

# Comprehension

## Genre

**Historical Fiction** tells a story in which fictional characters take part in actual historical events from the past.



## Generate Questions

### Author's Perspective

Look for clues that reveal the author's point of view. As you read, use your Author's Perspective Chart.

Clues	Author's Point of View

## Read to Find Out

How does the author feel about the Navajo language?



# *The Unbreakable Code*

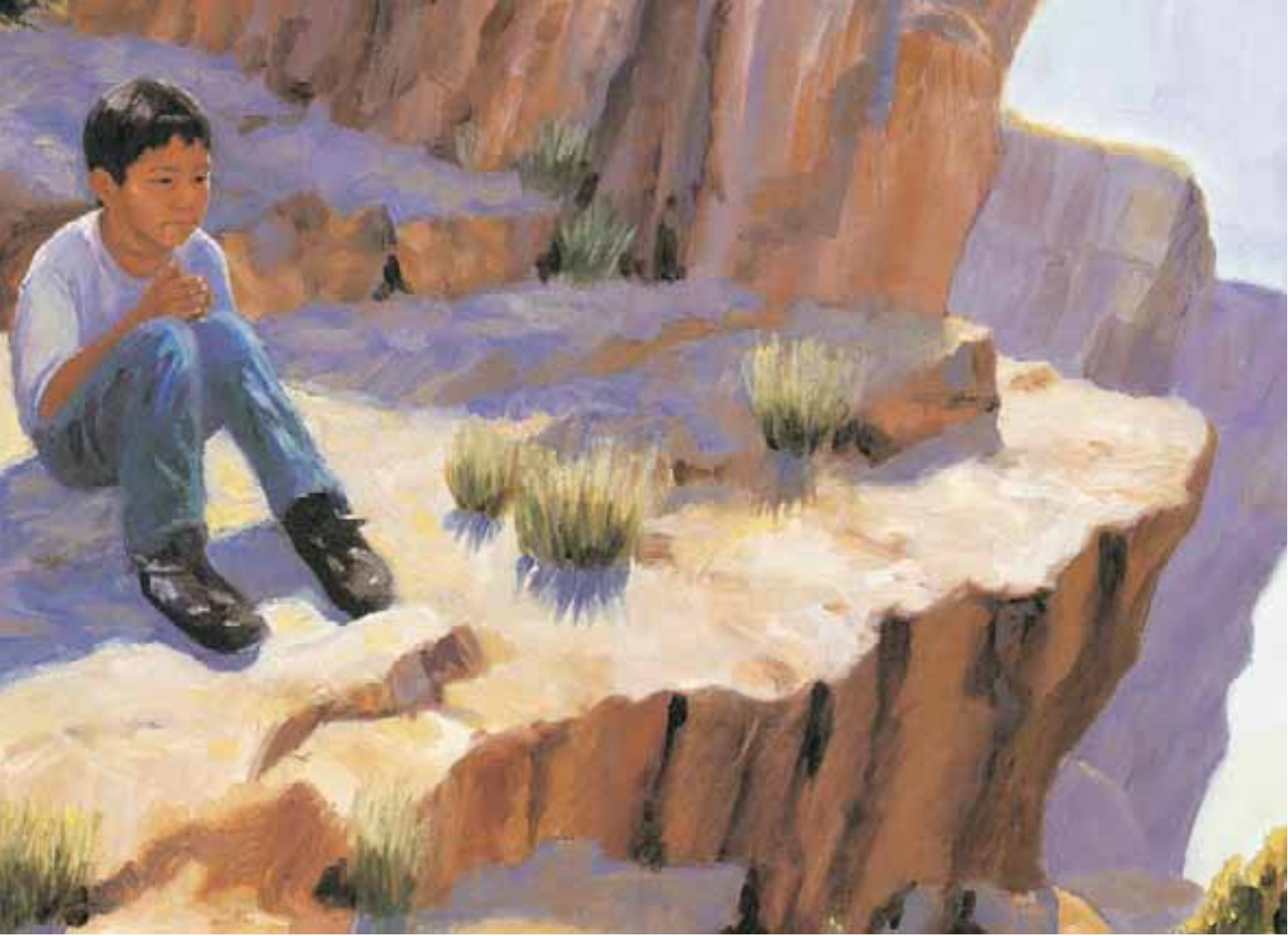
by Sara Hoagland Hunter ♦ illustrated by Julia Miner



Award  
Winning  
Selection







John raced up the trail, sending pebbles skidding behind him. When he reached his favorite hiding place, he fell to the ground out of breath. Here between the old piñon tree and the towering walls of the canyon, he felt safe. The river full of late-summer rain looked like a silver thread winding through his grandfather's farm land. They would be looking for him now, but he was never coming down.

