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The Last Lakota Code Talker

Good and bad memories, and framed commendations on one of his four walls - that's what Clarence Wolf Guts has to show for WWII and all that came later.

By Bernie Hunhoff

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Clarence Wolf Guts is not the sort of hero who capitalizes on his exploits; he hasn't written any books or run for office, and you can count his speaking appearances on one hand. He lives almost as simply today as when he was a boy on the Rosebud Reservation in the 1920s.

He accumulated very little property in 83 complicated years. Most of his friends and his family are dead. He quit drinking at age 81, and found that sobriety improves his ability to remember the good and the bad of a sometimes-messy life.

Much about Clarence Wolf Guts is confusing, beginning with his name. He doesn't know what he was called when he was born on Feb. 26, 1924 in the Red Leaf community on the Rosebud Reservation of south central South Dakota. His birth certificate lists him as Eagle Elk, but his father and uncles soon decided to give him a more unusual name - Wolf Guts.



He learned Lakota from his grandfather, Hawk Ghost, and his grandmother, Hazel Medicine Owl. "My grandfather taught me the facts of life and the Lakota language," he said. "He told me 'you'll go to school and stay in school.' But he also said to speak Indian because 'you'll need it later in life.'"

Teachers at his boarding school in St. Francis discouraged him and other students from speaking Lakota. Clarence dutifully learned English and played basketball, softball and baseball. "I tried football but I couldn't hack it," he says. "It was a little bit too rough."

He and a cousin, Iver Crow Eagle, left St. Francis in the eleventh grade to fight in World War II. "I didn't know if I could make the physical in Omaha," he says. "I had a perforated ear drum. I guess a bug got in there when I was a little kid. My grandmother took tweezers and pulled the bug out, and hurt my ear drum."

But it was 1942, and the U.S. Army wasn't fussy. The cousins were assigned to hand-to-hand combat training in Tennessee, desert exercises in Arizona, and finally to Ranger training at Camp Rucker in Alabama.

Booze and time have not dimmed his memory. He recalls with considerable detail the day he became an important player in the war effort. A captain came to his barracks and asked, "You talk Indian?"

"I am Indian. One hundred percent Indian."

"Well, the general wants to see you."

"Me?" wondered Clarence. "What in the world did I do now?"

The captain told him to get a haircut, take a shower and dress in his best clothes. He also offered tips on military etiquette: stand two feet from him, salute, say your name, rank and serial number. Then he and the captain went to see the general.

"Sir, this is Clarence Wolf Guts from South Dakota," said the captain. "He talks Indian."

Major General Paul Mueller, commander of the U.S. Army's 81st Infantry, poured glasses of whiskey for the three of them, and told Clarence he wanted a man-to-man talk - "non of this 'sir' or 'general.' Just talk to me like a man.

"Can you speak Indian fluently?" the general asked.

Clarence said he could "read, write and speak the Lakota Sioux language." Satisfied, the general explained that the Japanese were intercepting vital communications, and he intended to confuse them by sending messages in a Native American language.

Clarence told the general, "I don't want no rank, I don't want no money. I just want to do what I can to protect America and our way of life."

"I've never seen or met an Indian before," the general said. "You guys were first in this country?"

"Yes, supposedly we were," replied Clarence.

Gen. Mueller said he liked his spunk. Then he asked if he knew of any other soldiers who spoke Lakota. Clarence said his cousin, Iver, was also at Camp Rucker, whereupon Gen. Mueller exclaimed, "I hit the jackpot!"

Two other Lakotas from South Dakota - Roy Bad Hand and Benny White Bear - were also recruited. The four learned how to operate military radios, and they worked with officials to develop coded messages. They developed a phonetic alphabet and assigned military meanings to common words like turtle, tree or horse. Their communications helped the army to move troops and supplies without tipping off the enemy.

Clarence was Gen. Mueller's personal code talker, and traveled with him and the 81st as the division moved from island to island in the Pacific, headed for Japan. Iver accompanied the general's chief of staff. Even though they had special protection - two body guards were assigned to each code talker- - Clarence still shakes when he thinks of the bullets, mortars and bombs.

