

# NAVAJO CODE TALKER

BY BEN FENWICK

JUST A TEENAGER  
IN AN INDIAN  
BOARDING  
SCHOOL  
WHEN JAPAN  
BOMBED PEARL  
HARBOR,  
SAM BILLISON  
WAS DESTINED  
TO PLAY  
A PIVOTAL ROLE  
IN WINNING  
THE WAR.

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Courtesy: The National Archives

Cpl. Henry Bahe Jr., left, and Pfc. George H. Kirk, Navajo Code Talkers serving with a Marine Signal Unit, operate a portable radio set in a clearing they have hacked in the dense jungle close behind the front lines.



Iwo Jima: few places can conjure such a vision. Who has not seen the World War II picture of Marines raising the triumphant American flag on rocky, volcanic Mount Surabachi? In the end, the battle of Iwo Jima cost 6,821 American lives and another 20,000 wounded, and among the Japanese, 20,000 lives were lost. This ferocious battle was so terrible it led the U.S. High Command to drop the atomic bomb to avoid even worse casualties in an invasion of Japan.

Despite this high toll, the Marines won with a lot less blood than might have been spilled had it not been for the now-legendary Navajo Code Talkers. In fact, without them, the Marines might not have won at all.

“Were it not for the Navajo, the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima,” said Major Howard Connor, a 5th Marine Division signal officer in that battle who commanded a group of six Code Talkers, including Sooner alumnus Samuel Billison.

“We were fighting for our land,” says Billison, a 1954 OU master’s graduate. “We were fighting for our mother, the Earth. We were fighting for our country, and we were Marines.”

Billison’s land was the Navajo reservation, which covers parts of Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. Now living in Window Rock, Arizona, Billison grew up in and around Gallup, New Mexico, in the sunburned desert struck with painted canyons, jutting sandstone chimneys and storm-washed arroyos. Billison says that like all Navajo boys in those times he was sent away to a special boarding school where Indians were taught to read, write and speak English. Moreover, the boys were punished if



they spoke Navajo—and the United States nearly lost one of its better secret weapons.

But the language, and Billison, persevered. It was close. Before Billison graduated high school, the Japanese launched the December 7, 1941, sneak attack on Pearl Harbor. Like the rest of America then, word reached the Navajo reservation by radio or newspaper. The image of the battleship Arizona sinking into the harbor while smoke roiled above her inflamed not only white Americans, but Native Americans as well.

“Most Native Americans, including the Navajo, think the United States is our country. We call it our mother land,” Billison says. “When the war broke out, the Native Americans were the first to enlist because of the feeling that the land is our mother. The philosophy, the prayer, the religion . . . a lot of prayers mention the Earth is our mother. That’s the reason that we fight.”

The United States had been caught unprepared. In addition to being outmanned, outgunned and outsmarted in the early days of the war, the U.S. was also out-coded. The Japanese long before had broken the coding system of the Pacific fleet and regularly decoded sensitive materials sent by radio. Vital information—whether troop movements, shipping routes or defensive preparations—was laid bare before a wily enemy, an enemy cutting through American forces with alarming speed. Within weeks the Japanese landed in the Philippines, menacing the American forces there led by General Douglas MacArthur. After MacArthur escaped under the cover of night, the American fortress of Corrigidor fell, and the survivors began their long nightmare of captivity with the 300-mile Bataan Death March through the jungle. Times were desperate, and many Americans thought they might not win.

Into this critical time came Billison and the other Navajo.

“When we started, the Japanese had broken our codes,” Billison says. “They knew where our ships were, the troops and the air movements. That’s why we needed the Indian language.”

A man named Phillip Johnston, raised

on a Navajo reservation, saw the need for a good coding system and knew that Navajo could fill the bill. He knew that in World War I, the U.S. Army had used Choctaws from southeastern Oklahoma to transmit sensitive material, so he wrote a letter to pitch his idea.

“Twenty-two years of residence among the Navajo Indians. . . has enabled me to become fluent in the language of this tribe,” Johnston wrote. “It occurred to me that the Navajo language might be ideally suited to use by the Marine Corps for code in oral communication.”

Such a code could be unbreakable because it was only known in the United States and then only among the approximately 50,000 Navajo. Using intona-

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Pfc. Carl Gorman, a Navajo from Chinle, Arizona, mans an observation post on a hill overlooking the city of Garapan while the Marines were consolidating their positions on the island of Saipan, Marianas.

tion, guttural sounds and other inflection, Navajo has another major advantage—it wasn’t written.