His mother had married the man from Minnesota. There was nothing he could do about that. But he was not going with them. He closed his eyes and rested in the stillness. The faint bleat of a mountain goat echoed off the canyon walls.

Suddenly a voice boomed above him: “Shouldn’t you be packing?”

John’s eyes flew open. It was his grandfather on horseback.

“Your stepfather’s coming with the pickup in an hour.”

“I’m not going,” John said.

“You have to go. School’s starting soon,” said Grandfather, stepping down from his horse. “You’ll be back next summer.”

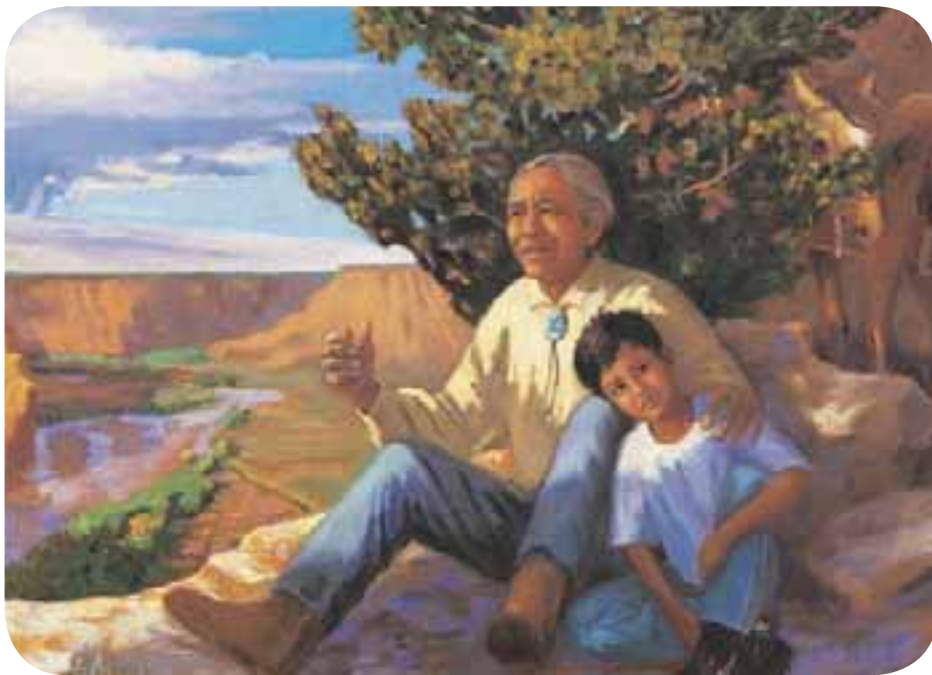
John dug his toe deeper into the dirt. “I want to stay with you,” he said.

Grandfather’s soft, brown eyes disappeared in the wrinkles of a smile. John thought they were the kindest eyes he had ever seen.

“You’re going to be all right,” Grandfather said. “You have an unbreakable code.”

“What’s that?” asked John.

Grandfather sat down and began to speak gently in Navajo. The sounds wove up and down, in and out, as warm and familiar as the patterns of one of Grandmother’s Navajo blankets. John leaned against his grandfather’s knee.



“The unbreakable code is what saved my life in World War II,” he said. “It’s the Navajo language.”

John’s shoulders **sagged**. Navajo couldn’t help him. Nobody in his new school spoke Navajo.

“I’ll probably forget how to speak Navajo,” he whispered.

“Navajo is your language,” said his grandfather sternly. “Navajo you must never forget.”

The lump in John’s throat was close to a sob. “You don’t know what it’s like there!” he said.

