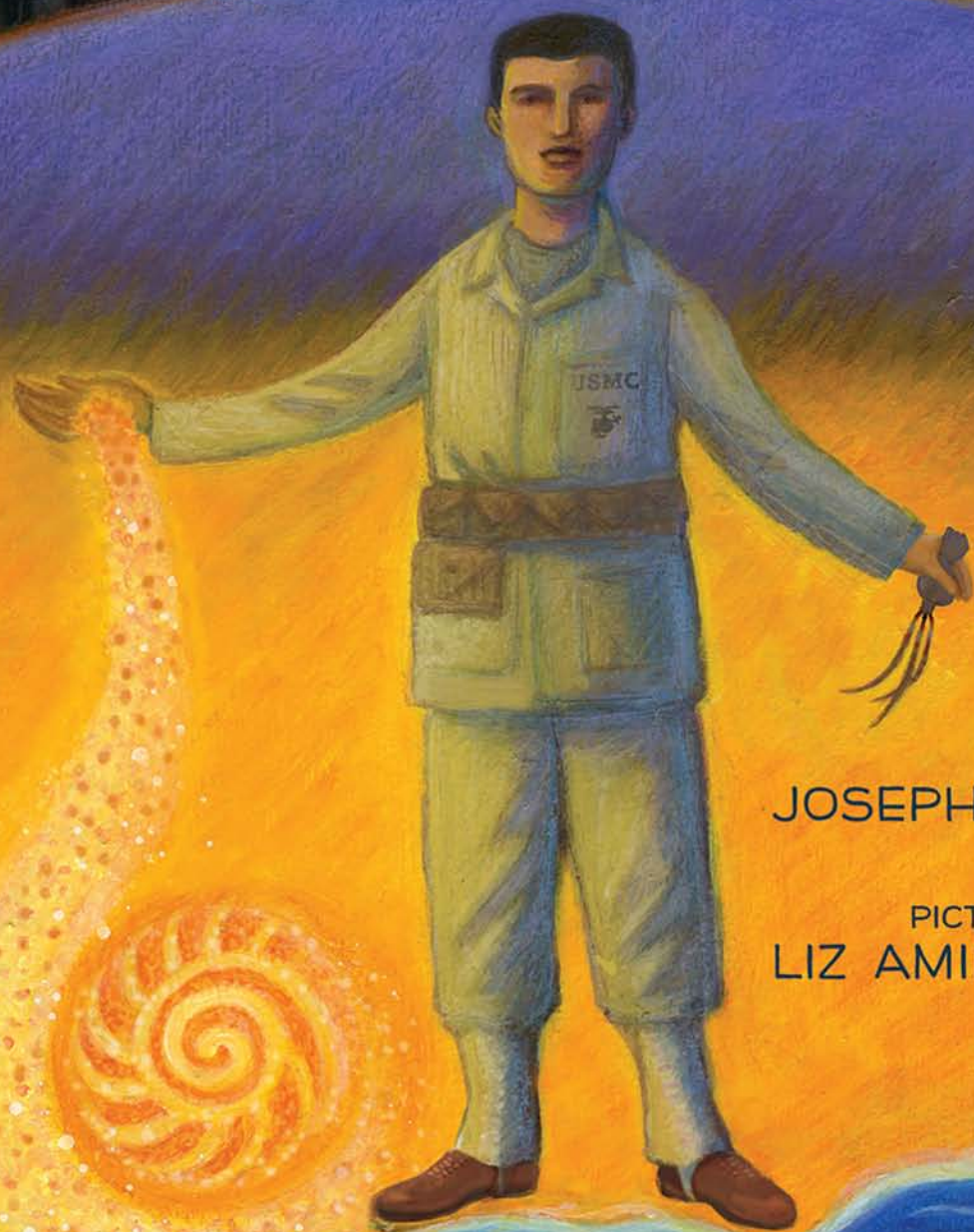


CHESTER NEZ AND THE UNBREAKABLE CODE

A NAVAJO CODE TALKER'S STORY



JOSEPH BRUCHAC

PICTURES BY
LIZ AMINI-HOLMES

Suddenly the language he had been told to forget was needed—to fight a war.

In 1929 Chester Nez was sent to boarding school, where his teachers taught him that his Navajo language and culture were useless. Yet he held on to them. While others forced Chester to conform to the white man's world, he found strength and comfort in the traditions of his people and still wanted to live the Right Way as a Navajo.

Then in 1942 the marines recruited Chester, along with other men who could speak Navajo, to help fight Japan in WWII. Though the United States had once fought against the Navajo, Chester knew America was his country too, and he was honored to protect his homeland. The marines needed a new military code that the enemy couldn't break, so Chester and the other Navajo soldiers worked to create a code using their language—a code that was integral to winning the war.

From award-winning author Joseph Bruchac, a powerful story about the life of one of the original Navajo code talkers.

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To my wife and constant inspiration: Nicola Marae Allain—JB
To my family that encircles me with love and support—LA-H

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OCTOBER 1929: MONTH OF SMALL WIND

When Betoli was eight years old, the time came for him to go to boarding school. He had to leave his family, his home, and the goats and sheep he loved and took care of.

He climbed into the back of the missionary's truck.

"You need an English name," the missionary said. Betoli's name was Navajo, like he was.