“Navajo is not a written language,” Billison says. “We don’t have an alphabet or numbering system. I can tell you something in Navajo, but I can’t write it down.”

Desperate for any advantage, the Marines took Johnston up on his offer. But there was resistance, Billison says.

“The officers didn’t like it,” Billison says. To some of the officers, the Indians

looked almost Asian and their language was unintelligible. “They thought at first the Japanese were taking over their communications.”

The value of using a language as a code, however, quickly became apparent. To encrypt a message in the usual way, a complex process was required, replacing each character written in the English alphabet and numbering system with a different letter or symbol developed from an intricate matrix based on a mathematical logarithm. Using the communications methods of the time, encoding and decoding was long and tedious—just the thing a commander did not need to deal with in the heat of battle.

“When you send something in English, it is put into a code. Then it’s transmitted,” Billison says. “When it’s received, it gets handed to an officer who deciphers that code. Then it goes to another officer to see if it was the day’s code, then it goes to another officer to see if it was from the right place, then it goes to another officer to see if it was the right message. Then it gets handed to a general. It took almost two hours for the general to see the message.”

Johnston hurriedly brought four Navajo together for a demonstration. They had to put together a code using the Navajo language. They made up terms for things that do not exist in Navajo, like “submarine” or “dive bomber.” Then the Marines put it to the test.

“When we sent the message, it took two and a half minutes,” Billison says. “From two hours to two minutes. The officer said, ‘Well, let’s keep them damn Indians.’ That’s how we got started.”

The Marines developed the code with a core of 29 original Navajo Code Talkers. Billison enlisted in 1943 and was immediately put through boot camp, then sent to signal school. The Marines taught the Code Talkers not only combat techniques, but also all the aspects of communications. They learned Morse code, semaphore and ship-to-ship communications. Before the war’s end, the Marines had enlisted more than 400 Navajo Code Talkers. A group of 17 Comanche served in Europe as U.S. Army Code Talk-

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Navajo communications men with the Marines on Saipan landed with the first assault waves to hit the beach. From left are Cpl. Oscar B. Iithma, Gallup, New Mexico; Pfc. Jack Nez, Fort Defiance, Arizona; and Pfc. Carl C. Gorman, Chinle, Arizona.

ers, as did members of several other tribes.

By the time Billison had worked his way through the service, the Navajo code had grown. Based on a phonetic alphabet method, a Navajo word was substituted for each letter of the English alphabet. For instance, "A" would be sent by a Navajo Code Talker saying the Navajo word for "Ant"—Wol-la-chee. "Bear," or the Navajo word "Shush," stood for the letter "B." Thus, words could be spelled out in Navajo and decoded by another Navajo, but *only* another Navajo. Even then, that Navajo would have to know what was being intended by the message. To make the code even more secure, there was not just one substitute for each letter; there were three. If a message had to be repeated, the sender used a different replacement the second time around.

"If you kept saying 'ant, ant, ant,' the Japanese would catch it right away," Billison says. "They were known to be very good code breakers."

Billison says other words meant specific things. A fighter plane was "Da-hi-ti-he," or "hummingbird." Navajo words for flying things meant aircraft, swim-

ming things meant ships, and crawling things were for land operations.

Thus, the original 29 Code Talkers designed an unbreakable code.

"Those young boys, they must have been gifted," Billison says. "They came up with a code nobody broke. Not the Japanese, not the Marines, not the Navy, not even other Navajo. You had to study the code to know what was being sent."

The U.S. forces had to battle hard to beat the Japanese across the Pacific. As the war progressed, the Japanese fought harder, refusing to surrender their garrisons on the island bases. Guadalcanal, Saipan, Tinian, Guam. All fell in pitched battles with high casualties. Billison's turn came in one of the worst battles of World War II—the battle for Iwo Jima.

"Iwo Jima was vital," Billison says. The island's three airstrips, which were being used for Kamikaze attacks, were essential for attacking the Japanese mainland. "The (American) B-29 bombers were flying from Tinian and Guam, and it was a very long distance to Japan."

Because of that long distance, the fighters were unable to escort the bombers into Japanese air space, leaving the bomb-


ers vulnerable to Japanese fighter attacks.

"With the airstrips at Iwo Jima, the fighters could escort them to Japan then come back and land at Iwo Jima," Billison says.

Iwo Jima was bombed for weeks in preparation for the battle, completely deforesting the 8-square-mile island. But the bombing and naval barrage had lesser effect than the American Pacific command knew. The Japanese hid in extensive underground fortifications. Japanese guns on the towering, fortified volcano, Mount Surabachi, commanded a clear view of the Marines as they landed.