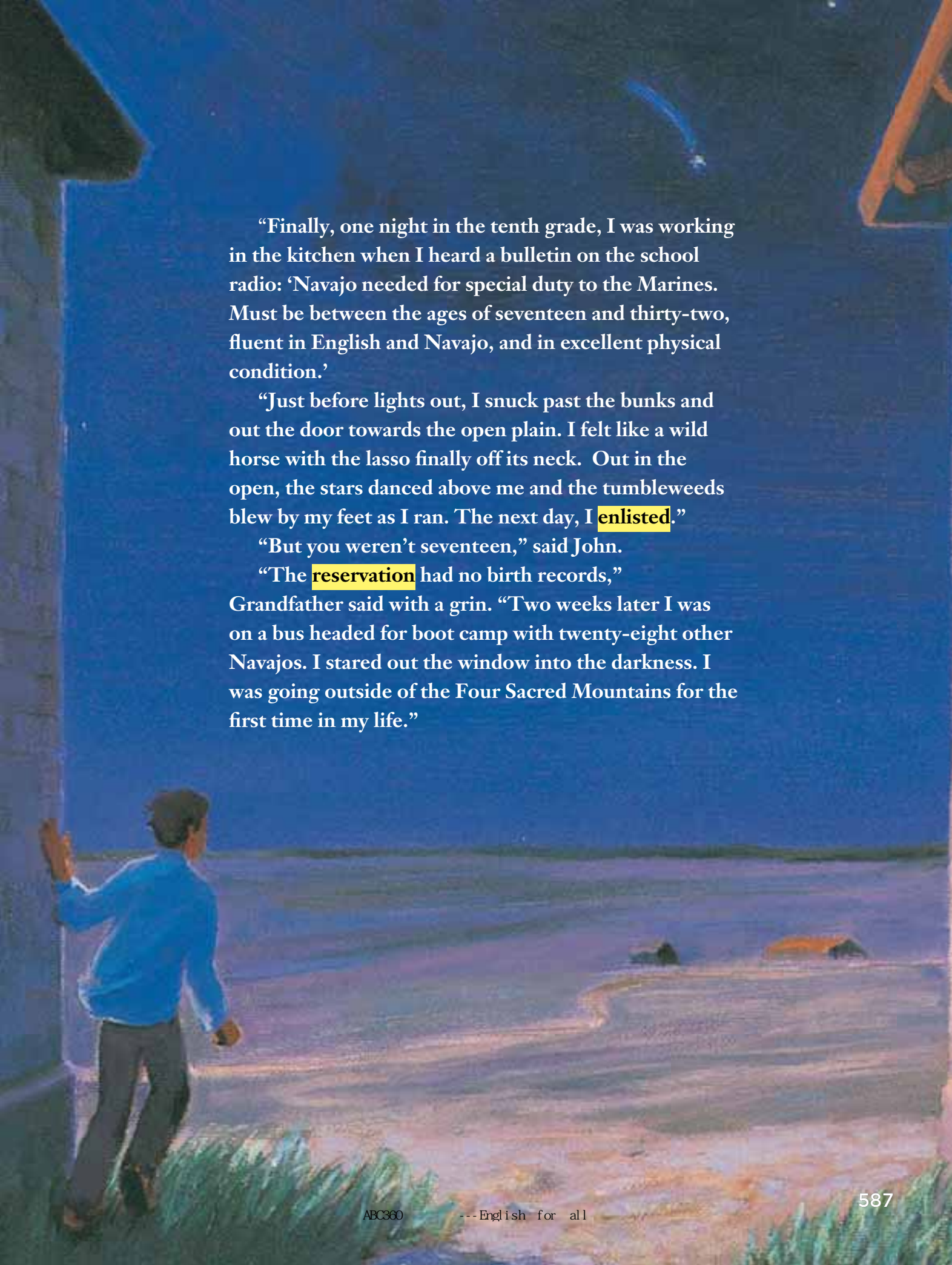
His grandfather continued quietly in Navajo. “I had to go to a government boarding school when I was five. It was the law.