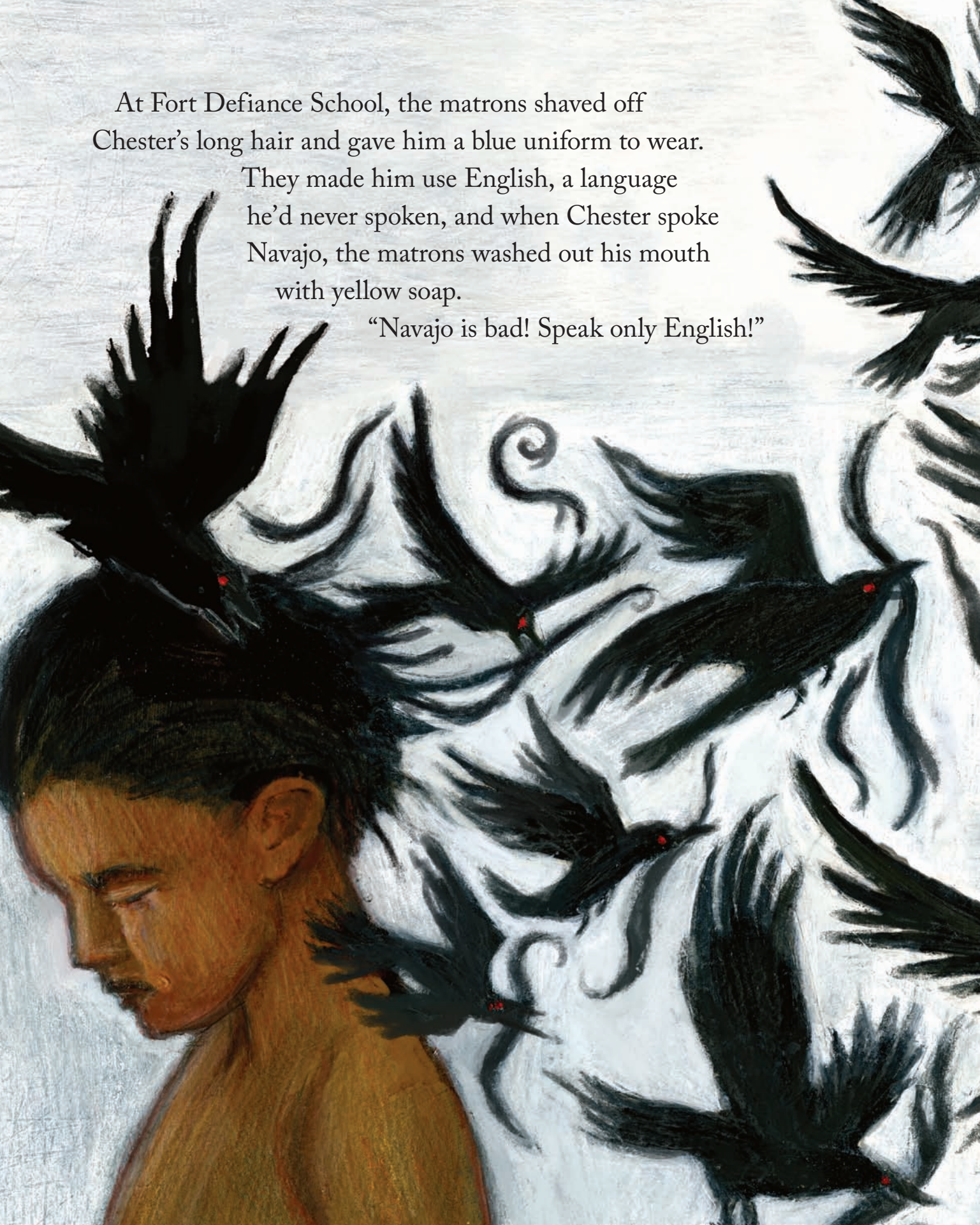
"You will be Chester," the man said.



At Fort Defiance School, the matrons shaved off
Chester's long hair and gave him a blue uniform to wear.

They made him use English, a language
he'd never spoken, and when Chester spoke
Navajo, the matrons washed out his mouth
with yellow soap.

"Navajo is bad! Speak only English!"





Many years earlier, in the 1860s, the US Army had held Navajos captive at Fort Defiance. From there, the army forced the Navajos to go on the Long Walk, a journey of 300 miles into what is now New Mexico. Many people suffered and died.

