respect him and fearing that his teachers are right—he'll have to give up everything Navajo in order to be successful.

Even Ned is not spared humiliation for speaking even a few words of his own language. Though he is usually so resilient, such humiliations have a strong effect on Ned, too, undercutting his pride in his language and culture and making him think his teachers' denigrating remarks might be right.

Just then, Tommy Nez runs in, shouting that the United States has been attacked. Everyone runs to the main school building, where Mr. Straight leads them to a radio. They listen to the details of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. No one knows what to think or say, but they sense that their world has changed.

Ned's gloomy thoughts are suddenly disrupted by the news of the Pearl Harbor attack. He doesn't know it yet, but this event will change everything for him—including his doubts about the Navajo language.

CHAPTER 7: NAVAJOS WANTED

By Christmas, many American and Allied bases throughout the Pacific have fallen to the Japanese. Ned studies his geography book to locate them. Many Navajos want to help the war effort. The Tribal Council declares war on Germany, Japan, and Italy. Navajo men report to the Indian agent to enlist, but are told that their English isn't good enough, making them feel ashamed.

The Navajo Tribal Council continues to voice its support for the United States' war effort, and its patriotism is an extension of the Navajos' love for their sacred land. However, at first, it looks as if Navajo support isn't wanted—specifically because of the language barrier that will later become a crucial asset.

Ned wants to enlist, too, but he's only 14. He fears that the war will be over before he's old enough. Also, the Armed Forces don't seem to want Indians. A handful of mission school graduates are accepted as soldiers, but in general, the Armed Services overlooks "the help of those of us who had loved this country long before the ancestors of the bilagáanaas came here."

Like most of his people, Ned is eager to help the war effort. However, he fears he will miss his chance, and he recognizes the irony that the government is rejecting those who've loved the American land the longest.

But in April, 1942, a message circulates around the reservation via shortwave radio. A Marine recruiter is coming to Fort Defiance in search of Navajo volunteers for a special job. Only men who are fluent in both English and Navajo are wanted. Ned is so excited that his friends tease him. But Tommy Nez and Jesse Chee eagerly join Ned to visit the tribal offices the next day. Through a door, they see a broad-shouldered, uniformed white man sitting at a desk. Ned is awestruck by the sword, rifle, and recruiting posters hung on the wall. Ned can't take his eyes off the gleaming Marine uniform on one of the posters.

A few months after Pearl Harbor, it looks as if the U.S. military has changed its position. They are specifically seeking out Navajos, though it's not yet clear why. Even though he is enticed by the shiny trappings like many teenagers would be, Ned also has a genuine desire to serve his country, since he's still motivated by the connection between the U.S. and the ancestral land of the Navajo.

Later that morning, the recruiter, First Sergeant Shinn, makes his speech on the steps of the tribal offices. First Sergeant Shinn explains that the Marines are seeking a "few good men" and that enlisting would provide new opportunities. Ned observes that Navajos have been listening to white men speak for a long time and can tell when one is telling the truth. He feels confident that First Sergeant Shinn believes what he is saying. However, the Marines are only accepting men between the ages of 17 and 32. Right now, Ned is only 15.

Ned is not naïve about the history between the United States government and the Navajo people, having grown up with those stories and experienced discrimination himself. However, he doesn't let this history of oppression stop him from trusting white people altogether; here and throughout, he recognizes that all people are worthy of respect.

Ned thinks he sees a way around this problem. Most Navajos do not have birth certificates, having been born at home. If his parents claim he is old enough, he will be allowed to enlist. Ned presents this idea to his parents, and they discuss it in private. When they call him back inside, they tell Ned they are proud of him. However, they think he is too young. If the war persists for another winter, then they will give Ned their blessing to enlist. So Ned goes back to school, while a group of 29 other men become the first Navajo platoon.

Ned finds a creative way around the obstacle posed by his age, again showing his perseverance. Though he doesn't succeed this time, it's clear that he won't give up trying to serve his country.

CHAPTER 8: NEW RECRUITS

Even as the 29 men are recruited, nobody knows what their so-called special duty will be. After the all-Navajo platoon is bused away from Fort Defiance, nobody hears from them for months. Eventually, a couple of influential fathers write to the Marines with questions, only to be told that their sons are well, but that they cannot communicate with anyone. People joke uneasily about their fate. But four months later, one of those men reappears at Fort Defiance—Johnny Manuelito. He is now a corporal, having finished his training and been sent back to instruct the next batch of recruits.

The seeming disappearance of the new recruits would naturally be unsettling for the families back on the reservation. Nobody has a clue why the Navajos have been specifically called into service, their work having been classified as top-secret. This sequence of events has eerie echoes of the U.S. government's previous efforts to crush the Navajo, and it highlights the potential risk that Ned is taking on by trying to serve that same government.

When Johnny Manuelito makes his recruitment speeches around the reservation, everyone is impressed. He looks like a different person, not just because of his spotless uniform, but because of his confident carriage. During one speech, he looks to Ned "like an eagle staring down from a high mountain crag." He explains to the audience that if a man is drafted, he won't have a choice about which branch of the armed forces he joins, but if he enlists now, he can hope to become a marine.

Johnny's evident pride contrasts with the attitude Ned has been taught to adopt in school—one of inferiority to white people. That aside, Johnny looks like Ned's ideal of a warrior, as his "eagle" comparison suggests.

Ned is thrilled by Johnny's words, his confident posture, and his self-assurance. After the talk, he walks to the front to listen more. He hears Johnny explain that the average white man usually washes out of boot camp. But not a single member of the Navajo platoon washed out. Ned is not surprised to hear this. The skills tested in Marine boot camp are things many Navajos do every day. After Johnny's speech, Ned's mind is made up—he's ready to become a warrior.

Marine boot camp, besides providing basic training to new recruits, was also a way of weeding out those who couldn't handle the physical demands of being a Marine. Many of those demands are things Navajo men take for granted as part of daily life—here, they have an advantage over most white recruits.

CHAPTER 9: THE BLESSINGWAY

Ned approaches his parents again, explaining that he has done as they asked by waiting a year, but that he is ready to be a warrior now. His parents, though sad, agree to give their permission on one condition. Ned has to go to a singer who will do a ceremony, a "Blessingway," that will keep him safe when in danger. The singer's Navajo name is Big Schoolboy, but he is also known as Frank Mitchell. Ned addresses him as Hosteen, a term of respect.

Ned's identity as an American warrior will be directly linked to his Navajo identity. His parents' insistence on a ceremony of blessing illustrates this connection. The Blessingway will equip Ned to become a marine by sending him off with his people's blessing and granting him special protection, showing that being Navajo and being a patriotic American can go hand in hand.

Hosteen Mitchell is a Catholic, like most of Ned's family by now. (Ned's four younger siblings have also attended mission school, and his parents have been baptized as Catholics and join the children at church.) But Ned says that "being Catholic did not mean we would forget the Holy People and our Navajo Way." Hosteen Mitchell is a respected man, and Ned likes his modesty and humor. Hosteen Mitchell calls Ned "ant" because of his small size and great strength, and he tells Ned stories about his own school days.

Many Navajos, especially those with connections to mission schools, became practicing Catholics while retaining many aspects of their Navajo spiritual beliefs as well.

Hosteen Mitchell conducts the Blessingway the following weekend. Family and friends gather at Ned's home. He is ceremonially bathed and sung over in the morning and blessed with **corn pollen**. The ceremony resumes in the evening, and 60 years later, Ned can still feel the beauty of the many songs Hosteen Mitchell sang throughout the night. The following dawn, Ned scatters pollen and inhales the morning, feeling that he is now "in good balance" and ready to become a warrior for America.

Corn pollen is an important component of Navajo rituals, and its usage will continue to symbolize protection and blessing throughout Ned's service in the war. The service as a whole makes feel Ned feel "balanced"—which is a key aspect of Navajo spiritual belief—and connected to his land, his loved ones, and the Holy People.