“They gave me an English name and cut my hair off. I wasn’t allowed to speak my language. Anyone who spoke Navajo had to chew on squares of soap. Believe me, I chewed a lot of soap during those years. ‘Speak English,’ they said. But Navajo was my language and Navajo I would never forget.

“Every summer I went home to herd the sheep and help with the crops. I cried when the cottonwoods turned gold and it was time to go back.







“Finally, one night in the tenth grade, I was working in the kitchen when I heard a bulletin on the school radio: ‘Navajo needed for special duty to the Marines. Must be between the ages of seventeen and thirty-two, fluent in English and Navajo, and in excellent physical condition.’

“Just before lights out, I snuck past the bunks and out the door towards the open plain. I felt like a wild horse with the lasso finally off its neck. Out in the open, the stars danced above me and the tumbleweeds blew by my feet as I ran. The next day, I **enlisted**.”

“But you weren’t seventeen,” said John.

“The **reservation** had no birth records,” Grandfather said with a grin. “Two weeks later I was on a bus headed for boot camp with twenty-eight other Navajos. I stared out the window into the darkness. I was going outside of the Four Sacred Mountains for the first time in my life.”

“Were you scared?” asked John.

“Of course,” said his grandfather. “I didn’t know where I was going or what our mission was. Most of all, I didn’t know how I would measure up to the people out there I had heard so much about.”

“How did you?” asked John, chewing his fingernail.

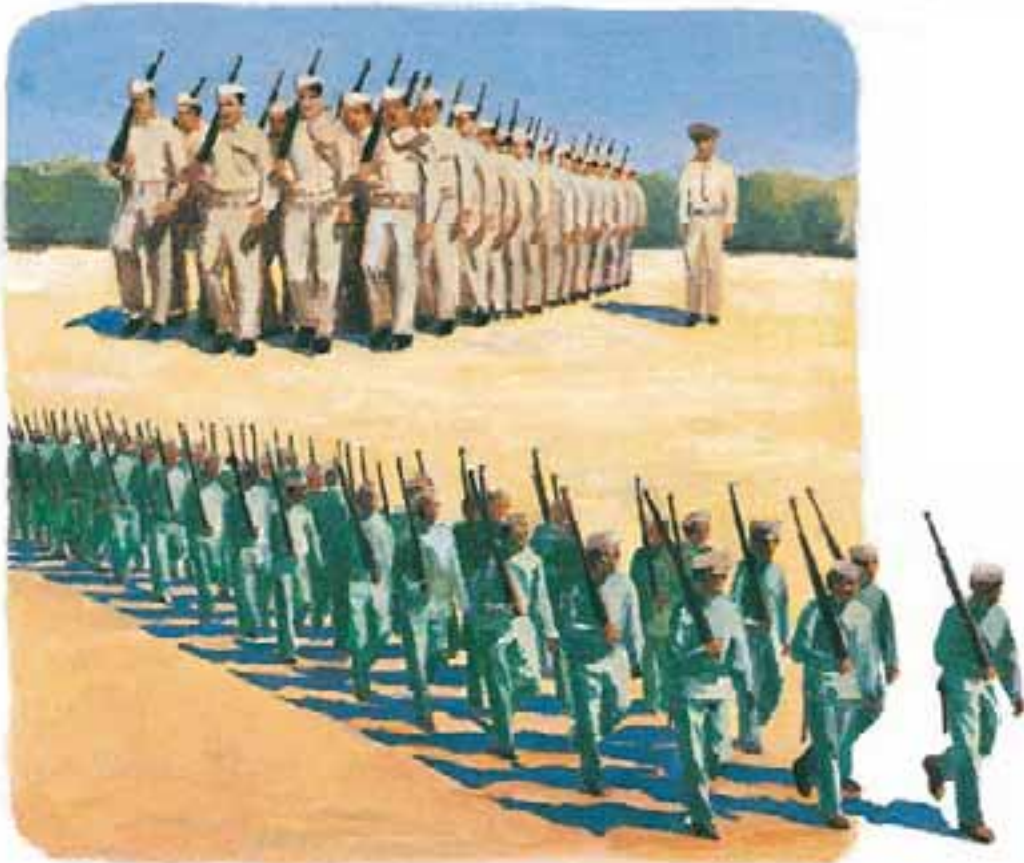
His grandfather began to laugh. “We were known as the toughest platoon at boot camp. We had done so much marching at boarding school that the drills were no problem. Hiking in the desert of California with a heavy pack was no worse than hauling water in the canyon in midsummer. And I’d done that since I was four years old.