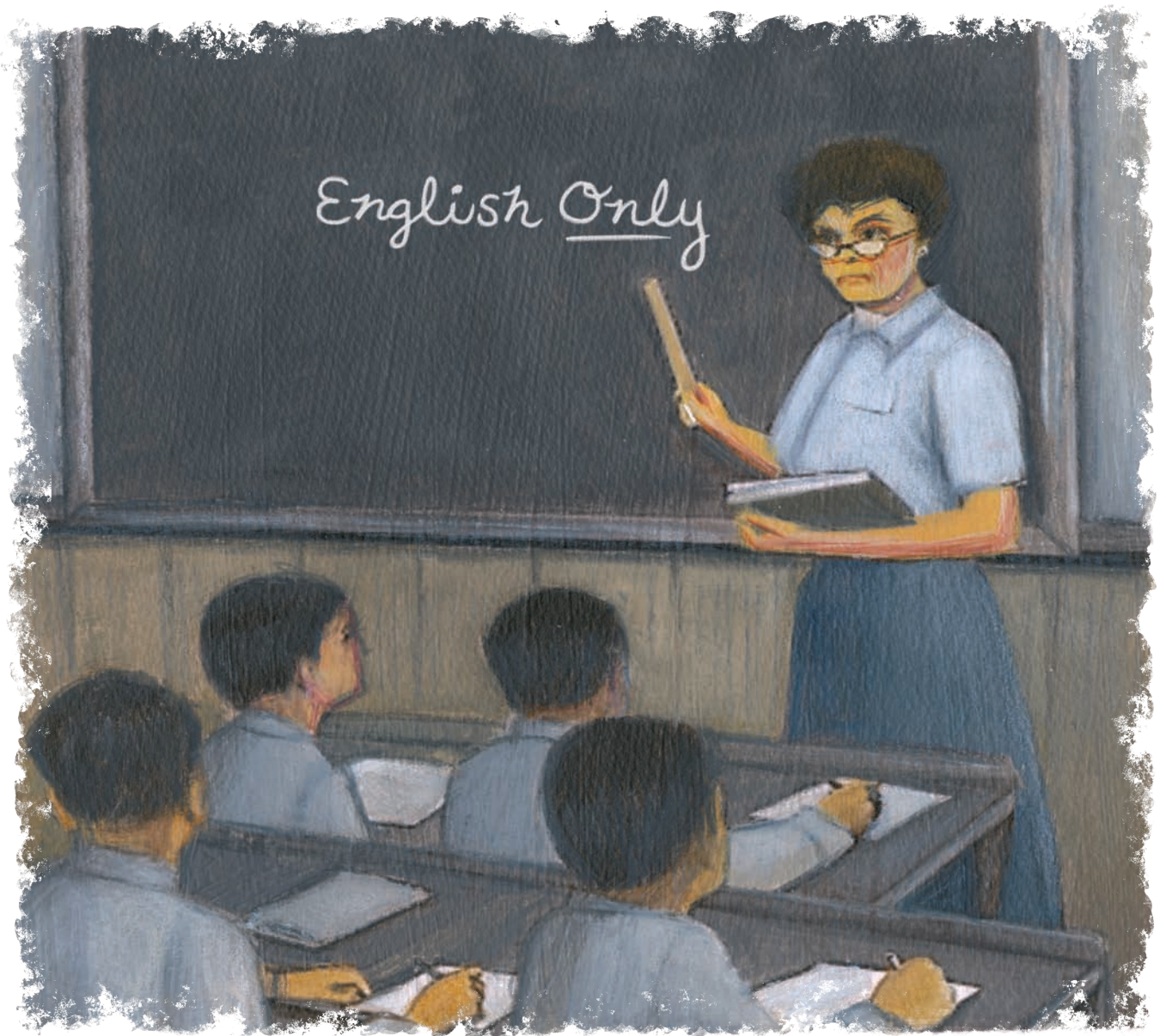
Fort Defiance was now a boarding school for Navajo children. But some of the youngest students had bad dreams because of the fort's history. Chester did his best to calm their fears at night. He reminded them they were not alone. They still had families back home.

JUNE 1932: MONTH OF BIG PLANTING

Over the summer, Chester returned home, where he could again speak the sacred language the Holy People had given the Navajos long ago. When he cared for the sheep and goats and prayed using corn pollen, he felt like a real Navajo, living the Right Way.

His heart was strong again. Being home took away the loneliness Chester felt at school.