CHAPTER 10: BOOT CAMP

The next day, Ned and his parents go to the Marine Corps office near tribal headquarters so that Ned can enlist. When First Sergeant Frank Shinn asks Ned if he is at least 17 years old, Ned simply tells him that he is "old enough to join the Marines" and that his parents will attest to the same. He is allowed to take the oath. In March, 1943, he and more than 60 other Navajo men take the bus from Fort Defiance to Fort Wingate to be sworn in.

Ned's carefully chosen words aren't questioned, and his path to becoming a warrior is finally underway.

Fort Defiance was the place where, in 1863, the Navajo people were first gathered for the Long Walk into exile. Fort Wingate had been their first stop. Now Ned and his fellow marines are making the same journey, but this time "to fight as warriors for the same United States that had treated our ancestors so cruelly."

There is heavy historical irony in this journey. Ned retraces his ancestors' sorrowful path for a very different purpose. Now, the United States military has called upon the Navajo warrior heritage it once sought to crush.

The next day, boot camp begins. Some of the men get tears in their eyes when their hair is shaved off to Marine regulations, but Ned laughs at his "plucked turkey" appearance. As the day goes on, large men yell angrily at Ned no matter what he does. On the whole, Ned thinks that the drill instructors' insults are easier for Navajo recruits to handle than for white recruits. After all, "we were used to having white men shout at us and tell us we were worthless and stupid."

Ned is able to take a wry, humorous perspective on some of the demands of boot camp, another example of his resilient attitude—he draws on past struggles for strength, and he's able to see how his identity can be an asset in surprising ways.

Ned finds that the expectations of boot camp aren't too difficult to meet. As Johnny Manuelito had said, long hikes in the sun, carrying heavy loads, and doing calisthenics are fairly standard activities for the Navajos. They are much harder for most of the white recruits from other platoons. Even marching in step is familiar to those who've attended boarding school. Weapons training is fun for Ned.

As expected, Ned finds that his Navajo upbringing has suited him well for the warrior lifestyle, and that he's doing better than the average non-Navajo recruit who isn't accustomed to such activities.

But Ned, like most of the other Navajos, does not know how to swim. The drill instructor blindfolds the men and pushes them into the deep end of a swimming pool. Most of them, forced to sink or swim, manage to struggle across the pool. When Ned is tossed in, he sinks like a rock and walks across the pool underwater. He eventually does learn how to swim, though—he's the last man in the platoon to do so.

Ned explains parenthetically that Navajo culture tends to associate deep water and underwater creatures with monsters, hence a tendency to avoid swimming—which would seldom be necessary in the desert anyway.

Unlike the white recruits, the Navajo recruits—survivors of poor rations in boarding school—think the food in boot camp is good, and they even gain weight. But Ned also learns about some things he has in common with his white peers. A blond-haired, blue-eyed recruit named Georgia Boy approaches Ned in the mess hall one day and asks if Ned can read. He wants Ned to help him read a note from home. Afterward, Georgia Boy confesses to Ned that he has never learned to read; he's been getting by in boot camp by memorizing things he is supposed to read. When Ned offers to teach Georgia Boy to read, Georgia Boy beams, and Ned knows he has a new friend.

Ned makes his first non-Indian friend in boot camp. Like Ned, Georgia Boy has likely grown up struggling with a sense of inferiority, in his case because of an inability to read. Ned's ready kindness quickly cements their bond, and helping Georgia Boy is one small example of the many ways in which Ned's skills are valuable throughout the war—even though he's spent his whole life being told he's worthless.

Growing up in boarding school, Ned had always been taught that white men knew everything. But that day, Ned learned that this isn't true. He learns, in fact, that "in many of the most important ways, white men are no different from Navajos." And what's more, all people can learn from each other.

Though Ned didn't literally believe that white men knew everything, his encounter with Georgia Boy might have been the first time a white peer asked for Ned's help. His eagerness to help others and his quickness to find commonality will serve him elsewhere in the war, too.

CHAPTER 11: CODE SCHOOL

Ned's 297th platoon, all Navajo, graduates from boot camp with the highest honors. He doesn't know what will happen next, but he is proud to be a real marine (or "leatherneck") and sure that he's ready to face anything. Looking back, he still believes that the Navajo marines were among the toughest out there, perhaps because they remembered their forefathers' courage in protecting their land.

Like the first group of Navajo recruits, Ned's platoon has no wash-outs. Ned proudly draws strength from his ancestors' struggles as he is trained to become a warrior for the United States.

However, Ned was wrong that he was ready for anything. The day after graduation, the Navajo platoon is told that they're shipping out. It seems like a cruel joke at first—the other platoons are enjoying a furlough. The Navajos are bused to Camp Elliott, north of San Diego, and settled into barracks. The next morning, they are marched into a building with bars on the windows. They have no idea what is happening.

Ned still doesn't know what the Navajos' secret assignment is, and at first, their introduction looks fairly ominous, especially given all the ways that the U.S. government has mistreated Navajo people in the past.

The platoon is marched into a classroom, and the door is locked behind them. Then they are shocked to hear a voice addressing them in Navajo. In front of the classroom are two Navajo marines, Johnny Manuelito and another man named John Benally. They introduce themselves as instructors. Ned is "stunned" by the idea of having a Navajo teacher.

Ned has always had white instructors before, and seeing Navajo figures in positions of authority (at least in the world beyond the reservation) would be a surprising novelty to him.

Johnny Manuelito passes out pencils and paper and begins saying words in Navajo. The recruits have to write down those same words in English. Johnny runs through 16 words very quickly, then collects the papers from the confused recruits. After glancing through the papers, he tells the group that they've done well, but that they must become perfect if they want to be code talkers. Ned has never heard this term before. The teachers explain that it will be the platoon's job to learn a Navajo-based secret code and to be trained in communications. Then, on the battlefield, they will send messages that only fellow code talkers can understand.

Finally, Ned learns what the Navajos' secret mission will be. It is one that, in contrast to his past experiences, will not depend upon forgetting his sacred language, but will instead directly rely upon it. Not only that, it will be a crucial, lifesaving tool on the battlefield. This is an enormous shift from the way that everything related to Navajo culture has been devalued in Ned's life up to this point.

Ned likes the sound of this job. He can easily see its importance, too. Marines must be able to communicate quickly over long distances. But so far, the Japanese have managed to break every code the Marines have used. During World War I, for example, Cherokee and Chickasaw languages had been used. After that, the Japanese were prepared, sending people to the United States to study American Indian languages. But Navajo is so difficult—it can only be mastered by those who've spoken it all their lives—that the Japanese are not known to have attempted to learn it.

A white man named Philip Johnson, the son of a trader on the reservation, had the idea for a Navajo code. Then, a high-ranking marine named Major General Clinton Vogel authorized this idea, leading to the recruitment of Navajos. Though Philip Johnson has sometimes been credited with creating the secret code, that is not true—the code was developed by Navajos themselves.

CHAPTER 12: LEARNING THE CODE

Because so many lives depend on the code, no one must ever be told about it. It has to be strictly committed to memory. Only a small number of code books are ever printed, and those are closely guarded in training areas; they are certainly not carried around by the code talkers. The code talkers must even be willing to be tortured and killed before they would reveal the code to the enemy. Ned feels proud to make this promise.

The Navajo-based code is based on the code talkers' memories—in a complete reversal from the attempts, in Ned's childhood, to force him to forget the language.

The code itself is straightforward. The code talkers have to learn a new alphabet in which a Navajo word is assigned to each English letter (from "ant" to "zinc"). Ned's class also adds more Navajo words for the English letters that are used most often, in order to guard against potential code-breakers. Less frequently used terms, such as *Mount Suribachi*, are spelled out, while frequently used terms receive their own separate code words. The constant learning and memorization is hard work, but Ned is proud of what he's doing.

