

Telling Our Stories, Finding Our Roots



Soldiers in Tiverton

During World War Two Tiverton hosted a number of American soldiers. Both white and black GI's were stationed in the town as well as some less well-known guests: Native American members of the Comanche tribe, working as 'Code Talkers'.

Relations between the different groups were generally harmonious, but there were also problems, with conflicts between white and black GI's recorded in local news reports. One of the more light hearted stories found by researchers includes a tale of a group of black GI's who helped the Tiverton sea cadets. The cadets had moved from Knightshayes to Leat St and needed to clear a space for a parade ground. A request was made to the American troops for help in return for the princely sum of beer and sandwiches. 5 to 8 black soldiers came and helped clear the site in a single, enjoyable day.

Other American soldiers based in Tiverton (probably at Collipriest House) included 14 Native American Indians, members of the Comanche tribe, who crossed the Atlantic along with other US military personnel. The soldiers were part of the US Army's 4th Infantry Division, and brought with them something unique: a secret code, decipherable only by them, which had been constructed out of their tribe's own language. The code was deployed six months later during the D-Day landings and many lives were saved.

This earned the 'Code Talkers', as they became known, the title of 20th century heroes as well as official honours from the French and US governments.

Use of Native American languages to produce a secret code began in the First World War, but accelerated in 1941 when the US handpicked 21 young, unattached Comanche men to train as radio operators and repair line men, while at the same time giving them free rein to develop Comanche code words for military terms no-one outside the group, including others of their tribe, could understand. This was a challenge, partly because there was no Comanche equivalent for words like tank, machine gun, bomber and Hitler. Some creative thinking was required:

***Tank* became 'turtle', *machine gun* became 'sewing machine', a *bomber* was a 'pregnant airplane' and *Hitler* 'crazy white man'.**

The code was hugely successful. It took a military machine up to four hours to transmit and decode a message, but a Comanche code talker could decode the same message in less than three minutes. The Code was never broken.

And what of the Tiverton connection? One of the Comanches, who had arrived in the town just six months before, was responsible for sending the first D-Day message after landing on Utah Beach. Translated into English, it read:

'We made a good landing. We landed in the wrong place.'