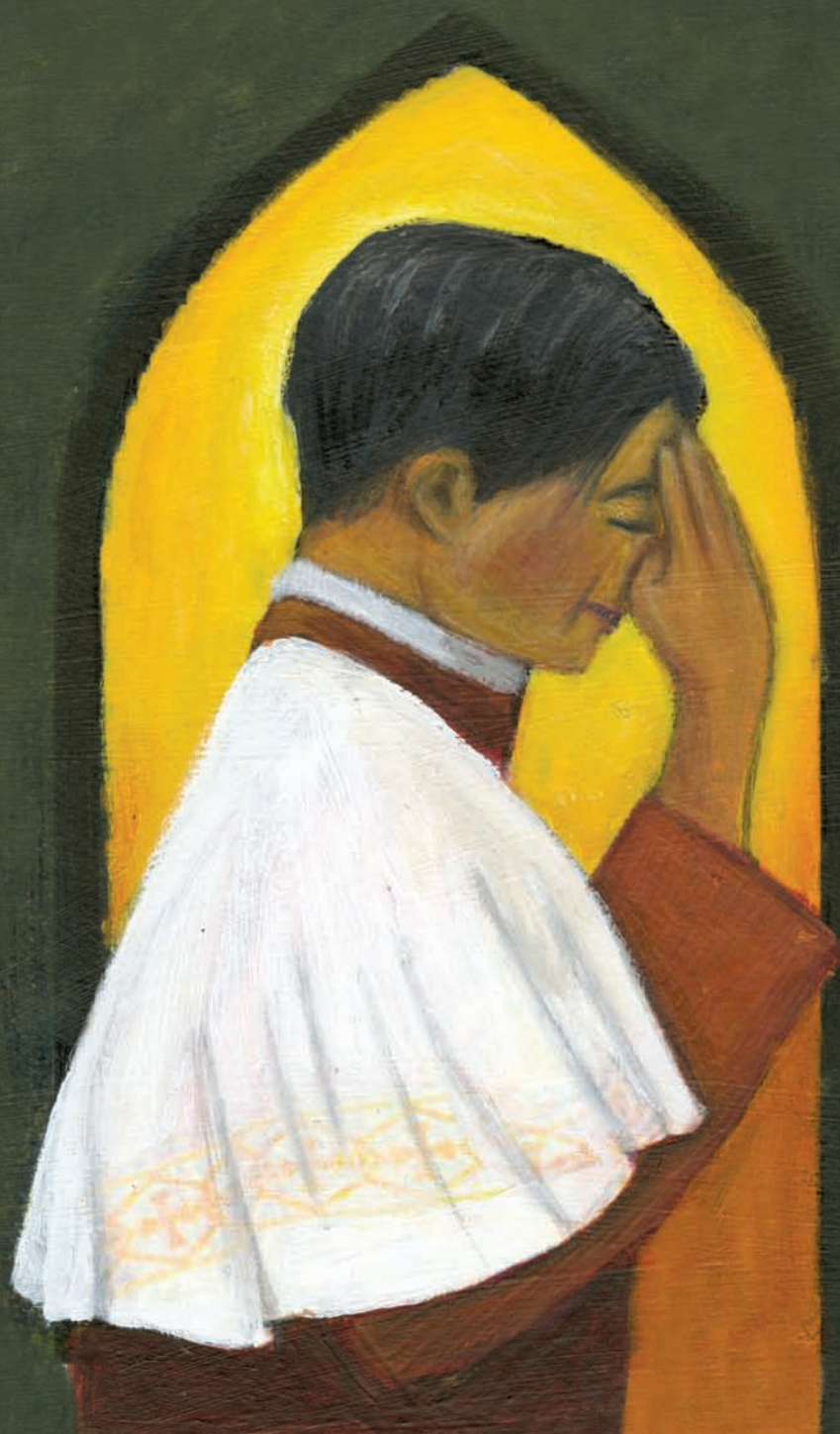


SEPTEMBER 1932: MONTH OF HALF

Chester returned to school, where he was again told his Navajo language was worthless.

“You must use only English to survive in the white man’s world!”
the matrons said.

Chester knew he might need to live in the white man's world one day. In that world speaking English was essential, so he worked hard and did well. Chester enjoyed learning and wanted to prove his worth. He also learned to pray the Catholic way and served as an altar boy. The Catholic way was good, but so was the Navajo way.



Though he spoke English in school, Chester kept his love for his Navajo people and their language. He decided to never break the ties that bound him to them.



DECEMBER 1941: MONTH OF CRUSTED SNOW

Chester was in tenth grade when the school principal called the students together.

“The Japanese Empire attacked us at Pearl Harbor,” he said.
“We are at war.”



The United States had fought the Navajos years ago, but now the United States was their country too. Chester thought about how his ancestors stood up against enemies. He should act with the same courage. Protecting his homeland was an honor.

“I am a warrior,” Chester said to himself. “I will fight for this land.”





APRIL 1942: MONTH OF BIG PLANT

Recruiters from the US Marines Corps came to the Reservation. “We need Navajo men who speak English and Navajo,” they said.

The US military needed a new way to send its secret messages. The messages were sent in code over the radio, but since anyone’s radio could receive those messages, the enemy could hear them too. The Japanese had broken every American code. The marines tried using a coding machine, the Shackle, to create an unbreakable code, but the machine took too long to encode and decode messages.

Then a former army soldier, a missionary's son who had once lived on the Navajo reservation, suggested using Navajo, a language almost impossible for non-Navajos to speak.

The marines agreed to try it.

Many Navajos volunteered to join the marines, but only twenty-nine were chosen, including Chester. They became Platoon 382.

Suddenly the language he had been told to forget was important. Chester was proud he had never given up speaking Navajo.





JUNE 1942: MONTH OF BIG PLANTING

After basic training, Platoon 382 went to Camp Elliott near San Diego. An officer took the platoon into a room. “Create an unbreakable code,” he told them. “Start by choosing one word for every letter of the English alphabet.”

Then the officer left, locking the twenty-nine men in that room. Chester wondered how they would begin.

Then one of the men, Gene Crawford, spoke up. He knew how military codes worked. “Make every word clear and different from every other,” he said to the others.