Ned and his fellow marines are not just memorizing a new alphabet, but actively contributing to the writing of the code as well, drawing on their knowledge of their native language and culture. Most of them have before done work in which their culture plays a prominent and respected place; it's becoming clear that Navajo culture really does have a place in white society, despite what Ned and his peers have been told all their lives.

The class enjoys kidding around with the white instructors who teach them how to operate their signal equipment. Their favorite is the Morse code teacher, Corporal Radant. During breaks, the recruits enjoy practicing bayonet fights in the classroom to drive Corporal Radant crazy. During smoking breaks, they sneak up on Corporal Radant and wrestle him to the ground. In addition to the good-natured fun, these are peaceful weeks for Ned. After years of being forced to try to forget Navajo, things have reversed dramatically. The recruits are even encouraged to speak Navajo with each other outside of class. This feels wonderful to Ned, and he can tell that his fellow Navajo marines feel proud and fulfilled, too.

The dynamic in code school is entirely different from Ned's prior experiences of formal schooling, in which white teachers looked down upon and even abused Navajo students. Here, the students and teacher are on an equal plane in pursuit of a shared goal, and their mutual fondness manifests in good-natured jokes and pranks.

Ned explains to his grandchildren that the Navajo recruits were not "proud" in the sense of becoming self-important. They remained quiet and humble, remembering that their sacred language had been passed down to them by their elders. Ned remembers his family and his land each day as he goes through his **corn pollen** ritual. He wears a pouch of corn pollen and greets the dawn by scattering pollen every morning. He believes that this blessing keeps him balanced and safe.

As it has done since his childhood, Ned's sense of obligation to his elders and his community shapes his attitude about everything he does. His daily prayer ritual also remains an integral part of his role as a marine, as the corn pollen symbolizes the way Ned's home and people protect him wherever he goes.

At the end of code school, the Navajos decide to hold a special dance to honor their Camp Elliott instructors and to entertain their non-Indian friends. They wear ceremonial clothing and perform some dances and songs. Corporal Radant and Ned's friend Smitty even try to join in the dancing. They close the program by singing a Navajo translation of the Marine Corps hymn. It's a light-hearted, memorable day.

This celebration of Navajo culture is a good example of how code school, and military service generally, is something of a liberating experience for Ned. For the first time, his culture and language attain an honored place among non-Navajos.

CHAPTER 13: SHIPPING OUT TO HAWAII

While Ned's group has been training, the war in the South Pacific has dragged on, with the Japanese proving tougher than expected. Some of the original group of Navajo code talkers are now in Hawaii, recuperating from combat in the Gilbert Islands. Ned is headed to Hawaii, too. He is assigned to the signal corps in Admiral Halsey's South Pacific forces, and it's rumored that his unit's job will be to take Bougainville, a Japanese air base in the Solomon Islands.

Ned gets closer to entering combat for the first time. The United States's strategy in the South Pacific involved a gradual "island-hopping" approach toward Japan, but it proved much longer, bloodier, and more grueling than anyone had predicted.

Ned is excited to finally see some of the far-off places he'd loved studying as a schoolboy. But at the moment, he is much more nervous about crossing the ocean than he is about eventually encountering Japanese soldiers. As a child, he'd always been warned to avoid deep water. Navajo stories associate water with danger, even monsters. The morning he ships out, he prays with his **corn pollen** before dawn, asking for the protection of the Holy People.

Ned's spiritual practices continue to keep him connected to his land, people, and religious beliefs, even as he enters totally unfamiliar and hostile territory.

The journey to Hawaii turns out to be calm and peaceful. The signalmen are kept busy practicing their code. The Navajo signalmen are sent into the field as teams of two. In each team, one is on the radio set, with headphones and microphone. He identifies himself in Navajo over the airwaves, waits for an acknowledgment of "Roger," and then begins sending his message. This is usually Ned's job. The Navajo on the other end speaks aloud the message he receives while his partner writes it down and translates it; then that team sends back a coded message of their own.

The signalmen's job is fairly straightforward, but as they'll soon discover, it requires tremendous courage, calm, and focus in the midst of the chaos of battle.

When they reach Hawaii, the code talkers gather with those from the original all-Navajo platoon in order to be briefed on changes in their code—something that recurs over the course of the war. At one point Ned chats with a veteran code talker team, Sam Begay and Bill McCabe, asking them what combat on Guadalcanal was like. They laugh about their first battle, when they were so "green" that they wandered innocently off their landing craft, "like two sheepherders looking for a lost lamb," and into the path of a Japanese Zero (a bomber).

Ned finally gets a chance to talk with combat veterans and get insight into the code talkers' work on the frontlines. The veterans jokingly compare their new duty to the peaceful farming life they're familiar with, subtly highlighting the way that traditional Navajo culture relates to white society and the war effort.

Sam and Bill explain that when they sent their first message, other American radio operators, having never heard Navajo before, thought that the Japanese had gotten onto their radio frequency. From then on, they had to start all their messages by announcing "Arizona" or "New Mexico" in a loud voice. But after their lieutenant saw that the code talkers could send a message in two minutes and 30 seconds, the code talkers proved themselves.

The novice code talkers still faced some barriers to acceptance, but their skilled work quickly won the admiration of their fellow marines. From their example, Ned can see that skill, hard work, and commitment can be paths to acceptance within the majority society—just like his uncle told him back when he left for the mission school.

CHAPTER 14: THE ENEMIES

Sam and Bill also tell Ned that during their early days on Guadalcanal, the Japanese enemy was faceless. They heard the Japanese planes, saw the shells landing, and heard the crack of the Japanese rifles, but they saw no soldiers. There were many Japanese corpses, however. Ned explains that Navajo tradition encourages people to avoid dead bodies, for fear of bad spirits. Although it was hard for Navajo marines to deal with this, he goes on, they did the duty for which they'd been trained.

Like beliefs about water, Navajo beliefs about dead bodies pose a challenge to new recruits, but Ned explains that they are willing to overcome their discomfort in order to endure the same battlefield conditions as everyone else. This is just one example of the many ways in which conforming to the expectations of the white-dominated military could be hard for Navajo people, even though they were committed to doing so.

Japanese soldiers were trained to never retreat or surrender. Bill and Sam tell Ned that one day, they met a few Japanese prisoners. These men weren't professional soldiers, but lower-class, uneducated men who'd been forced to fight. Bill describes them as "lost and sad," "not monsters at all." It made them realize, Sam adds, that "our enemies were just human beings."

Once he gets into combat himself, Ned, too, will be challenged to recognize the humanity of Japanese soldiers. It's easy to make assumptions about their motives from a distance, but they can only really be understood as individual human beings.

CHAPTER 15: FIELD MANEUVERS

Before heading to the South Pacific, the marines participate in a training exercise on Hawaii's Big Island. Half of that island is desert. Ned thinks the Hawaiian desert resembles Dinetah. The lieutenant, Stormy, orders the platoon to cross the desert in two days with an allotment of just one canteen of water each. There is no way of refilling their canteens in the desert, he says. Ned and the three other Navajos look at each other. They've all noticed the prickly pear cactuses growing here.

Ned and his friends discover further perks of their desert upbringing, which give them a temporary advantage over non-Navajo marines.

As the marines start out, it grows hot. The other marines can't help drinking from their canteens, but the Navajos don't. Whenever Stormy isn't looking, Ned and his friends cut off a piece of prickly pear and suck out its juices. By the following day, their canteens are still untouched, while the other marines are staggering. Stormy ends up sending the Navajos back to camp to get water for everyone else. They never reveal their secret.

This humorous scene shows that Ned and his Navajo friends don't mind having some fun at the expense of the rest of their platoon, thanks to their special knowledge of the terrain. Again, coming from a Navajo background turns out to be an asset in unexpected ways.

A few days later, Ned ships out for Bougainville. First, however, they stop at Guadalcanal to practice a beach landing. As a native of the desert, Ned finds the rain-drenched South Pacific climate and terrain strange. There are also poisonous centipedes, giant crocodiles, and snakes.

