

## • VIEWER DISCUSSION GUIDE •

# Choctaw Code Talkers



This photo was taken upon returning to the United States from fighting in World War I on June 7, 1919, in Camp Merritt, New Jersey. Pictured Left to Right: Corporal Solomon B. Louis, Private Mitchell Bobb, Corporal Calvin Wilson, Corporal James Edwards, Sr., Private George Davenport and Captain E.H. Horner. Image Courtesy of Dr. Joseph K. Dixon; Rights Purchased from Mathers Museum.

*“Well, I’m really proud that my grandfather was a Code Talker. I tried to tell anybody and everybody that wanted to talk about it. I’m proud of him. Our Choctaw language—our heritage itself—helped end World War I.”*

— Margaret McWilliams, granddaughter of Choctaw Code Talker, Corporal Calvin Wilson.



**Choctaw Code Talkers** is the personal and heartfelt story of Choctaw soldiers whose dedication and bravery assisted in ending World War I, even though as individuals the men were not recognized as American citizens. In 1918 in Northern France, during the fiercest and bloodiest battles of World War I, a small core of Choctaw American Indian soldiers foiled the German oppressors. These brave men utilized their Native language to transmit secure messages as a part of the American Expeditionary Forces, turning the tide of the war and ensuring an Allied victory. These men had volunteered to fight for the government that only a few decades before had caused the Choctaw Nation to experience a great tragedy known as the “Trail of Tears Removal.”

The film combines original archival war footage and images with testimonies from the Code Talkers’ families, Choctaw Tribal leaders, linguists, military personnel and historians. Shot on location in multiple cities throughout Oklahoma and in Los Angeles, California, the program also includes intimate scenes from remote areas of Tribal Trust Land, as well as museums and military bases. **Choctaw Code Talkers** brings a unique perspective to these forgotten heroes and their early wartime contributions.

This Viewer Discussion Guide is designed to encourage deeper exploration and conversations about the film and explore issues surrounding patriotism, honor and heritage.

## PRODUCER'S NOTES



**Valerie Red-Horse**

Image Courtesy of Red-Horse Native Productions, Inc.

### Valerie Red-Horse (Cherokee), Producer/Director/Writer

“The Choctaw story of the original Code Talkers in World War I, which set an incredible precedent in military history, is an American Story that deserves to be told. As a filmmaker, I am very passionate about honoring the memories of these brave men—for our own community and the community at large. I was struck by the pathos of the situation when the families recounted how many of these men went to war to “prove” they were truly loyal Americans—since they were not yet citizens, did not feel trusted and could not call America their home officially. To then realize the full impact of the contribution they made to the War and our Allied victory by using their language—yet were not honored or given proper benefits upon their return—motivated me to tell their story properly and passionately. Interestingly enough, their families are not bitter or angry, but instead only demonstrate great pride in their ancestors’ service to this country. I hope the film *Choctaw Code Talkers* instills a sense of renewed pride in the younger generation and a realization of the dedication of our Armed Services—those who have gone before us. I hope, too, that there might be a new focus of education and inspiration related to the Choctaw Nation and their powerful spirituality and their commitment to God, family and country, which has endured.”

## BY THE NUMBERS

For **hundreds of years** before Europeans came to the United States, the Choctaw Nation was a Tribe comprised of farmers who lived in what is now the southeastern U.S. until the Federal government forcibly removed most Tribal members in **1830** to Southeastern Oklahoma in what became known as the “Trail of Tears.” Tribal members have overcome diversity to grow nearly **200,000** strong—the country’s third largest Tribe.

The Choctaw’s serving in World War I, notates the **first** “Code Talkers”— soldiers willing to use their Native languages to send messages that the enemy forces could not understand.

The Choctaws volunteered for the army in **1915** although the United States did not enter the World War I until **1917**.

On **June 2, 1924**, the United States government approved the Citizen Act which made the Choctaws and **125,000** other Natives U.S. citizens.

In **1944**, a reservation was set up for the descendants of the Choctaw people who resisted or otherwise evaded the removal of the Choctaws to Oklahoma. They are called “The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians.” However, the group of soldiers known as the Choctaw Code Talkers all came from the Oklahoma Choctaw Nation which is recognized as a related but separate sovereign entity with Trust Land in the Southeast corner of Oklahoma.

On **November 3, 1989**, France gave the Choctaw Code Talkers an award, named *Chevalier de l’Ordre National du Merit *, for their part in World War I.

In **2008**, Congress approved and the President of the United States signed legislation, *Bill H.R. 4544* known as the *Choctaw Recognition Act of 2008*, allowing the minting of a medal for the Native American Code Talkers of World War I and World War II. As of **2010**, no one has been awarded the medals yet.