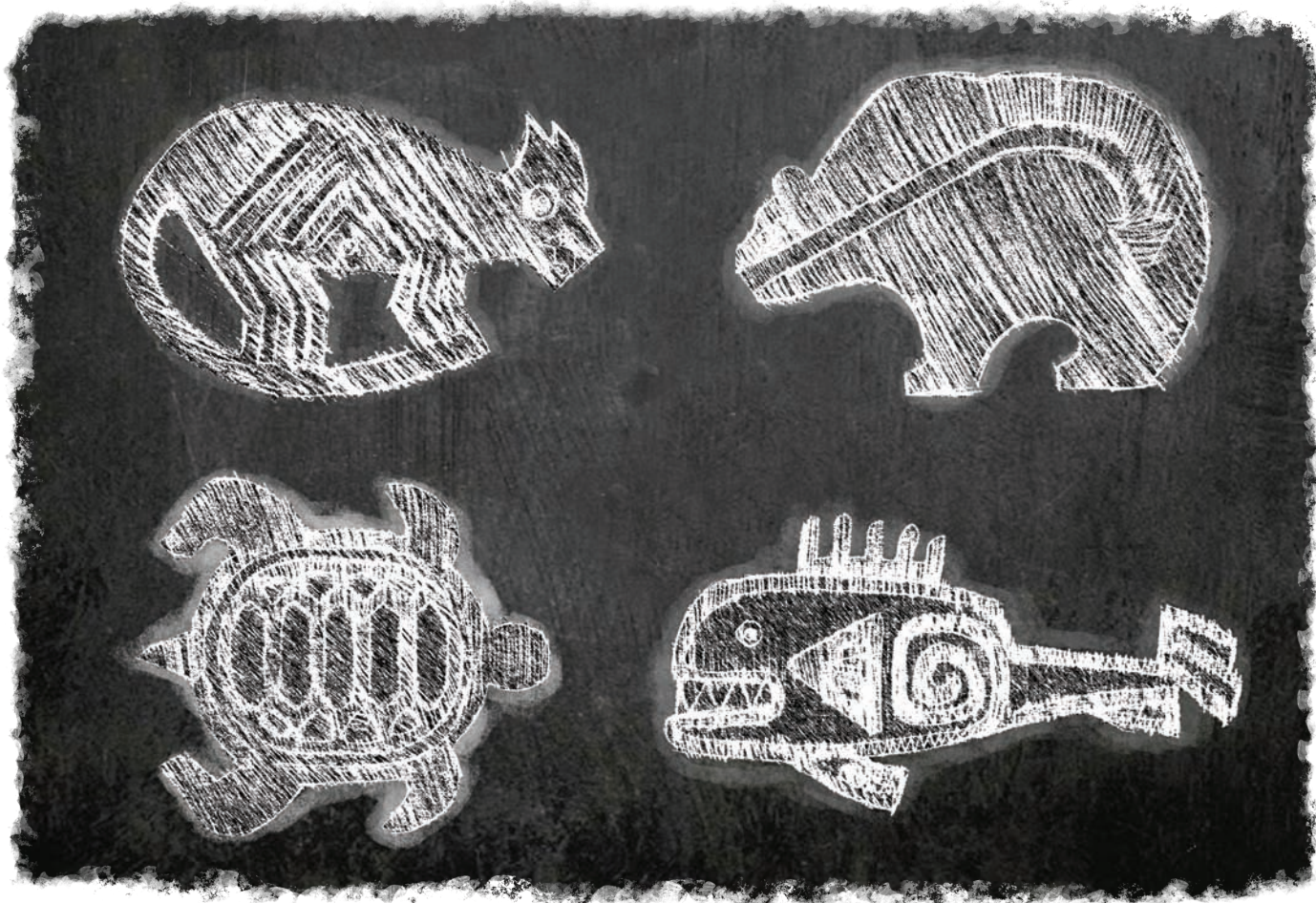
They used English words for each letter of the alphabet. *A* was *ant*. *B* was *bear*. *C* was *cat*. Then they chose the Navajo words for each of those English words. *Ant* was *Wol-la-chee*. *Bear* was *Shush*. *Cat* was *Moasi*.

By the end of the first day, they had the whole alphabet.

A few weeks later, three more Navajo men joined the team.

Now thirty-two soldiers were creating the code and learning to use it.

Instead of spelling out some items in the English alphabet, they chose Navajo words to represent them. *Battleship* became *lo-tso*, which means “whale.” *Bombs* were *a-ye-shi*, or “eggs.” There was a lot to remember, but Chester enjoyed what they were doing and had an excellent memory.