Bougainville is the largest of the Solomon Islands in what is now an autonomous region of Papua New Guinea. Guadalcanal, to its southeast, is part of the same archipelago and had already been captured by the Americans from the Japanese.

Ned also meets the Solomon Islands natives, who have been harshly mistreated by the occupying Japanese. Ned feels drawn to the islanders, speaking to them more often than most of the white marines do. He particularly remembers a chief named Gene-gene, who'd been tortured by the Japanese for refusing to reveal the Americans' location. Despite having been repeatedly stabbed, Gene-gene swam three miles through shark-infested waters to warn the American Rangers of the Japanese position.

Ned feels empathy and kinship for the Solomon Islands natives, who, like the Navajo people, have suffered oppression and occupation. Other marines seem to overlook the native peoples in their focus on their immediate duties, but to Ned, it's only natural to seek them out and listen to their stories.

One day, Gene-gene and Ned have a conversation. They sit silently by the ocean. Finally, Gene-gene touches the ground and then presses his hand to his heart. Ned knows he is expressing his love for his homeland. Ned, in turn, gestures toward the rising sun. They rest their hands against one another's heartbeats. Ned calls this one of the best conversations he ever had.

Despite their lack of a shared language, Gene-gene and Ned share a deeply felt exchange about their love for their respective sacred homelands, highlighting Ned's empathy and the centrality of that empathy to his identity as a marine.

For the landing exercise, the marines debark all their equipment and supplies as if it's a real landing. It's the first time Ned has set foot on a beach (Guadalcanal) where American marines have died. His partner, Bill Toledo, waits for him at the edge of the jungle. As they watch the rest of the marines calmly disembarking, even laughing and joking, Bill points out that there's one detail missing—chaos.

No matter how well trained they are, no new recruit can be fully prepared for the overpowering onslaught of actual battle. Ned senses that far worse awaits him.

CHAPTER 16: BOMBARDMENT

Before Bougainville, Ned is happily reunited with Georgia Boy, his friend from boot camp. Georgia Boy greets him with a bear hug. The attempt to take Bougainville is called Operation Cartwheel, because the objective is "to turn things around" by putting the Allies on the attack instead of the defensive. D-day for Bougainville is November 1, 1943. It looks as if Japanese defenders are mainly concentrated in the southern part of the island. The Americans will attack from the western shore.

Operation Cartwheel was one of the Allies' major operations in the Pacific Theater, operated by General Douglas MacArthur. Its goal was to dislodge the Japanese from their dominant position in the South Pacific. The Allied forces included troops from Australia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and Pacific islands as well as from the United States.

The terrain on Bougainville is very difficult—swamps, jungles, and hills. It's thought that the Japanese will be unable to get reinforcements easily, so the Americans should be able to neutralize the whole island fairly easily. Meanwhile, General MacArthur's forces will land on nearby New Britain Island to establish an airfield, thereby trapping the Japanese airfield at Rabaul between the two halves of the American forces. Ned notes, "Our leaders were still innocent about how many American lives it would cost" to beat the Japanese.

Though the military strategy is fairly straightforward on paper, the American leaders did not realize at this point how deeply dug in the Japanese defenders were, nor how bitterly resistant they were to surrender.

After a nearly sleepless night, the marines gather on the deck on the morning of D-Day, sharpening knives, making idle comments about baseball, and singing pointless songs. Ned prays silently for the Holy People's protection. The naval bombardment begins right on schedule; its intention is to surprise and drive back the enemy. The shelling goes on and on, a deafening noise. Nearby, an excited marine tells Ned that surely nothing's left alive on that beach. But Ned isn't so sure. He suspects that the dug-in enemy is just waiting to kill them.

Ned is finally on the cusp of his first real battle. Everyone deals with the terrible tension of impending battle in his own way—for Ned, this means prayer and remembrance of his people, which have kept him strong in so many other difficult situations.

CHAPTER 17: FIRST LANDING

Ned's ship, the *President Adams*, and 11 other transport ships inch closer to shore. At 6:45 in the morning, Ned climbs into his landing boat with 29 other men, and the craft is eventually dropped into the waves below. The 15-minute journey to shore feels much longer. After the shelling stops, fighter planes strafe the island. While the other marines cheer, Ned just checks his gear. As the landing craft makes its final approach, Japanese guns open up from the beach.

The naval bombardment and aerial strafing were meant to "soften up" the island, driving back the enemy in order to make the marines' beach landing easier. Because the Japanese soldiers were often dug deeply into caves and tunnels, however, such "softening up" was not always as effective as leaders hoped.

When Ned's craft stops on the beach, everyone stumbles forward, crawling under the crossfire. Though many are confused and afraid, their training takes over. Ned has no memory of digging a foxhole, but he soon finds himself at the bottom of one with Georgia Boy. Georgia Boy has a small shrapnel wound. He tells Ned that Ned dragged him into the foxhole one-handed, though Ned has no memory of this, either.

Ned's experiences upon landing on Bougainville are a good example of the power of training, as well as the adrenaline that often takes over in combat. Because of these factors, soldiers sometimes find that they have done feats of considerable strength that they do not even remember. The way that Ned's sense of reality wavers here also foreshadows the way that the ordinary world will feel strange to him after he returns from combat.

Despite the shelling and bombing, it turns out that the Japanese remained dug in. But the Marines succeeded in bringing 14,000 marines and their equipment ashore, setting up a command post at Cape Torokina. The Navajo net of code talkers begins sending messages. By the end of the day, some Solomon Islanders emerge to greet the Americans. One islander proudly shows off the bow and arrow with which he's killed two Japanese people. When a mortar shell hits nearby, Ned and Georgia Boy dive into their foxhole, but the islander doesn't flinch, just calmly offers them some bananas. Later, as Ned falls into an exhausted sleep, he reflects that the strangest thing of all is that they hadn't seen a single Japanese soldier that day.

The Solomon Islanders have become so accustomed to warfare on their island that they are hardened against bombs, while Ned and his friends are still "green" and jumpy. Despite a good start to the campaign, there's an eerie feeling about it, as though the operation has begun with deceptive ease. Ned realization that he hasn't even seen any Japanese people hints at how dehumanizing war can be. It's easy to forget that one's enemies are real people, a tendency that Ned will fight against later on.

CHAPTER 18: ON BOUGAINVILLE

The next two days are spent establishing the base on Cape Torokina and exploring the island. Its jungle terrain is especially foreign to Ned. There is even an erupting volcano. But there are also hordes of mosquitoes, meaning that everyone has to take awful-tasting Atabrine pills to ward off malaria. At first Ned enjoys tricking the watch officer, who distributes the pills, by just pretending to swallow them, but eventually he is found out.

Malaria was a huge problem during World War II, as troops were exposed to disease-carrying mosquitoes unknown to them at home. Malaria ultimately took more soldiers out of action than the enemy did—hence the strict administration of preventative pills.

At night, the Japanese often launch *banzai* attacks. In such attacks, Japanese soldiers leave their posts and come running at their enemies with a single weapon or even just their bare hands. Because of these nighttime attacks, the marines are ordered never to leave their foxholes at night. This leads to tragedy when one of the original code talkers, Harry Tsosie, is accidentally shot to death after he leaves his foxhole at night for some reason and is thought to be an enemy.

Banzai *attacks often ended up being suicidal for Japanese soldiers. They were not to stop until either they or their enemies were dead. Of course such attacks were terrifying and demoralizing for the Allies as well, and could sometimes lead to tragic collateral deaths, as happens here.*

Ned and the other code talkers are kept busy even when the rest of their battalion is moved off the line. One day, for example, there are signs that the Japanese have just retreated. Marines are busily foraging through the personal belongings the Japanese have left along the trail. But the Japanese have started booby-trapping some of these items, knowing the Americans like to take them as souvenirs. After two marines are wounded by shrapnel in this way, Ned and his partner Bill Toledo send an urgent coded message warning all units about the traps. If they hadn't, Ned is sure that many more would have been wounded or killed. As soon as they finish sending that message, a Japanese mortar round lands right where Ned and Bill had been standing.