Frustrated by a language they didn't know, the Japanese made special efforts to find the code talkers. Some code talkers in other units later said that if their outfit was overrun, the code talkers expected be shot by their body guards to prevent their capture by the enemy. Clarence and Iver never spoke of that, but they had enough to worry about.

"How will we ever survive this?" Iver asked Clarence on a particularly harrowing day.

Clarence says he replied, "There is a God. He is protecting us." He bargained with God on several occasions. "Take me back to my country and my people and I will lead the way with Your name at the top of the list," he prayed.

Thoughts of the Rosebud Reservation provided some comfort. "I always wondered if they had food on the table, if they're dancing, if they're remembering us," he says.

He started to drink heavily in the army. "We went to war and war is hell," he says. "All I can say is we went to hell and back." He and many others found at least temporary relief in the bottle. "It's easier that way to take another man's life," he says.

As radio operators, they had access to another avenue of escape. "We could tune the radio to the U.S. and get western music from San Francisco," says the old soldier. "We could hear You Are My Sunshine and Chattanooga Choo Choo."

They even got some kicks while on duty. Clarence started laughing one day while transmitting a message to Iver.

"Are you laughing at me?" asked Iver.

"No, I'm laughing at the Japanese who are trying to listen to us," Clarence said in Lakota.

Decades later, a Japanese general admitted that his country's top cryptographers couldn't decipher the code talkers' language. When told it was Native American he replied, "Thank you. That is a puzzle I thought would never be solved."

When the war ended, Clarence and about a dozen other Lakota code talkers returned to the reservation. They were not welcomed home with parades or programs, but he and a

few soldiers held their own party, dancing and singing a song of thanks that they'd learned from Indian elders. Asked about it many years later, he said the dance of thanks wasn't for the dancers. "We did it for our people and the people of the United States of America. It was for them, and for the people of the world, because if the Japanese ever took over the world, we would be dead."

Code talkers from other Indian tribes were asked to not talk about their unique roles in the war, perhaps because the U.S. military thought it was a trick worth saving. All written reports about the code talkers were classified. Clarence doesn't remember being told to keep his service record a secret, but he and his fellow Lakota soldiers, happy to be home on the Rosebud Reservation, told no one. They didn't think of their service as particularly heroic. Like many veterans, they tried to forget.

"I wanted to be a rodeo man," he says. "I rode three bulls, and then I said 'I'll stick to horses.' Those bulls can kill you." He was a bronc rider at rodeos in Valentine, Gordon, Rapid City, White River, Fort Pierre and other West River cow towns.

He earned \$100 on a good weekend, but spent it on alcohol and gas to get to the next rodeo. In 1949 he broke his ankle at Cody, Neb., and soon retired from the arena. A year later he married Allgenia Brown. They raised two daughters and a son before divorcing in 1959.

He worked on farms and ranches, on or near the reservation. Heavy drinking kept him from accomplishing very much; and it also caused his greatest sorrow. He attributes both of his daughters' deaths to alcohol, and he says many of his other relatives suffer from alcoholism.

But his life took a turn when the silent history of the code talkers was broken. It began when the military declassified official information about its linguistic trickery. Then Max Collins wrote a book, *Wind Talkers*, about two Navajo code talkers. The book became a hit movie in 2002. The U.S. Congress awarded congressional gold and silver medals to the Navajo soldiers, and the story spread. Over a hundred code talkers were identified from 17 tribes. Unfortunately by then almost all the other code talkers had died. Clarence Wolf Guts, just by the good fortune of staying alive, became one of the most acclaimed WWII vets in South Dakota. He received an honorary degree from Oglala Lakota College. He rode in the Rapid City American Legion parade, traveled to Oklahoma City as a special guest at the opening of a traveling exhibit on the code talkers, spoke at the American Indian Veterans Conference in Wisconsin and was honored at a national WWII conference in New Orleans where he was given a red, white and blue "flag" shirt.