SEPTEMBER 1942: MONTH OF HALF

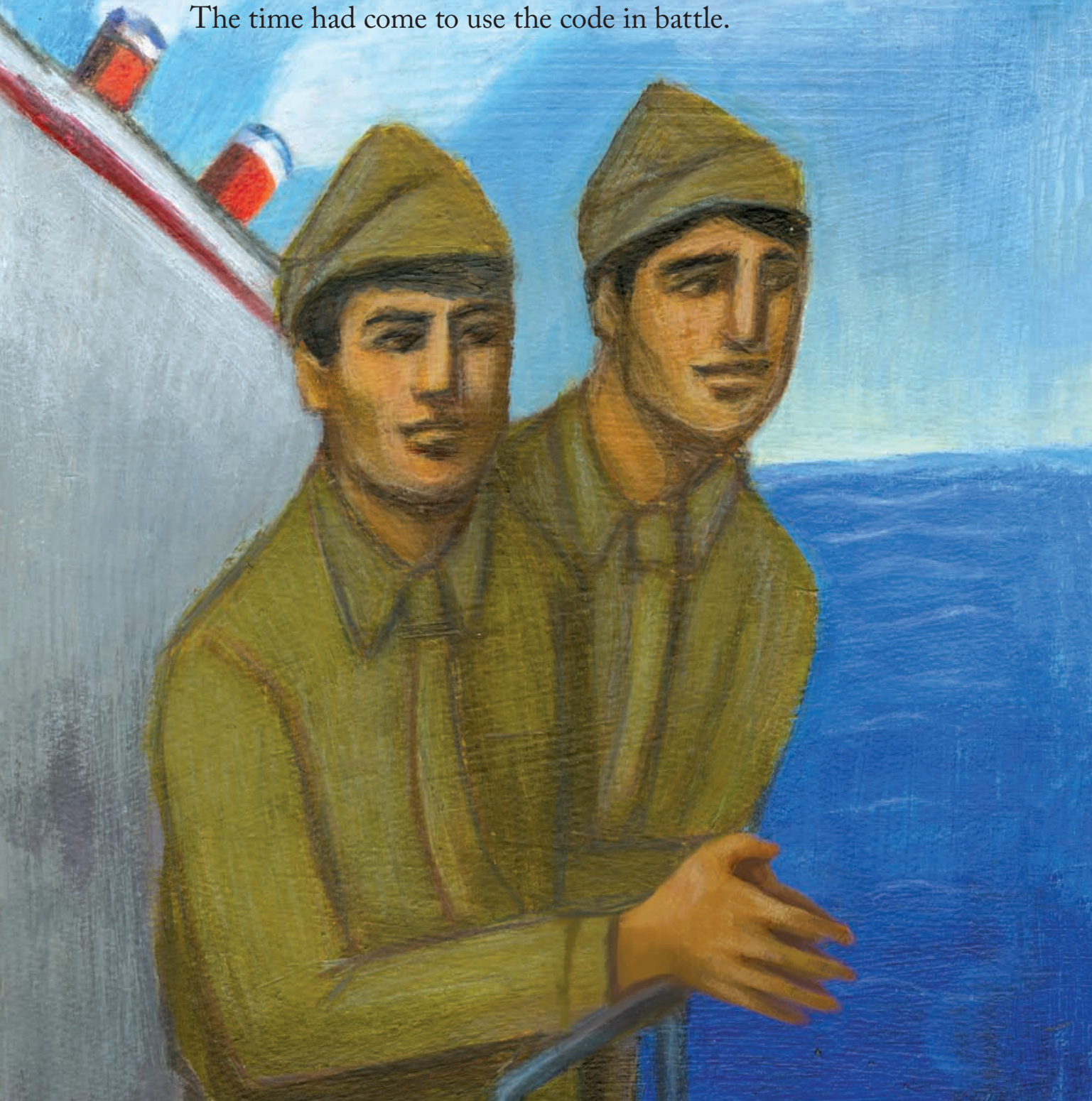
After thirteen weeks, Platoon 382 demonstrated their code to marine officials.

Expert code breakers could not break it. The code was strong.

The code was efficient too. The Shackle code machine took four hours to encrypt and decrypt a message Navajos could send and receive in less than three minutes. The Navajo language solved the marines' communications problem.

The military ordered the platoon to keep the code a secret.
Only commanders and officers knew about the Navajo code.

Two men stayed behind to teach new Navajo recruits while
Chester and the rest of the code talkers shipped out to the Pacific.
The time had come to use the code in battle.



When their boat reached the island of Guadalcanal, Chester and his partner Roy Begay waded ashore. They dug a foxhole in the sand, and then they were ready. When a runner handed them their first message, they radioed it to two code talkers on the ship offshore.



“Beh-na-ali-tsosie (enemy) a-knah-as-donih ah-toh (machine gun nest) nish-na-jih-goh dah-di-kad (on your right flank). Ah-deel-tahi (Destroy).”



Minutes after their message was received, artillery fire hit the machine gun nest. Chester shouted, “You see that?” Their Navajo code was working!

Chester and the other code talkers sent messages on Guadalcanal for many months, until the Japanese were defeated. Then they were sent to other islands in the Pacific.





The soldiers saw terrible things in combat. They dodged artillery fire, witnessed explosions, and watched men die. Chester was worn out and ill but kept working.

Every day he prayed in Navajo, using corn pollen from his medicine bag. The Navajo way gave him strength and helped him survive until he could go home.



JANUARY 1945: MONTH OF SMALL EAGLE

Chester was finally home.

But he'd seen too much death. He felt at times as if he were dead too.

Chester could not tell anyone, not even his family, about the Navajo code. It was still a secret.

Keeping that secret brought back the loneliness that hurt so much when he first went to school.