All kinds of scenarios could emerge which required the code talkers to send urgent, accurate messages, even when they weren't right in the thick of battle. Because of the need for urgency, the code talkers also had to place themselves right in the line of fire, as seen here with Ned and Bill's last-minute escape from the mortar round. By this point, it's become clear just how high the stakes are for Ned—he's risking everything to serve the United States, driven by his devotion to the land that his people have loved since long before the U.S. existed.

They spend two months on Bougainville, which Ned remembers as "hard and strange." Between the thick mud, the mosquitoes, and the volcano, Ned thinks that the very earth seems unhappy about the war. In December, there's even an earthquake. The marines get their first clear sight of the enemy when the quake sends Japanese snipers falling from the tops of palm trees.

Throughout all these weeks on Bougainville, the Japanese soldiers remain sheltered in their network of caves and tunnels, only seen during the nighttime attacks. This adds to the strangeness of the war and the sense of distance from the enemy.

On Bougainville, Ned spends a lot of time with Smitty, a friend of his from Camp Elliott. Long after the war, Ned learns that Smitty had a double assignment—not only to serve in their Signal Corps unit, but also to watch over and protect Ned from other marines, so he would not be mistaken for an enemy in disguise because of his skin tone and the "sort of Asian look that a lot of us Navajos have."

Because Ned's appearance could be mistaken for Japanese, he is at greater risk of accidentally being shot as an enemy by a fearful fellow marine.

One day, Smitty points out a brown-haired lieutenant getting out of a boat and asks Ned if he'd like to meet him. The lieutenant is the son of Joe Kennedy and will probably become a Massachusetts senator if he survives the war. Ned declines, since he's shy around new people, but later he finds out that Smitty's prediction was correct. He never does meet JFK, since the code talkers are only invited to the White House many years after his presidency.

Ned has a close brush with future president John F. Kennedy, who did indeed serve in the Solomon Islands campaign, in which he won multiple medals. Ned also nonchalantly acknowledges that White House visits remained in his future, hinting at the changed circumstances that will eventually allow him to tell his grandchildren this story.

On December 26, the Marines pack up to move off Bougainville. They've successfully established the American presence on the island, and with the help of the Seabees (the naval construction battalion), they've prepared everything for the Army takeover. Ned can finally relax. He also receives a letter from his parents, assuring him of prayers, and there's a P.S. from his younger sister, complaining of boredom at school. Ned mails his parents his unwashed fatigues for use in a protection ceremony.

The Seabees were a vital part of the South Pacific campaigns—after the Marines captured an island, the construction battalions would immediately move in to set up airfields, bases, and important structures to prepare for a longer-term presence on the island. Ned sends his dirty uniform home because it can stand in Ned's place in the protection ceremony.

CHAPTER 19: DO YOU HAVE A NAVAJO?

After Bougainville, the code talkers return to Hawaii. They update their code, coming up with new words for things and situations encountered in the field. By now, the code has almost doubled in size. And the Navajos have more than proven their value. Though some commanders didn't trust the Navajos at first, now qualified Navajos are in high demand.

The code talkers are frequently pulled off the frontlines in order to make sure the code is up to date with conditions in the field. By this point in the war, their work has proven its worth, even to people who didn't believe the Navajos could contribute anything of value.

One example is a time when the Marines captured an enemy position faster than expected, and the U.S. artillery continued hitting that position. Even when a white radioman sends a message, the shells keep coming. They think it's another fake message from the Japanese. Finally, the artillery sends a message: "Do you have a Navajo?" Ned is hurriedly summoned, and his message stops the shelling. After that incident, nobody questions the need for Navajo code talkers.

This scenario is a good example of the special value that the Navajo code talkers bring to the field. Fake messages sent by the enemy are a constant concern, but everyone trusts that the Navajo voices are reliable. Ned has always known that his language and culture are valuable, but now the rest of the world is learning that, too.

Marine generals unanimously request more code talkers. Their comments delight Ned. He grew up hearing only negative things from white people about Navajos people's capabilities. Now, the commanding general of the Sixth Marine Division writes that the Navajos are "excellent Marines, intelligent, [and] industrious." It's recommended that every marine division have at least 100 code talkers.

Ned takes heartfelt pride in the Marines' high esteem for the Navajos. Their attitude is the complete opposite from the kind of language that was aimed at Navajos in Ned's childhood.

At times, in the absence of gunfire, exploding shells, and mud, the respite on Hawaii feels unreal to Ned. He should be feeling happy and relaxed among his fellow Navajo code talkers, but instead he's "ill at ease," worrying about his friends, like Georgia Boy and Smitty, who are still fighting. He no longer thinks of those men as white strangers, but rather as friends and fellow marines.

Ned's feelings reflect the discomfort many soldiers feel when suddenly removed from the chaos of battle and given an opportunity to rest off the line. Ned carries this unease with him after the war and is forced to find ways to restore the inner balance that has always been so important to him.

Ned learns that one of the hardest things about war is that even when the fighting has stopped for a while, a soldier knows it will start again soon. And the quiet also allows for reflection on terrible things that have happened. These memories and fears drive many marines, including some Navajos, to drink—even after the war. This confirms Ned's belief that war is never good. It may sometimes be necessary, but it is truly "a time out of balance."

War takes a terrible toll on soldiers, Ned explains, by robbing them of true peace even when it is offered to them—memories and fears are too strong to resist. This is evidence for the book's overall argument that just because war might be a necessary measure at times does not mean it is a good thing in itself.

Though Ned, too, is tempted to forget bad memories by drinking, he is sustained instead by thoughts of his home and family. He knows his family is praying for him. He also feels close to them when he prays each dawn, using **corn pollen**. He believes that "keeping to our Navajo Way" helps him survive both the war itself and the times of uneasy quiet.

Ned is not immune to the sufferings of battle fatigue and is sympathetic to those who drink to escape them. However, his spiritual beliefs and practices provide an alternative coping strategy for him.

CHAPTER 20: THE NEXT TARGETS

In June, 1944, the Mariana Islands become the next targets of the Marines' island-hopping campaign. This is called Operation Forager, and it is under the command of Admiral Nimitz and Marine General "Howling Mad" Smith. The ultimate objective is to reach Japan itself. Ned is reunited with Georgia Boy and Smitty in the operation's Southern Task Force. Their first objective will be the island of Guam.

The Mariana Islands are an archipelago southeast of Japan and also a present-day United States territory. The goal of Operation Forager was, besides neutralizing more Japanese bases in the South Pacific, to build Allied bases for bombing runs against Japan.

Ned is forever grateful that he was not part of the Northern Task Force, which was sent to Saipan. Hundreds of marines there are killed in the water, on the beaches, and in *banzai* attacks. There are also Japanese civilians living on Saipan, some of whom join the attacks, armed only with sharpened sticks. Ned's friend Wilfred Billey tells him that the civilians were the saddest part—women and children jumped off cliffs to their deaths rather than be captured, believing propaganda which told them that the Americans would torture and kill them. Though the Marines eventually take Saipan, the victory is too bloody to be celebrated.

Saipan is the northernmost of the Mariana Islands. For the Japanese, Saipan was considered to be part of the last line of defense before Japan itself, which contributed to their ferocity in defending it. Approximately twenty thousand Japanese civilians died during the Battle of Saipan, though it can only be estimated how many people leaped to their deaths because of propaganda-fed fears. A memorial stands below Saipan's cliffs today.

CHAPTER 21: GUAM

While the other Task Force is taking Saipan, Ned's division prepares to land on Guam. The landing is delayed by two months, which gives the Navy a long time to bombard Guam's coast. This ends up being much more effective than the naval bombardments on other islands. The Marines are especially eager to take Guam because, as Ned had studied in high school, its people, the Chamorros, are American citizens. The Chamorros heroically resisted the Japanese occupation, even when treated cruelly.