“As for the survival exercises, we had all gone without food for a few days. A Navajo learns to survive.



### Author’s Perspective

What clues reveal how the author feels about the Navajo platoon?





“One weekend they bused us to a new camp in San Diego. On Monday we were marched to a building with bars on every window. They locked us in a classroom at the end of a long, narrow **corridor**. An officer told us our mission was top secret. We would not even be allowed to tell our families. We were desperately needed for a successful **invasion** of the Pacific Islands. So far the Japanese had been able to intercept and decode all American messages in only minutes. This meant that no information could be passed between American ships, planes, and land forces.

“The government thought the Navajo language might be the secret weapon. Only a few outsiders had ever learned it. Most importantly, the language had never been written down, so there was no alphabet for the Japanese to discover and decode.

“He gave us a list of more than two hundred military terms to code. Everything had to be memorized. No trace of the code could ever be found in writing. It would live or die with us in battle.

“When the officer walked out of the room, I looked at the Navajo next to me and began to laugh. ‘All those years they told us to forget Navajo, and now the government needs it to save the country!’



“We were marched every day to that classroom. We were never allowed to leave the building. We couldn’t even use the bathroom by ourselves. Each night, an officer locked our notes in a safe.

“The code had to be simple and fast. We would have only one chance to send each message. After that, the Japanese would be tracing our **location** to bomb us or trying to record the code.

“We chose words from nature that would be easy to remember under fire. Since Navajo has no alphabet, we made up our own. ‘A’ became *wollachee*.” “Ant?” asked John in English.

Grandfather nodded.

“‘B’ was *shush*.”

“Bear,” said John.

“‘C’ was *moasi*. ‘D’, *be*. ‘E’, *dzeb*.” His grandfather continued through the alphabet. Each time he named the Navajo word, John answered with the English.

“We named the aircraft after birds. The dive-bomber was a chicken hawk. The observation plane was an owl. A patrol plane was a crow. Bomber was buzzard.

“At night we would lie in our bunks and test each other. Pretty soon I was dreaming in code.





“Since we would be radiomen, we had to learn all kinds of radio operations. We were taught how to take a radio apart and put it together blindfolded. The Japanese fought at night, so we would have to do most of our work in complete darkness. Even the tiniest match flame could be a target.

“When the day came for the code to be tested in front of the top Marine officers, I was terrified. I knelt at one end of a field with our radio ground set. The officers marched towards me. Behind a building at the other end of the field, another code talker sat under military guard waiting for my transmission. One officer handed me a written message:

“‘Receiving steady machine gun fire. Request reinforcements.’

“It took only seconds for me to speak into the microphone in Navajo code. The officer sent a runner to the end of the field to check the speed and accuracy of the message. The Navajo at the other end handed him the exact message written in English before he even came around the corner of the building! They tested us over and over. Each time, we were successful. The government requested two hundred Navajo recruits immediately. Two of our group stayed behind to train them. The rest of us were on our way.”



“Tell me about the fighting!” said John.

Suddenly Grandfather’s face looked as **creased** and battered as the canyon walls behind him. After a long pause he said, “What I saw is better left back there. I would not want to touch my home or my family with those pictures.

“Before we invaded, I looked out at that island. It had been flattened and burned. ‘Let this never happen to a beautiful island again,’ I thought. I just stayed on the deck of the ship thinking about the ceremonies they were doing for me at home. We invaded at dawn.

“I almost drowned in a bomb crater before I even got to shore. I was trying to run through the water and the bullets when I felt myself sinking into a bottomless hole. My eighty-pound radio pack pulled me straight down. I lost my rifle paddling to the surface.

“On the beach, it was all I could do just to survive. I remember lying there with gunfire flying past my ears. A creek that ran to the beach was clear when I first lay there. By noon it was blood red.