**Three decades** after the “Trail of Tears,” the Choctaw people had rebuilt their social and economic bases. In **1934**, they re-established their own constitutional republic, and by **1836** they were running eleven elementary schools and nine high schools.

## EXPLORING THE FACTS

1. During the boarding school years, much effort was extended to erase the Native language of the children attending the schools. They were forced to learn and speak English. What do you think is the value of preserving these original languages? How does language influence identity?

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2. The Choctaw Code Talkers joined the military even though they were not yet considered “citizens” of the United States. How do you think these young men felt when asked—or volunteered—to fight for a country that did not claim them? What do you think motivated them?

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3. You can see and hear in the stories of the children and grandchildren of the Code Talkers that they are very proud of the role these Choctaw men had in winning World War I. This legacy of pride in our ancestors can play an important role in forming our identity. What do you know about your ancestors? What feats and actions did they perform in order to survive and create the next generation?

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4. The history of mankind on the planet is dotted with wars. A critical question we can—and should—ask is why do people make war on other people? What are your thoughts about this? When you consider the amount of resources and human lives taken (as reported in the film), do you think it was justified? What would you propose as a solution to war-making?

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5. Identity and belonging are key issues for all of us. We gain a sense of belonging when we participate in certain groups whether they are ethnic, religious or social. We can see in this film that many of the relatives of the original Choctaw Code Talkers are now of mixed blood, and yet they take their sense of identity from their Native blood. How do you identify yourself? What are the key beliefs, morals or ancestral lines help you to form your own identity?



**Bertram Bobb, relative of Choctaw Code Talkers Corporal James Edwards, Sr. and Private Mitchell Bobb. Image Courtesy of Bill Sheehy.**

## IDEAS FOR ACTION

1. Read the long and disturbing story of the Choctaw removal, later dubbed as the “Trail of Tears and Death” available at <http://choctawnation.com/history/choctaw-nation-history/trail-of-tears>. When you have finished the reading consider what you would have done had your family been forced from your home and threatened with floods, starvation, sickness and blizzards.
2. American culture is the result of major migration and immigration from all parts of the world. Like the “Trail of Tears” for the Choctaws, many were either removed or left due to War, poverty or hunger. If you were to trace the trail of your own ancestry back, where would that trail begin and end?
3. You can see and hear in the stories of the children and grandchildren of the Code Talkers that they are very proud of the role these Choctaw men had in winning World War I. This legacy of pride in our ancestors can play an important role in forming our identity. What do you know about your ancestors? What feats and actions did they perform in order to survive and create the next generation?
4. In the film we saw a great deal of old footage about how the soldiers on both sides fought in World War I. Much of this footage was shocking and painful to watch. Many of the Indian soldiers were boys. What was the average age of the German soldiers they were fighting? Conduct some research to find out.
5. In your world, how do you define “enemy” and how do you define “friend”? Put both words at the top of a piece of paper and then write down any words that come to mind for each. When you have finished, look again and see what would have to happen for an enemy to become a friend? What action, knowledge, curiosity or understanding would you have to gain or what steps would you have to take in order to shift your personal experience?



Image depicts the St. Mihiel Offensive Operations Map and American Expeditionary Forces move to St. Mihiel. Image Courtesy of National Archives.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### ABOUT THE CHOCTAW NATION

**Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Website**  
[www.choctawnation.com](http://www.choctawnation.com)

**Choctaw Language Resources Website**  
<http://www.native-languages.org/choctaw.htm#language>



**Choctaw Homestead.** Image Courtesy of National Archives.

**Website Dedicated to the Choctaw Code Talkers of World War I.**  
<https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/michael/www/choctaw/code.htm>

### ABOUT NATIVE AMERICAN PARTICIPATION IN THE U.S. MILITARY

**Naval History & Heritage Command Website - Native Americans and the U.S. Military**  
<http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq61-1.htm>

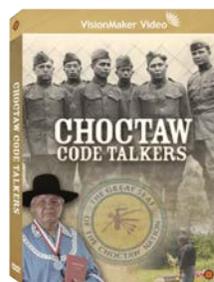
**U.S. Army Center of Military History Website - Native Americans in the U.S. Army**  
<http://www.history.army.mil/html/topics/natam/>

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This Viewer Discussion Guide was developed by Jamie Lee, an author and former instructor at the Oglala Lakota College, where she taught for five years. Lee has a Master's in Human Development and has been a communications trainer and an educator for the past 30 years. Her stories and articles have appeared in *The South Dakota Review*, *Winds of Change Magazine* and several other anthologies. She has published three non-fiction books along with one novel and a collection of writings from Oglala Lakota College students. Her first novel, *Washaka: The Bear Dreamer*, was a PEN USA finalist in 2007. Lee has written over 70 documentary programs including public radio's landmark 52-part Native music series, *Oyate Ta Olowan: The Songs of the People*.

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