Guam, which had been a Spanish territory, was ceded to the United States in 1898. It was captured by the Japanese hours after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941. Treatment of the Chamorros (or Guamanians) by the Japanese was especially cruel, including forced labor and executions. Up to 10 percent of the civilian population may have been killed under occupation.

Ned reflects that, until long after the war, it was hard for him to think well of the Japanese. This was especially true because of their mistreatment of the native peoples. The Japanese, he says, forgot that all life should be considered holy.

Ned's distress over his enemies is an example of the spiritual "imbalance" Ned describes as being a result of war. Even when enemies like the Japanese are justly fought against, viewing any people as enemies leads to a certain kind of soul-sickness, in his view, that must be redressed later on.

The Guam landing takes place on July 21. Ned and Smitty have to climb and dig in on a steep bluff. The marines are boxed in by the Japanese, so Ned is kept busy at the command post, sending messages back to the command ship. Eventually, though, he moves inland with the others, seeing one ravaged coastal town after another. As the marines move inland, they endure wave after wave of nighttime *banzai* attacks. When the *banzai* attackers are not killed by the marines' machine guns, hand-to-hand combat is sometimes necessary. Ned is grateful that he cannot remember what he did during these nighttime battles.

Ned's duties as a code talker do not shelter him from the terrifying realities of trench warfare, which only tends to become fiercer as the marines move closer and closer to Japan itself.

By mid-August, Guam has been won. In the capital city of Agana, Ned meets some of the Chamorros. They speak English as well as he does. Ned's heart breaks over their stories of the occupation, which remind him of the Navajo Long Walk. Before long, the Navajos are bringing Chamorros into the marines' chow lines, and nobody objects. He especially remembers a little boy, Johnny, of about seven years old. Johnny has been orphaned, so Ned and his tent-mate, Wilsie, let Johnny sleep in their tent. When it's time to pull out from Guam, leaving Johnny behind at the Red Cross station feels like losing a family member.

Just as he did while fighting on the Solomon Islands, Ned feels a deep empathy and kinship with the natives of Guam, who have been so cruelly treated by their occupiers. This leads him to care for the orphaned Johnny. It's another example of Ned's Navajo culture and history inclining him to seek out and care for native people as a matter of course—for him, doing so is an integral part of being a warrior.


Sometimes, sad stories have unexpectedly happy endings. One day, a code talker named Charlie Begay is found gravely wounded, apparently dead. Ned and Wilsie sadly follow protocol by placing Charlie's dog tag in his mouth (so his identification will not get lost) and covering his body with leaves and bark for the graves registration people to collect later. Weeks later, on Guadalcanal, Ned, Wilsie, and other Navajos are stunned when a healthy Charlie Begay is dropped off at their tent. Charlie explains that he was just returning to consciousness when graves registration showed up, and he is now recovered enough to return to duty. His friends are overjoyed.

Ned balances out the memories of the deep sorrows of fighting on Guam with a happier story of unlike recovery and reunion. His ability to feel joy in these moments is another indication of his overall resilience and the way his strong cultural roots keep him from becoming numb as a result of war.

CHAPTER 22: FATIGUE

During the last days of fighting on Guam, Ned gets shot in the shoulder by a Japanese sniper. He only remembers being carried to the medic by Georgia Boy. He later wakes up in the operating room on the hospital ship. The wound is small and, Ned says, hardly worth mentioning. Not everyone is able to carry on as easily as Ned does, though. Some men are hurt not physically, but in their spirits. The armed forces call this "battle fatigue."

Because of Ned's characteristic modesty, it's hard to tell how serious the wound really was. However, battle fatigue—what would likely be categorized as PTSD more recently—was undeniably real and serious, taking many soldiers out of action.

Ned says that battle fatigue is hard for many people to understand, especially people who have not been through combat themselves. Sufferers from battle fatigue were sometimes accused of cowardice. But Ned says that Navajos understand battle fatigue because their ancestors saw what war does to people's spirits. The old Navajo stories tell how even the Holy People experienced such injury. After Monster Slayer killed the many beings that had been destroying the people, he was sickened from combat and killing. That's when the Enemyway ceremony was created. Though Ned experiences battle fatigue himself, he is shipped back to the line as soon as he recovers from his physical wounds.

Ned classifies battle fatigue as being a kind of injury to the spirit, in keeping with his view of warfare as something that throws souls out of balance. He also sees battle fatigue as something that the Navajo people are in a unique position to understand and empathize with, which again shows how Ned's Navajo heritage prepares him to be a warrior in unique ways. Later, Ned himself will undergo an Enemyway ritual to restore him to balance, just as Monster Slayer himself is believed by the Navajo to have done.

CHAPTER 23: PAVAVU

The beginning of 1945 finds Ned on a tiny island called Pavavu. The island is covered with bugs, giant land crabs, and rats. But Ned and the other code talkers are kept busy creating code words related to amphibious warfare, since underwater demolition teams are being used to place explosives on enemy ships. Ned's role exposes him to lots of information that other marines don't know. For instance, he's among the first to hear about new bombs that are being prepared.

Pavavu (sometimes known as Pavuvu) is in the Solomon Islands. The island's natives largely abandoned it when Japan captured the other Solomon Islands, and the United States built an airfield there to mount raids against other Japanese-occupied islands. While working on the code here, Ned hears rumors of the preparation of atomic bombs.

All American servicemen are ordered to keep certain information secret from people back home. For example, they're not allowed to talk about the suicide planes that the Japanese are now sending against the Allies. These planes are sent in waves called *kamikazes*. Thousands of Japanese people volunteer to fly *kamikaze* planes, and most of them miss their targets. However, propaganda makes people believe that *kamikaze* planes will destroy the whole American fleet.

Secrecy and censorship were a big factor during World War II, as leaders feared that certain information would cause morale to decline on the U.S. home front. And in Japan, civilians (and even the Emperor himself) were often given misleading and downright false ideas about what was really happening in the war, with devastating results.

In reality, the tide of the war is now turning. As 1945 goes on, the Japanese are clearly in retreat. But Ned is worried about what the Japanese military will do when their situation becomes hopeless. In Europe, when enemies like the Germans realized they were losing, they would often surrender peacefully. But Japanese beliefs about war are very different. The Japanese do not feel bound by the rules of the Geneva Convention. And Japanese soldiers have been raised to believe that surrender is shameful, not only for oneself, but for one's family and nation.

Most nations had agreed to the rules of the Geneva Convention, signed in 1929 (updated versions of these agreements were negotiated after World War II). These rules provided for the humane treatment of prisoners of war and civilians. Japan, on the other hand, did not adhere to the predictable rules of warfare that Western nations generally observed, as tactics like kamikaze *warfare and* banzai *attacks showed.*

Although the objective in the Pacific Theater is to reach Japan, America's military leaders also dread doing so, anticipating the deaths of millions in the event of an invasion. They try instituting blockades of Japan and bombing Japanese cities and factories, after dropping leaflets warning civilians to vacate. Ned fears, however, that these tactics won't work.

The insufficiency of measures such as blockades and factory bombings eventually contributed to the decision to drop atomic bombs on Japan in order to end the war.

Ned distracts himself from his fears by spending time with other Native American marines. There are a total of 400 code talkers, but there are also at least 100 other Navajo marines. Most of those Ned meets on Pavavu are in scout companies. They are from many different tribes, but they are invariably nicknamed "Chief" by their white friends. The American Indians on Pavavu have "a sort of powwow," sharing various ceremonial dances and songs with one another. But Ned senses that such good times won't last long.

Ned enjoys the opportunity to meet and socialize with many different Native American marines, who serve in a variety of different roles, not just code talking. However, these marines did have experiences in common—such as being ignorantly nicknamed "Chief" by well-meaning white friends. Ned remarks elsewhere that he hated to correct his friends on this point, knowing that they meant him no insult.