On February 19, 1945, the invasion of Iwo Jima began. The first wave did not encounter resistance upon landing, but soon found themselves trapped. When the beach was full, with many easy targets, the Japanese opened up and gunned men down. The advancing Marines and their equipment sank knee deep in the blistering, black sands of the beach; they were unable to move forward for hours.

"It was volcanic ash," Billison says. "For the first wave it took quite a long time. You couldn't walk or run. You had to crawl on all fours to get up to ground



that was stable. That's where the Japanese really took advantage, and we lost a lot of casualties, both man and machine."

Code Talkers landing on the island acted as forward observers, calling in artillery strikes against positions that were causing the Marines problems. Code Talkers on land would radio positions to a command ship offshore, their messages then given to the admirals and generals. A new strike plan would be drawn, then the information transmitted back onto the shore—all without being tapped by the Japanese, to whom such information would have proven decisive.

"My company went in on either the first or second wave. We helped Code Talkers on what we called command ships. We would get the coordinates on the map where we'd want the ships to hit, then send the coordinates," Billison says. "Some of us went in on the first day, second day or third day. The first two or three days were really heavy. I think I went in the second day."

By the end of the battle, Billison and other Code Talkers had transmitted more than 800 messages error-free. A captured Japanese officer later declared that the code breakers on the island had broken all the other codes—but not the Marines' Code Talkers.

In all, it took 36 days to defeat the Japanese garrison on the island. That battle, and the following battle of Okinawa were so bloody that they swayed the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

"We had just gotten our orders, that we were going to land on the big island of Japan on November 7," Billison says. "I saw the maps with the fortifications, and we were preparing to land. But when they dropped those bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we knew the war would be over."

The Navajo were brought home at the end of the war but told their part in it was classified.

"They told us, 'Say nothing about the

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Courtesy: Office of Senator Jeff Bingaman

OU Alumnus Samuel Billison, left, president of the Navajo Code Talkers Association, meets in Washington, D.C., with New Mexico Senator Jeff Bingaman, who sponsored the legislation awarding Congressional Gold and Silver Medals to the Navajo Code Talkers, 57 years after their heroic World War II service.

code. If anyone asks you, say you fought with the Marines,' " Billison says.

The code remained a secret that Billison and the other Code Talkers kept for more than 20 years.

After the war, Billison decided to take advantage of his benefits with the GI Bill. Oklahoma colleges and universities were known to be Indian-friendly, so Billison came to Oklahoma. He first attended East Central in Ada, receiving a bachelor's degree. He worked at a hotel in Wewoka for a little spending cash. Then in 1954, he attended the University of Oklahoma, where he garnered his master's degree. He earned his doctorate in education from the University of Arizona. With no one knowing his true wartime contribution, Billison went to work as a school principal and later was elected to the Navajo Tribal Council. Finally, in 1968, the Marines declassified the code.

"Suddenly we all got these phone calls, with people saying, 'Hey, you were a Code Talker. You did a great thing. Come to us so we can honor you,' " Billison says.

It took much longer, however, before the wheels of the U.S. Government would turn out official recognition of the Code

Talker contribution to the war effort. In a July 26, 2001, ceremony in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda, by an act of Congress sponsored by New Mexico Senator Jeff Bingaman, the original Code Talkers were awarded Congressional Gold Medals. With only five of the heroes still living, the awards, however appreciated, were bittersweet.

"It's too bad the U.S. took so long to recognize the Code Talkers," Billison says. "They gave the 29 those gold medals, but they waited too long, and most of them were gone. They will never be able to appreciate it. That's real sad."

The following November, the Navajo Nation held the Congressional Silver Medal ceremony in Window Rock, Arizona, to honor Billison and Code Talkers who came after the 29.

Now 76, Billison is a founder and president of the Navajo Code Talker Association, and remains a delegate to the tribal council. He and the other Code Talkers are revered among Indian and non-Indian alike. A recent movie, "Windtalkers," depicts a fictionalized, Hollywood version of the Code Talker contribution in the war.

However, perhaps the most curious honor for Billison was a recording he was asked to make.

"They just showed up at my house, and they wanted me to make a CD," Billison says. "They said to give a phrase of code and then say what it means. After I got through, they said they'd come back."

When the representatives of Hasbro Toys returned, Billison learned the real purpose of the recording.

"They asked if it was okay to record it for the GI Joe," Billison says with a hint of a smile. "I said it was okay. They were going to pay me, but I told them to give it to the Code Talker Association."

Now Billison's voice speaks from the action figure. But his words probably carry more weight in the Marine Corps—and in history.