South Dakota's congressional delegation -- Senators Tim Johnson and John Thune, and Rep. Stephanie Herseth - introduced a bill to award him and the other forgotten code talkers the Congressional Gold Medal which was given to the Navajos in 2000. Clarence traveled to Washington with South Dakota Indian leaders, including Don Loudner, the national commander of the American Indian Veterans Association of the United States, to testify for the legislation.

Clarence looked as uncomfortable at the senate committee hearing as the senators would look riding a bucking horse. His dark face is wrinkled and creased. His legs are so cramped that he can hardly stand. His hair is white and scruffy. Still, he spoke simple, heartfelt words to the lawmakers. "I am a full-blood Indian, and we do whatever we can to protect the United States because we love America," he said. "Nobody can ever take that away from us."

Taking advantage of the spotlight, he provided a quick language lesson, explaining that he

was a Lakota Indian. "That is what I am, a Lakota Indian. Some of the tribe is named Sioux, but we are not Sioux. We are Lakota."

He stressed that his thoughts as a soldier were always of home. "When I see young children playing without any supervision, I realize why we were over there ... we did not want the enemy to come over here to America, because we love America."

Clarence looked out-of-place behind the microphone, but he understood its power: he told the senators that he and other veterans needed better benefits, and he asked the chairman, Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell, if he could arrange a meeting with President Bush while he was in the capital city. "I just have a hunch that might be difficult on short notice," the senator replied. But before the old Lakota left the witness table, the chairman paid him a compliment: "You are a proud man from a proud people. It has always interested me that the Lakota people who suffered their last great tragedy at the hands of the U.S. military and the federal government as late as 1890 at Wounded Knee their grandfathers must have been involved in those last free days of the Lakota people. And to be able to rise above that to help defend a nation, it must have given them some thought when they would remember what their grandfathers had gone through, and their grandmothers too."

The U.S. House of Representatives unanimously approved the legislation in 2001, and by the U.S. Senate did the same 2003. But it hasn't become law. Loudner says the proposal gets "bounced around" from the House to the Senate. Since being introduced, the bill has been changed; now it only asks that the code talkers be awarded silver medals rather than gold, like the Navajo received.

Loudner opposes the bill in its current form because of the change from gold to silver. He also noted that the Hopi Tribe is lobbying the U.S. Postal Service to change its plans to issue a commemorative stamp designed to honor only the Navajo code talkers. "Why should they honor one tribe and not the others?" he asks.

Loudner, who lives in Mitchell, believes the Lakota code talkers haven't received sufficient credit. He notes that Albert Grass and Richard Blue Earth of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe served as code talkers in World War I. Both were killed in action on Oct. 9, 1918. He believes about 14 Indians from South Dakota were code talkers in WWII. Clarence Wolf Guts is the only living Lakota - and for a time he was thought to be the only living WWII code talker in the United States. However, the Hopis of Arizona now believe an elder of their tribe, once thought to be deceased, has been found, alive and well and living off the reservation.

Clarence returned from Washington and soon quit drinking. He has been sober for nearly two years and he hopes he can stay away from the bottle. "All my buddies are dead and gone," he lamented, sitting alone in a spacious but sparse room in the Cohen Memorial Home, an assisted living center that is high on a hill on the north edge of Pine Ridge.

Awards, letters and honors - all issued within the last five years - hang nicely framed on one wall. His flag shirt from New Orleans is kept alongside two or three other pieces of clothing in a tiny closet. He spends his time reading, watching television in the community room and stoking his pipe, when he has money for tobacco.

His sleeping room is neat and clean. There is a low bed, a folding chair and a dresser. A red Doritos bag lies on the tile floor alongside a laundry basket and some magazines and books, including Sioux Falls writer/photographer Greg Latza's book *Blue Stars*, which was published in 2004 to honor South Dakota war veterans.

"I'm page 78," he says.

Fortunately for the United States, Clarence Wolf Guts and others didn't listen when school teachers urged them to abandon the Indian language.

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