CHAPTER 24: IWO JIMA

The island of Iwo Jima, 600 miles south of Tokyo, will be the site of the largest Marine assault ever assembled. Iwo Jima is needed by the Allies in order to create an emergency landing field for bombers making runs to Japan. It's a small island, and most believe that it will be easy to conquer. But Japanese soldiers are dug deep into caves and tunnels—16 miles of them, in fact. The Japanese plan no longer includes *banzai* attacks. Instead, they are going to stay dug in.

Iwo Jima is a volcanic Japanese island which was one of the last steps in the Allies' island-hopping campaign toward Japan itself. Because of its strategic importance to Japan, however, it would include some of the bloodiest fighting in the entire war.

CHAPTER 25: IN SIGHT OF SURIBACHI

After everything they've survived, most of the marines think that taking Iwo Jima will be a piece of cake. But it turns out to be "the worst nightmare of all." Ned says this wasn't their commanders' fault. The island had been relentlessly bombed for days before the landing invasion; it should have been sufficiently "softened up." But Command didn't know how deeply the Japanese were dug in and how well supplied they were. In fact, later, the marines discover that some of the food the United States had shipped as relief for the starving Japanese people had been appropriated by the Japanese military; it was stored in the caves on Iwo Jima.

Iwo Jima had been heavily fortified by the Japanese, and the 21,000 Japanese soldiers present on the island were prepared to fight to the death to defend it from the Allied invasion. (In fact, more than 19,000 of those soldiers were ultimately killed in the fighting.) The Battle of Iwo Jima took place between February 19 and March 26, 1945.

An enormous naval fleet of 464 ships is sent against Iwo Jima. There are four command ships, each with a Navajo code talking team. False messages are sent via Morse code to trick Japanese monitors, but all the important communication takes place through the Navajo net. Seventy thousand Marines prepare to invade. The morning of the landing, Ned prays as usual with **corn pollen**. Instead of eating the traditional big breakfast marines are served before a landing, Ned stashes a steak sandwich in his pack—something he's grateful for later.

By this time in the war, the Navajo code talkers are implicitly relied upon to transmit the most important communications during battle—it's become clear that the Navajo language is crucial to the war effort. Before the landing even begins, Ned senses that this will be one of the most devastating invasions he's been involved in, and he conducts his usual ritual in anticipation.

When Ned gets his first glance at Iwo Jima's Mount Suribachi, it makes the hair stand up on the back of his neck. Even after the naval bombardment and aerial bombing, the island remains silent, as if dead. Ned is part of the first landing wave, along with Smitty. He and Smitty feel as if they are one another's good luck charms.

Taking Mount Suribachi was one of the Marines' first objectives on Iwo Jima. It will prove to be far more difficult than anyone had anticipated.

Iwo Jima means "Sulphur Island," and as Ned's landing craft approaches the island, he can actually feel volcanic heat emanating from it. Steam seeps from cracks, and the sand can burn a person's hand. As Ned and the other marines step onto the island, they're met with utter silence. It all feels eerily easy to Ned.

The tropical, volcanic island projects an uninviting atmosphere even before the marines step on its beaches. Adding to the unsettling environment, the marine landing occurs suspiciously unopposed, but this is because the Japanese soldiers are all concealed in caves and tunnels.

CHAPTER 26: THE BLACK BEACH

Johnny Manuelito is manning the Navajo net on one of the command ships. Later, he tells Ned what the beach landing looked like from his position. Soon after the suspiciously quiet landing, a storm of shell, machine gun, and small arms fire explodes across the island. On the island itself, the loose, deep black sand makes it nearly impossible for Ned and Smitty to scramble up Mount Suribachi. When they reach the top, they realize that the Japanese waited until the Americans had scaled the mountain's first slope and then were exposed on the broad plain at the top of the slope. They manage to dig a foxhole, and Ned starts sending a desperate string of messages back to the command ship—messages reporting high casualty estimates and requests for more ammunition.

Sure enough, the eerie silence does not hold for very long, as the Japanese have been holding their fire until the marines have begun progressing inland. The sudden, catastrophic storm of fire indicates how the rest of the battle will go.

Ned can't remember much about the first three days on Iwo Jima. It's probably best, he thinks, that he can't recall all the terrifying sights. He does remember the sulfurous smell of the island, combined with the smells of gasoline, gunpowder, and—worst of all—burning skin. Ned remembers hastily eating his steak sandwich as he and Smitty keep shoveling black sand out of their foxhole.

Most specific memories of Iwo Jima are traumatic, and as combat memories often do, they remain deeply buried in Ned's mind. The trauma that Ned undergoes during these days is one of the biggest contributors to his difficulty healing after the war.

However, Ned also has calming memories from Iwo Jima. He remembers hearing strong Navajo voices over the din of shells, shrapnel, and bullets. The Navajo web never breaks, holding together the battle for Iwo Jima.

The Navajo code talkers were especially vital to eventual victory on Iwo Jima. Their ability to continue sending code with accuracy and calm, in the midst of some of the war's most chaotic days, shows how skilled and reliable the code talkers were. Ned's calm memories also show how important the Navajo language still is for him personally. It connects him to his home and his people, even as it also serves a crucial practical role in battle.


It takes four days for the marines to climb Mount Suribachi, taking just a few feet at a time. On Friday morning of that week, 40 marines crawl on their stomachs up a nearly vertical slope. When they reach the top, it's empty. Six men raise a small American flag they'd brought with them (one of them is a Salish Indian). A sergeant who's a photographer snaps a picture of the group. This photo later gets printed in *Leatherneck*, a Marine magazine.

When the small group of marines finally takes Mount Suribachi, the first of two flag-raisings takes place. It's the second of these that becomes one of the most famous images from World War II.

Ned can't see the raised flag from his foxhole, but he hears the cheers pouring down the mountainside. Another code talker sends a message back to the command ship that Mount Suribachi has been secured. Much of the island breaks into celebration. However, the rest of the island still has to be taken, and there's a terrible cost. Almost 20,000 Japanese soldiers die, and almost 7,000 Marines are killed.

Though the taking of Mount Suribachi marks the turning of the tide, the struggle is far from over in this particularly relentless and bloody battle.

Ned says that he has shared too little about the many white men who became his friends during the war. Friendship in war is different than friendship in peacetime—you know you might lose a friend at any moment. One rainy March morning, Ned is part of a group whose objective is to take a certain hill. They are raked with enemy fire, and suddenly Ned turns to see blood spurting from Georgia Boy's neck. After a medic arrives, Ned has to keep moving with his radio. It's the last he sees of Georgia Boy on Iwo Jima.

Ned explains that although friendship in wartime is genuine and wonderful, its nature is different from that of friendship in peacetime—it is constantly haunted by the expectation of loss. The way that war undermines even something as positive as friendship reinforces the novel's broader point that war is always a bad thing.

Twenty-six days after D-Day, Iwo Jima is officially won. As they sail back toward Guam, the last thing Ned sees is the American flag waving on the top of Mount Suribachi. He tells his grandchildren that they have probably seen the famous picture of the six marines raising that flag. However, that famous picture wasn't the first one taken. Two hours after Mount Suribachi was taken, an Associated Press photographer, Joe Rosenthal, took a picture of marines erecting a larger flag on the summit. The photo of *that* flag-raising became famous. It even included Ira Hayes, Ned's Pima Indian friend.

The second photo taken on Mount Suribachi became immortalized in newspapers and monuments and even won a Pulitzer Prize later in 1945. At the time, most people seeing that photo don't realize that it's the second flag-raising that took place on Mount Suribachi (the smaller flag was taken down as a souvenir for the Secretary of the Navy, and a larger one ordered to be set up).

Some of those in the photograph felt embarrassed about the attention they later received. Ned thinks they deserved all the praise they got, but he understands Ira's discomfort with his new celebrity status. He thinks that's part of why Ira started drinking so much. He couldn't get war memories out of his mind, and the famous photograph made things worse. Ira used to tell Ned and Wilsie he wished they were in the photo, too: "It is so lonely being there forever without another Indian."