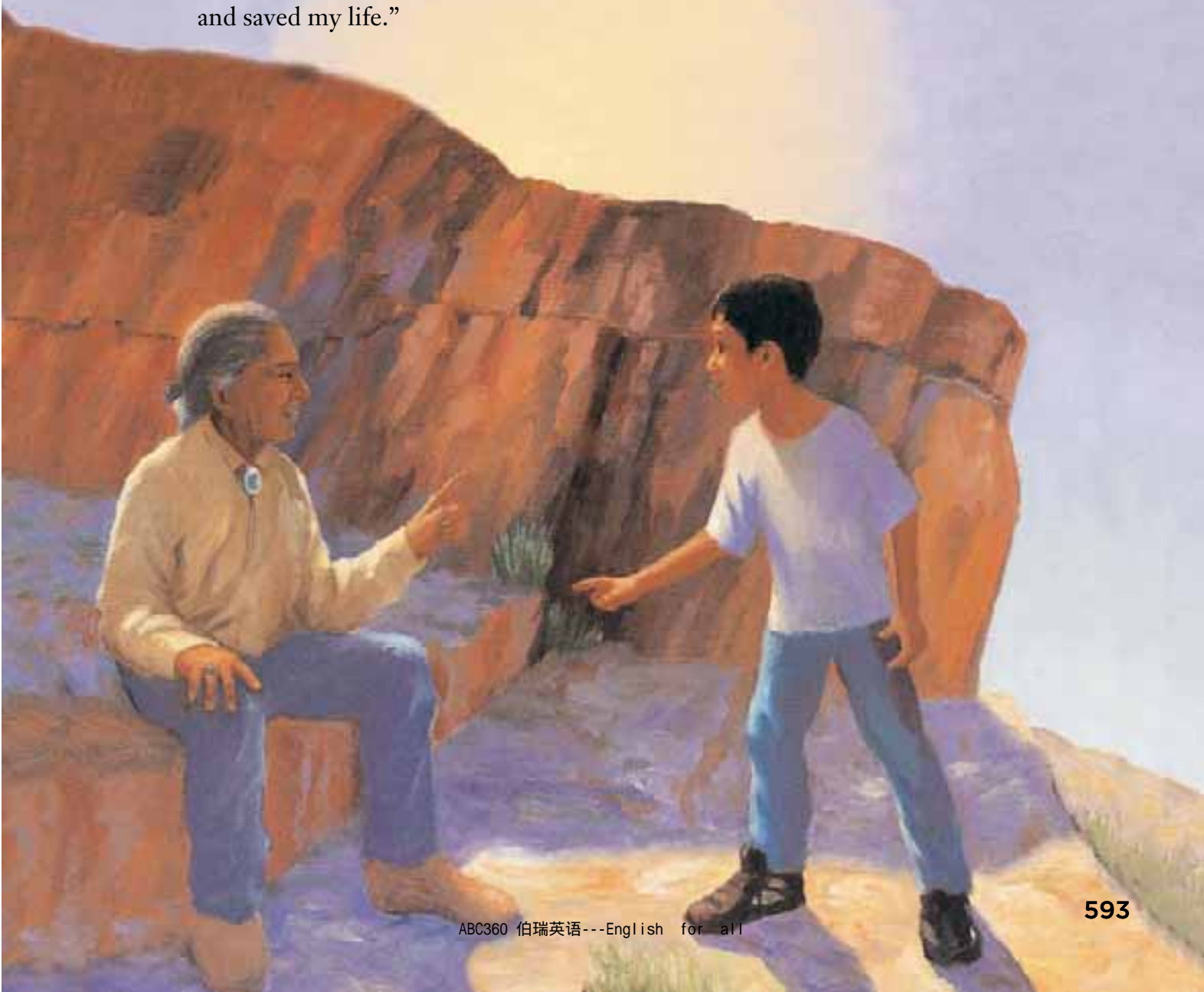


“The worst were the fallen soldiers I had to run over to go forward. I couldn’t even stop to say I was sorry. I just had to run over them and keep going.

“I had to move through the jungle at night, broadcasting in code from different locations. One unit needed medical supplies. Another needed machine-gun support. I had just begun broadcasting to another code talker. ‘Arizona! New Mexico!’ I called. The next thing I knew, an American soldier behind me was yelling, ‘Do you know what we do to spies?’