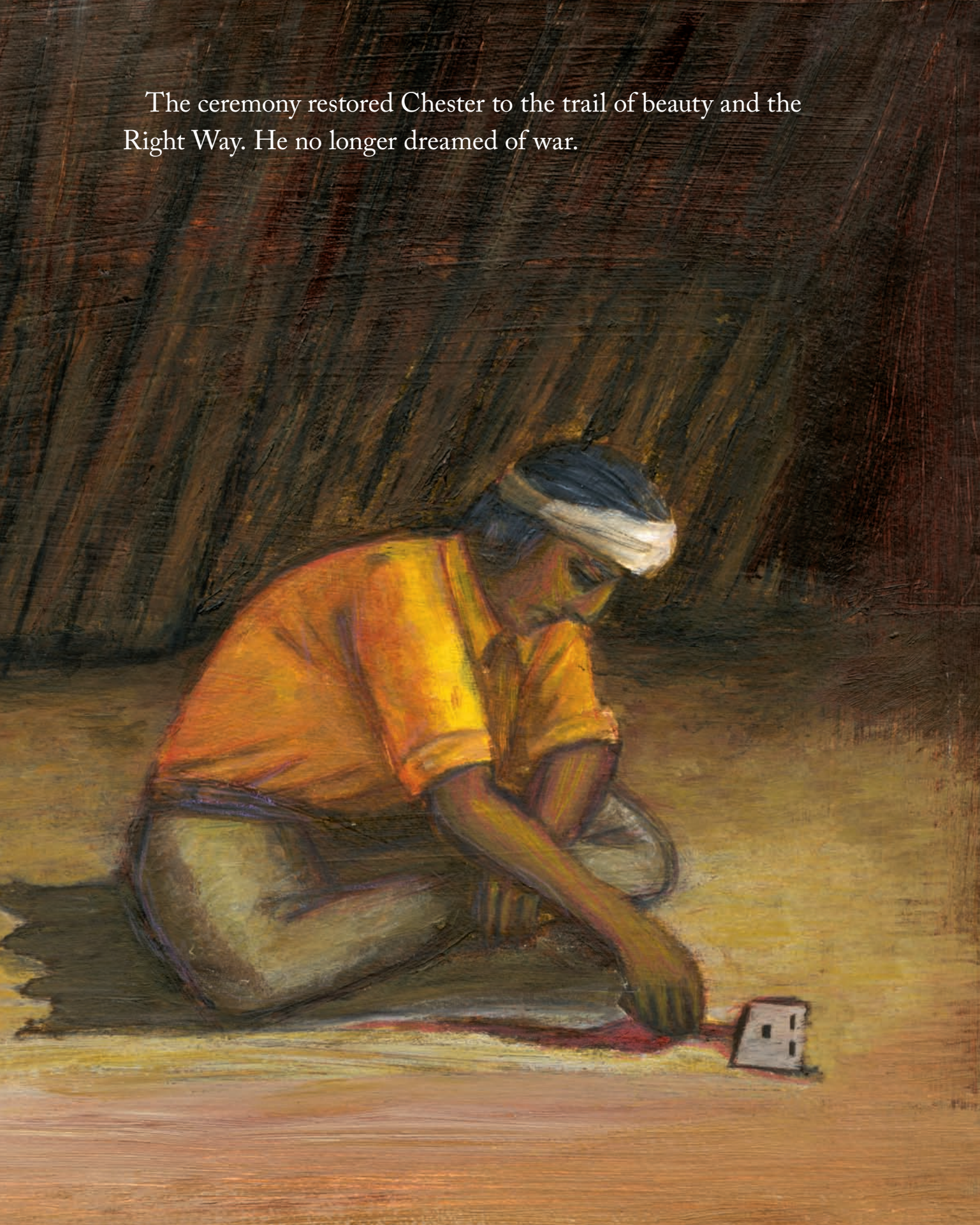


Chester's family knew he needed help. They arranged an Enemy Way, a four-day-long ceremony to help someone exposed to the evil of war.

This ceremony was also done for children returning from boarding schools like Fort Defiance. Chester knew that being at school, with its military structure and harsh discipline, was similar to enduring war.



The ceremony restored Chester to the trail of beauty and the Right Way. He no longer dreamed of war.



SEPTEMBER 1945: MONTH OF HALF

Eight months after Chester came home, the Japanese surrendered and the war was over. The Navajo code had been vital to the war effort. Code talkers had served with every marine unit.

By the end of the war, more than 400 Navajos had served as code talkers. They had been told in school that their language was no good, but they had proven that wasn't true.

The Navajo code helped win World War II.







Like his people who survived the Long Walk, Chester had never forgotten his Navajo heritage.

Despite being told to give up his Navajo language and culture, he found ways to merge them with the white man's world.

His spirit stayed unbroken.

He kept his feet on the trail of beauty.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Chester Nez went on to serve stateside in the Korean War, from which he was discharged as a corporal. Chester also continued his schooling at the University of Kansas from 1946 to 1952, where he studied commercial art. He married, had children, and gained a reputation as an artist without telling anyone about his role as a code talker.

Years passed and still Chester and the other Navajo code talkers kept their secret.

Finally in 1968, the military decided that with new technology, the Navajo code was no longer needed. The code was declassified, and their secret was released after twenty-nine years.

In 1982, President Ronald Reagan declared August 14 National Code Talkers Day, and more people began to learn their story. In December 2000, President Bill Clinton signed into law an act honoring the code talkers. The original twenty-nine were given gold medals, and all the code talkers who followed were given silver ones.

Chester appreciated being invited to the White House and being given those honors. But what he felt best about was that he had been able to live the Right Way as a Navajo, holding on to his language and traditions despite being told in school to give up his culture.

Eventually, with the help of Judith Avila, Chester decided to tell his story. It was published in 2011 as the book *Code Talker: The First and Only Memoir by One of the Original Navajo Code Talkers of WWII*.