The historical Ira Hayes was, in fact, unhappy about his appearance in the famous photo, and his postwar alcoholism—a result of his experiences during the war—contributed to his death a decade later.

CHAPTER 27: OKINAWA

Iwo Jima was the key to the war's end. Now planes are able to fly from Guam and Saipan to Japan without being attacked. Plenty of Japanese people want the war to end, too. But the Japanese military command still refuses to surrender. So a massive invasion of Okinawa is planned.

By this time, most people are terribly weary of war, but surrender still does not appear to be imminent. Okinawa, too, proves to be a devastating battle, with one-third of the Japanese island's civilian population ultimately dying.

As Ned is sailing toward Okinawa, he gets one of the biggest surprises of his life. He hears a familiar Southern drawl and sees Georgia Boy, who has survived his wounds after all. This only adds to the good morale among the marines. But Ned is afraid to trust that the war is truly ending. On landing day, he dreads another ambush like those they've survived in the past.

Most marines can't help feeling that the worst is already behind them, but Ned senses that there is another devastating battle to come. Again, his traumatic experience makes it hard for him to relax, even when his immediate surroundings are calm.

But by nightfall, the marines reach objectives that had been expected to take days. It seems too easy. Indeed, a week later, they reach dug-in Japanese defenses at Kakazu Ridge. The Japanese military command intends to try to bleed the Marines dry. As Ned had feared, some of the war's bloodiest fighting is still ahead of them. It takes 83 days to fight across one ridge after another. The island is officially secured on June 2. The Japanese lose 110,000 men, and 80,000 Okinawan civilians are killed, too. Ned feels heavy-hearted after the victory and fears the toll that a full-scale invasion of Japan would take. Many Japanese citizens wanted the war to end by this time. However, even Emperor Hirohito was protected from knowing how badly the Japanese military was being beaten, and the military command remained determined to fight.

Though the invasion itself is relatively uneventful, the fighting soon turns fierce one again, with terrible consequences for Allies, Japanese soldiers, and Japanese civilians alike. The Japanese soldiers' tenacity is an indication of how fiercely they are willing to fight to defend Japan itself. Their determination parallels Ned's commitment to protecting American land, and this parallel highlights the idea that even seeming enemies often have a lot in common.

On April 12, Ned receives a radio message telling him that the U.S. president, Franklin Roosevelt, has died. He is moved to tears, and everyone is shocked by the news. Nobody had known how sick FDR was; many didn't even know he had been crippled by polio. FDR had been greatly loved, and the marines mourn together.

Adding to their depressed morale after the arduous fighting on Okinawa, FDR's death is a terrible blow for the marines, as well as for the American public in general. The secrecy surrounding FDR's illness is an example of the secrets that were strategically kept for morale's sake throughout the war.

CHAPTER 28: THE BOMB

On August 6, 1945, an atomic bomb is dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, killing over 70,000 people. Two days later, a second one is dropped on Nagasaki. After this, Emperor Hirohito wants to surrender. After an attempted coup by some of the military officers, Hirohito announces the Japanese surrender to his people, many of whom have never heard his voice before. The code talkers are among the first to learn this news. The Navajo marines are overjoyed, dancing down the road with some of the bandsmen's drums. The other marines join in or celebrate in their own ways. It is a wonderful night for everyone.

After the horrible fighting on Iwo Jima and Okinawa, the Allies dreaded an invasion of Japan itself, projecting at least a million American casualties alone. This projection contributed to the decision to drop the atomic bombs, in hopes of bringing the war to an end at last. In that respect, at least, the dropping of the bombs was successful, though the humanitarian cost of that choice was unthinkably vast. At the time, all Ned and his fellow Marines know is that they are finally going home.

CHAPTER 29: GOING HOME

The code talkers can't go home immediately. A couple of code talkers travel to Japan and send messages to the rest, who are in San Francisco. They report on the terrible devastation caused by the atomic bombs. Ned says that although the bombs may have cut the war short, the horrifying reports make him pray that such bombs will never be used again.

After the war, Ned learns more about the terrible suffering caused by the bombs, the use of which remains controversial. Most of the people killed by the bombs were civilians, and as Ned has previously made clear, those individuals were as worthy of dignity and respect as any other human.

Before leaving the Marines, Ned and the other code talkers are warned that their official role must remain top secret. When they get home, they can't tell anyone what they really did during the war. Like some of his friends, Ned isn't sure what to do with himself after the war ends. Life feels too easy.

Assimilating back into civilian life is difficult for veterans like Ned, after spending years immersed in their wartime duties. This difficulty is compounded by the necessity of secrecy.

Then, during his trip home, Ned has an encounter that shows him what he needs to do. At the edge of the reservation, he goes into a bar to get a Coke. He's in uniform. In San Francisco, the sight of his uniform drew thanks and greetings from many people. But here, the reaction is different. The bartender angrily points out a "NO INDIANS SERVED" sign and throws Ned into the street. He doesn't fight back.

After the warm reactions he received in San Francisco, the bartender's reaction to Ned makes him feel as if nothing has changed from his childhood. His honorable war service makes no difference; all that matters is that he is a Navajo.

However, Ned's Marine service has made him resilient. Instead of resigning himself to hopelessness, he decides to prepare himself for another battle. He decides to take advantage of the G.I. bill to go to college and become a teacher. He wants to teach Navajo language, history, and culture to children so that they will never forget it.

Ned does not react to his setback by becoming depressed or self-pitying. Instead, he reconnects with his childhood goal of becoming a teacher, realizing that there are meaningful battles to be fought on the homefront, too.

However, Ned does not meet his goals quickly. His mind and spirit are still wounded from the war. When he gets home to Dinetah, there are not celebratory parades or other recognitions like the ones white soldiers often receive. He is expected to fit back in to everyday life. Ned starts having vivid nightmares about the war. But just when it feels like he will go crazy, his family gets Hosteen Mitchell to perform an Enemyway ceremony for him.

Despite his goals, Ned still needs healing from the events of the war. He cannot transition smoothly into civilian life. Fortunately, his family is supportive, and his rootedness in Navajo traditions helps him once again. His war experience is bookended by spiritual blessings that connect him to his sacred land and people.

The ceremony brings Ned back into balance. The first night of the ceremony, he has a dream of Bougainville. Everything that had once seemed new and threatening about the jungle now seems beautiful to him. He dreams that Smitty is shaking him awake in the foxhole, telling him that the Japanese have retreated and that everyone is safe. When Ned opens his eyes again, he feels he is "truly home" and can "go forward on a path of beauty."

Ned's dream of Bougainville at peace symbolizes the restoration of his inner balance and the healing of his spirit. His reference to the "path of beauty" is an allusion to the Beauty Way, another Navajo blessing.

Over the years, Ned has worked hard for his people as a teacher. In some ways, he continues to face disadvantages. For example, the G.I. bill will not help people build houses on Indian reservations. But Ned doesn't give up. He serves in tribal government, working on educational reform.

Ned continues to face discriminatory practices after the war. However, his experiences during the war have only strengthened his resolve, and he works to directly combat his people's oppression.

In 1969, the story of the code talkers is declassified. Ned can tell his story. Books are written about them, they are invited to the White House, and they are given medals, like the one Ned is showing to his grandchildren. But the best thing is that Ned and other code talkers can tell their grandchildren how their sacred language helped America.

Once Ned is finally permitted to speak about his role as a code talker, formal recognitions are secondary to the joy of sharing this story with his grandchildren—it is their heritage, too, and he hopes that sharing his story will be a way to remind them and the rest of the world that the Navajo language and cultural are deeply valuable.

Ned concludes that the story he has told his grandchildren is not just his story—it's a story of his people and their strength as Navajos. He prays that none of his grandchildren will ever have to go into battle. But he also prays that they will hold onto their language with "warrior spirit" and that they will never forget what it is to be Navajo.

Ned hopes that his story will encourage his children to continue his legacy—not by fighting in war themselves, but ultimately by fighting to remember their sacred language and to stay strong in the culture he has handed down to them.

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