“Don’t shoot!’ I said. ‘I’m American. Look at my uniform.’ He didn’t believe me. He had just heard the foreign language. He had seen my hair and my eyes. Japanese spies had been known to steal uniforms from fallen soldiers.

“One of my buddies jumped out of the bushes right at that moment and saved my life.”







“How did you stay alive the rest of the time?” asked John.

“My belief was my **shield**,” Grandfather answered.

He drew a ragged wallet from deep inside of his shirt pocket. “Inside of this, I carried corn pollen from the medicine man. ‘Never be afraid,’ he said. ‘Nothing’s going to touch you.’ And nothing ever did. More than four hundred code talkers fought in some of the bloodiest battles of World War II. All but a few of us survived.



“The Japanese never did crack the code. When they finally discovered what language it was, they captured and tortured one poor Navajo. He wasn’t a code talker and couldn’t understand the message they had intercepted. He told them we were talking about what we ate for breakfast. Our code word for bombs was ‘eggs’.

“Six months before the war ended, Navajo code talkers passed more than eight hundred messages in two days during the invasion of Iwo Jima.





“When the American flag was raised on top of Iwo Jima’s mountain, the victory was announced in code to the American fleet. ‘Sheep-Uncle-Ram-Ice-Bear-Ant-Cat-Horse-Itch’ came the code.”

John tried to spell out the letters.

“Suribachi?” asked John.

“Yes,” said Grandfather. “Mount Suribachi.

“When I came home, I walked the twelve miles from the bus station to this spot. There weren’t any parades or parties.

“I knew I wasn’t allowed to tell anyone about the code. I looked down at that beautiful canyon floor and thought, ‘I’m never leaving again.’”

“But why did you leave in the first place?” asked John.

His grandfather lifted him gently onto the horse. “The answer to that is in the code,” he said. “The code name for America was ‘Our Mother.’ You fight for what you love. You fight for what is yours.”

He swung his leg behind John and reached around him to hold the reins.

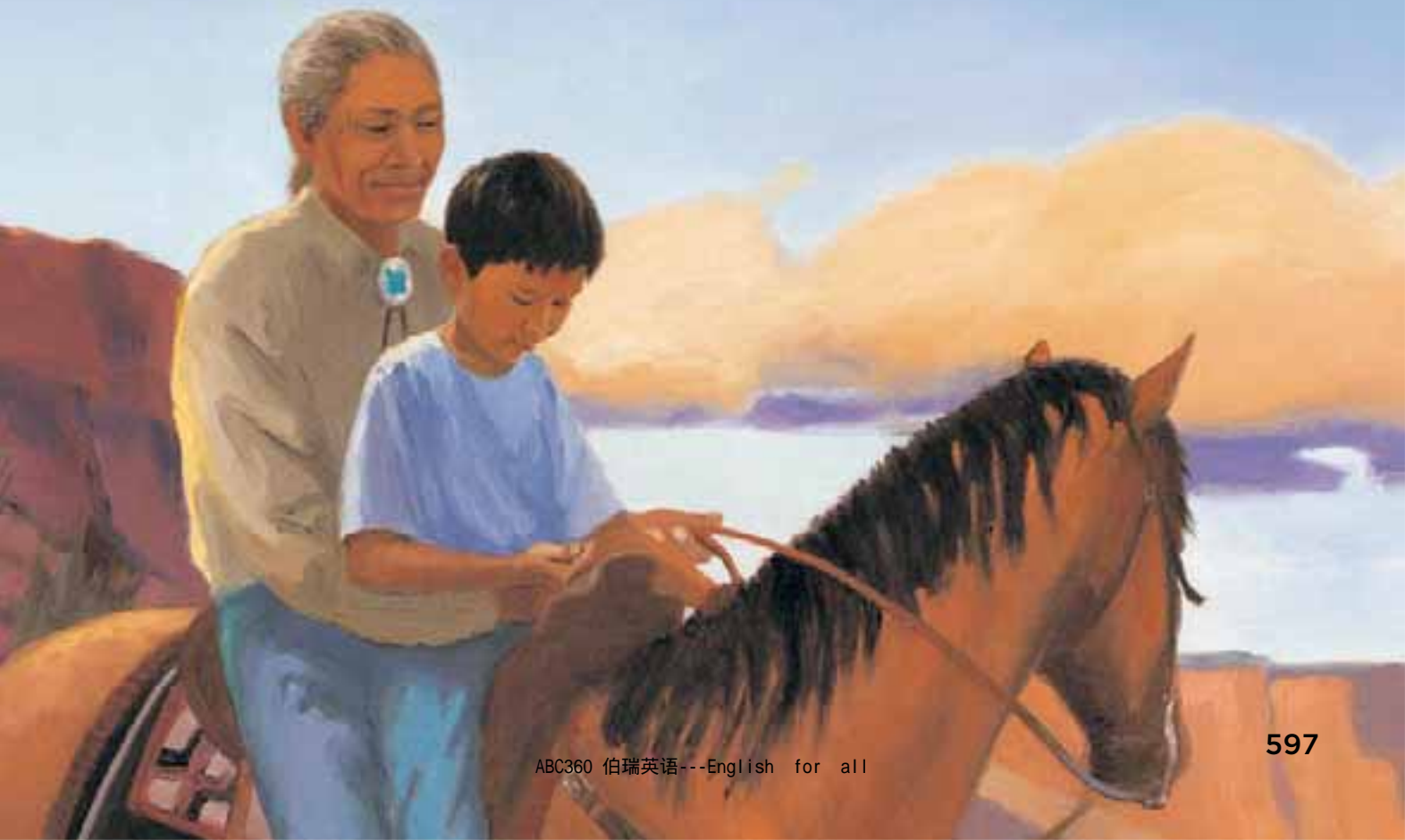
“Keep my wallet,” he said. “It will remind you of the unbreakable code that once saved your country.”