Chester was the last survivor of the twenty-nine original Navajo recruits who created the unbreakable code. He passed away on June 4, 2014, at the age of ninety-three at his home in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Chester's name and that of hundreds of other Navajo men who served as code talkers in World War II can be seen on the bricks of the Veterans' Memorial in Window Rock, Arizona, in the heart of the enduring Navajo Nation.

THE NAVAJO CODE

(A portion of the code from the Naval History and Heritage Command)

ALPHABET	NAVAJO WORD	LITERAL TRANSLATION
A	WOL-LA-CHEE	Ant
B	SHUSH	Bear
C	MOASI	Cat
D	LHA-CHA-EH	Dog
E	AH-JAH	Ear
F	MA-E	Fox
G	AH-TAD	Girl
H	TSE-GAH	Hair
I	TKIN	Ice
J	AH-YA-TSINNE	Jaw
K	KLIZZIE-YAZZIE	Kid
L	AH-JAD	Leg
M	NA-AS-TSO-SI	Mouse
N	A-CHIN	Nose
O	NE-AHS-JAH	Owl
P	CLA-GI-AIH	Pant
Q	CA-YEILTH	Quiver
R	GAH	Rabbit
S	DIBEH	Sheep
T	D-AH	Tea
U	SHI-DA	Uncle
V	A-KEH-DI-GLINI	Victor
W	GLOE-IH	Weasel

X

AL-NA-AS-DZOH

Cross

Y

TSAH-AS-ZIH

Yucca

Z

BESH-DO-TLIZ

Zinc

Battleship

LO-TSO

Whale

Bomb

A-YE-SHI

Eggs

Craft

AH-TOH

Nest

Cruiser

LO-TSO-YAZZIE

Small Whale

Demolition

AH-DEEL-TAHI

Blow Up

Destroyer

CA-LO

Shark

Flank

DAH-DI-KAD

Flank

Grenade

NI-MA-SI

Potatoes

Machine Gun

A-KNAH-AS-DONIH

Rapid-Fire Gun

Submarine

BESH-LO

Iron Fish

January

ATSAH-BE-YAZ

Small Eagle

February

WOZ-CHEIND

Squeaky Voice

March

TAH-CHILL

Small Plant

April

TAH-TSO

Big Plant

May

TAH-TSOSIE

Small Plant

June

BE-NE-EH-EH-JAH-TSO

Big Planting

July

BE-NE-TA-TSOSIE

Small Harvest

August

BE-NEEN-TA-TSO

Big Harvest

September

GHAW-JIH

Half

October

NIL-CHI-TSOSIE

Small Wind

November

NIL-CHI-TSO

Big Wind

December

YAS-NIL-TES

Crusted Snow

TIMELINE

- 1921** Born January 23 in New Mexico
- 1929** Sent to boarding school at Fort Defiance, Arizona
- 1942** Enlists in the Marine Corps
- 1945** World War II ends; Chester leaves active duty and becomes part of the Marine Reserves
- 1946** Attends the University of Kansas to study commercial arts
- 1951** Called to active duty for Korean War
- 1952** Discontinues studies at the University of Kansas when his GI bill runs out
- 1968** Navajo code declassified
- 1974** Retires from working as a painter at the Raymond G. Murphy Veterans Affairs Medical Center
- 1982** President Ronald Reagan proclaims August 14 Navajo Code Talkers Day
- 2000** Legislation to honor Navajo Code Talkers passes Congress and is signed by President Bill Clinton on December 21
- 2001** Original twenty-nine Navajo Code Talkers receive the Congressional Gold Medal of Honor from President George W. Bush
- 2011** Writes memoir, *Code Talker: The First and Only Memoir by One of the Original Navajo Code Talkers of WWII*, with Judith Avila
- 2012** Awarded honorary degree from the University of Kansas
- 2014** Chester Nez dies at the age of ninety-three on June 4





As a writer and storyteller, **JOSEPH BRUCHAC** often draws on his Native American (Abenaki) ancestry. He's been researching—and meeting—Navajo code talkers for

over two decades. Joseph is the author of more than 130 books for young readers and adults, including *Code Talker: A Novel about the Navajo Marines of World War Two*. He holds a bachelor's degree from Cornell University, a master's degree from Syracuse University, and a doctorate from the Union Institute. Joseph lives in Greenfield Center, New York. Visit him online at www.josephbruchac.com.



LIZ AMINI-HOLMES painted and drew as a child, but she was also interested in becoming an archaeologist, a paranormal researcher, an

astronaut, and a detective with Scotland Yard. However, she decided working as an artist was way more fun than any of those jobs and required a lot less math. Liz is the illustrator of the multi-award-winning *Fatty Legs: A True Story* and *A Stranger at Home* and has been fortunate to create children's books and illustrations on many multicultural topics. She lives with her family in Woodside, California. Visit her website at www.lunavilla.com.

**Chester Nez was a boy told to give up his Navajo roots.
He became a man who used his native language to help America to victory.**



"To be productive citizens, our children must learn the authentic history of our great nation from a young age. This is a fine retelling of the Chester Nez story for a young audience. It evokes Navajo culture and shows how important the contributions made by Native Americans are to our country."—Judith Schiess Avila, co-author of *Code Talker: The First and Only Memoir by One of the Original Navajo Code Talkers of WWII*

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