

Zonnie Gorman holds a photo featuring the 29 men who would become the first Navajo Code Talkers during an interview at her home in Gallup on March 19. The photo also includes her father, Navajo Code Talker Carl Gorman, seen standing top row, second from the right.

DONOVAN QUINTERO/FOR THE JOURNAL

We're still here. We're not erased'

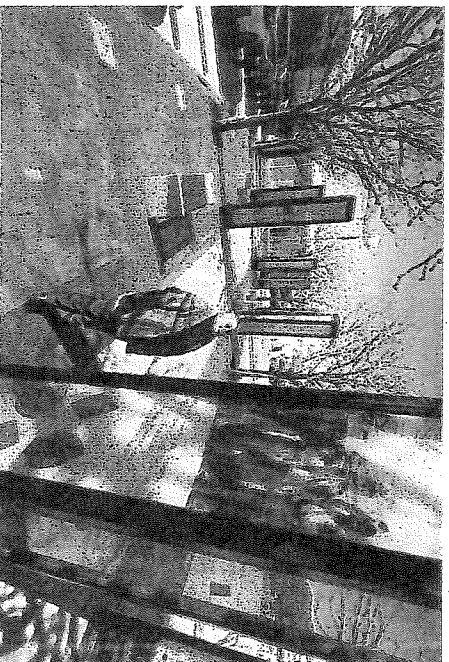
Daughter, granddaughter speak up after the Navajo Code Talkers' removal from government websites

BY DONOVAN QUINTERO
FOR THE JOURNAL

GALLUP — Zonnie Gorman remembers the first time she saw an old photo of a group of young, sleek, clean-cut Navajo men — men who would go on to become the Navajo Code Talkers during World War II. The “Original 29” was a group that included her father, Carl Gorman.

As a teenager in the 1970s, Gorman’s fascination with the image ignited a lifelong passion. That interest would ultimately lead her to become one of the leading Navajo experts on the Code Talkers, a group of Navajo Marines who used their language to create an unbreakable military code during World War II.

Gorman has spent her career preserving the memory and meaning of their service. But now, decades after the Code Talkers helped win a war using a language the U.S. once tried to suppress, their story is once



Zonnie Gorman looks for her father’s name on a pillar that honors Navajo Code Talkers at the McKinley County Courthouse plaza in Gallup on Wednesday, March 19.

again under threat — not by conflict, but by erasure.

Recently, the U.S. Department of Defense removed content about the Navajo Code Talkers and other minority veterans from its public websites. Press secretary John Kirby said the change was part of an automated review to

remove “diversity, equity and inclusion” materials. Pentagon officials have said some of the content, including pages about the Code Talkers, were removed by mistake.

Last week, the Pentagon restored some pages highlighting the crucial wartime contributions of Code Talkers and other

Native American veterans. That step came days after tribes condemned the removal.

But to Gorman, this move is far more than a technical update — it’s part of a troubling pattern. To her, the purge isn’t accidental — it’s a calculated strategy to silence stories that don’t conform to a narrow version of American patriotism.

“They didn’t just remove the Navajo Code Talkers,” she said. “They also removed references to the Tuskegee Airmen, Jackie Robinson and other minority veterans who served the country.”

Gorman’s initial fascination with a family photograph became the foundation of her scholarship. Possibly the first group image of the Code Talkers, the photograph represents a historical moment.

“The photo fascinates me because it represents a

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moment frozen in time," she said. "These young men, some from boarding schools, some older like my father, captured together before they would change the course of World War II."

Now, Gorman sees her historical work as a form of resistance — fighting against what she views as a dangerous political move to erase the truth.

"We cannot be complacent," she warns. "We all need to stand together — not just as Indigenous people, but as people who will resist what's happening right now."

The Code Talkers came of age at a time when their culture and language were punished or discouraged.

Many were born before Native Americans became U.S. citizens in 1924 and attended boarding schools where speaking Navajo could result in punishment.

During World War II, Navajo Marines developed a complex code based on their language to send military messages. It was never broken — it is the only unbroken code in modern military history.

The first group of 29 Navajo men developed the code. Eventually, nearly 400 Navajo men served as Code Talkers.

New Mexico state Sen. Shannon Pinto, D-Tohatchi, granddaughter of the late John Pinto — a fellow Code Talker and longtime state legislator — reflected on how her grandfather might have reacted to the news.

"It would hurt," she said softly, pausing. Her words carried the emotional weight of her family's legacy and the enduring struggle of Indigenous people.

"We're still here. We're not erased," Pinto added, her voice steady but filled with emotion.

Pinto acknowledged the historical pattern of pushing Indigenous voices to the margins.

"We've seen this before," she said. "And it always comes back to the same message: that we don't belong, that our stories don't matter. But they do."

For both women, the Code Talkers aren't just historical figures—they're symbols of survival, cultural strength, and the enduring power of memory. Their message is clear: efforts to erase history will be met by voices that refuse to be silenced.

"Our languages are still here. Our cultures are still here," said Gorman.

Many other Native American nations also contributed Code Talkers during the war. These included the Seminole in Florida, Cherokee in North Carolina, Ojibwa in Michigan, Menominee and Oneida in Wisconsin, Meskwaki in Iowa, Dakota and Lakota Sioux in the Dakotas, and numerous tribes in Oklahoma, such as the Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Pawnee, Kiowa and Comanche. The Assiniboin in Montana and the Hopi in Arizona also played a part.