John clutched the wallet with one hand and held the horse’s mane with the other. He wasn’t as scared of going to a new place any more. His grandfather had taught him who he was and what he would always have with him. He was the grandson of a Navajo code talker and he had a language that had once helped save his country.



### Author's Perspective

How does the author feel about the Navajo code talkers? How can you tell?





# Decoding the Facts about Sara Hoagland Hunter and Julia Miner



***Sara Hoagland Hunter*** was a teacher and a journalist before she combined her interests and started her own company. Today she writes and produces books as well as videos, scripts, and albums for children. For this book Sara interviewed the “code talkers.” She found them kind and strong, and she felt privileged to be able to tell their story.

***Julia Miner*** became interested in illustrating this book when her college classmate Sara Hoagland Hunter told her about the idea. They made several trips to Arizona to meet with actual code talkers, which helped them capture the spirit of the Navajo code talkers’ experience. Besides illustrating children’s books, Julia is an architect and writer. Often she travels to different countries for inspiration for her illustrations.



Find out more about Sara Hoagland Hunter and Julia Miner at [www.macmillanmh.com](http://www.macmillanmh.com)

## Author’s Purpose

This selection is historical fiction. Which parts of the story are based on real events? How well does the author inform readers about those events? Explain.



# Comprehension Check



## Summarize

Understanding an author’s perspective can help you organize ideas and make judgments about the piece you are reading. Use your Author’s Perspective Chart to help you write a summary of *The Unbreakable Code*.

Clues	Author's Point of View

## Think and Compare



1. Use the Author’s Perspective Chart to describe how the author feels about the Navajo code talkers. Explain how the story would change if the author felt differently about the subject. **Generate Questions: Author’s Perspective**
2. Reread page 594. What is Grandfather’s belief? How was it like a **shield** during the war? **Analyze**
3. Describe why you would or would not like to have been a Navajo code talker. Explain your answer. **Apply**
4. Grandfather says that “You fight for what you love.” Explain why you agree or disagree with his statement. Include examples from your experience in your answer. **Evaluate**
5. Reread “Rita, the Storyteller” on pages 580–581. In what ways are Rita’s and John’s family histories and traditions similar? In what ways are they different? Use examples from both selections to support your answer. **Reading/Writing Across Texts**

