Carl in Gallup, New Mexico, 1929.
Collection of Carl Gorman, Courtesy of Zonnie Gorman (NCP0.10:2004.8)
Born in 1907 on a Navajo reservation in Chinle, Arizona, Carl Gorman spent his nights sketching horses as his mother, Alice, wove rugs on a loom nearby.

At 10 years old, Carl was sent to Rehoboth Mission School where teachers beat him for speaking his native language. Carl still refused to speak English. As punishment, he was locked in a basement in the middle of winter with little food and water. Carl and his younger brother soon ran away.

Carl later attended Albuquerque Indian School, a government boarding school, which discouraged native ways of life. At his graduation, instead of a high school diploma, Carl received a certificate stating he was “satisfactory in farming.”

My teachers didn’t care about me. They were trying to make white people out of us. I learned so early how terrible and cruel prejudice can be.

Carl Gorman

We were restricted from talking Navajo with each other at school... If you spoke out in Navajo, even secretly, there were people watching you all the time and tattling on you. You would get whipped or punished for it. That’s how the Christian mission was. The mission was to get the “savages” civilized and fit them in with American society.

Keith Morrison Little, Rehoboth Mission School student
Thirty-five year old Carl Gorman lied about his age to join the U.S. Marine Corps. He wanted to serve his country. As a child, Carl had been punished for speaking Navajo, but during the war, he would use his native language to save American lives in the Pacific.

As one of the original 29 Navajo Code Talkers, Carl developed a top-secret military code that would be impossible for the enemy to break. In the midst of battle in the Pacific, Carl transmitted this Navajo code to pinpoint enemy positions for artillery strikes, locate units in desperate need of replacements, and communicate orders for attacks.

In Saipan, Carl fell gravely ill with malaria and was airlifted to Pearl Harbor, Hawai‘i, for medical care.

Before the white man came to this country, this whole land was Indian country and we still think it’s our land, so we fight for it. I was very proud to serve my country.

Carl Gorman, Navajo Code Talker

Navajo Indians enlist in the military, ca. 1941-45. Photograph by Milton Snow, Courtesy of Navajo Nation Museum, Window Rock, Arizona (N07-90)

The original 29 Navajo recruits at Fort Wingate, New Mexico, 1942. Carl is in the back row, second from right. Collection of Carl Gorman, Courtesy of Zonnie Gorman (NCPD.10.2004.36)

Carl Gorman tracks enemy movements on the island of Saipan in the Marianas, June 27, 1944. National Archives (NWDNS-127-MN-83714)
During the war, Carl Gorman used his native language to save countless American lives. He vowed to serve as a bridge between his people and a continuously encroaching Anglo world.

Carl’s passion for drawing and painting led him to the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. He was among the first Native American artists to incorporate both Western and native styles in his work.

In 1964 Carl returned to the Navajo reservation to help his people preserve traditions that had been repressed by centuries of colonization. As director of the Navajo Arts and Crafts Guild, Carl recorded the ancient traditions of silversmiths and weavers and taught the importance of perpetuating Navajo art, language, and culture.

I want to help my Navajo people preserve their beautiful arts and crafts, which are rapidly vanishing. Indian art is dying out and we Navajo people must do something to prevent this great loss. Our young Navajo people do not realize the valuable heritage they have. They need training and help…

Carl Gorman
YOU ARE A SECOND-CLASS AMERICAN . . .

Because of westward expansion, Native Americans were brutally removed from their lands and placed on reservations. For instance, Colonel Kit Carson’s troops forced over 11,000 Navajo to march more than 300 miles in 1864. Held under armed guard for five years, 3,500 Navajos died. Over the next century, federal policies and court cases displaced over two-thirds of Native Americans from their lands.

Most Native Americans were not considered U.S. citizens until the passage of the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924. And still Native Americans in states like New Mexico and Arizona were denied the right to vote until the 1950s.

YOU’RE BEATEN FOR SPEAKING YOUR NATIVE LANGUAGE . . .

In the early 1900s, many Native American children were kidnapped and placed in Bureau of Indian Affairs schools. Government boarding schools, like the Albuquerque Indian School, aimed to “Americanize” native children by forcing them to speak English and to pursue vocational trades. Isolated from their families, Native American children as young as five years of age slept in military-style barracks, marched from classroom to mess hall, and lived on meager rations of food. Many ran away to escape this harsh treatment.
DURING WORLD WAR II

THE NAVAJO WEAPON

The original group of 29 Navajo Code Talkers developed a military code that used native words. Since military terms did not exist in Navajo, “dive bomber” became gini (chicken hawk), and “submarine” became besh-lo (iron fish). The letter “A” became the Navajo word for “Ant,” “B” for “Bear,” “C” for “Cat,” etc.

Before, a typical military message could take up to two hours to decipher. These Code Talkers could communicate accurate messages in less than two minutes. Over 400 Navajo Code Talkers served in combat in the Pacific. At Iwo Jima Island, they sent 800 error-free messages within a 48-hour period. Thirteen Navajo Code Talkers were killed in action while serving their country.

SERVING OUR NATION

One-third of all Native American men between the ages of 18 and 50 served during World War II. Over 25,000 Native Americans were placed in either white or black units in all branches of the military. Roughly 800 Native American women served on the homefront and overseas.

One of these women, Eva Mirabal, a Taos Pueblo Indian, joined the Women’s Army Corps after graduating from Santa Fe Indian School. Stationed at the world headquarters of Air Service Command at Patterson Field, Ohio, Eva painted a building-sized mural “A Bridge of Wings,” depicting the improving relationship between North America and South America during the war.
DURING WORLD WAR II

YOU SERVE HEROICALLY, BUT . . .

Many Native Americans returned home to worsening conditions on the reservations and few job opportunities. Veterans moved to the cities but suffered alienation from their communities.

In one case, paratrooper Ira Hayes, a Pima Indian, returned home a hero. An Associated Press photographer had snapped a picture as Ira and five other Marines raised the American flag over Iwo Jima. Ira became a symbol of Native American assimilation into mainstream life after the war. And yet, disillusioned by the reality of poverty and despair on the reservation, Ira became an alcoholic and died at the young age of 32.
AFTER WORLD WAR II

A SECRET NO MORE . . .

When the Navajo Code Talkers returned from the Pacific, their work remained classified in the event that they would be needed for future wars. Even family and friends knew little of their heroic service during the war. It was not until 1968 that the code was declassified.

Recognition was long overdue, and on July 26, 2001, President George W. Bush presented Congressional Gold Medals to the original 29 Navajo Code Talkers to acknowledge their development of the unbreakable code. Of the 29 original Code Talkers, only four lived to receive their medals.

The Code was so successful that military commanders credited it with saving the lives of countless American soldiers. The Congress expresses the gratitude of an entire nation to these brave and innovative veterans for their contributions and sacrifice in the struggle for freedom and democracy.

Jeff Bingaman, U.S. Senator from New Mexico, 2000