



IN THE THICK OF THE WAR

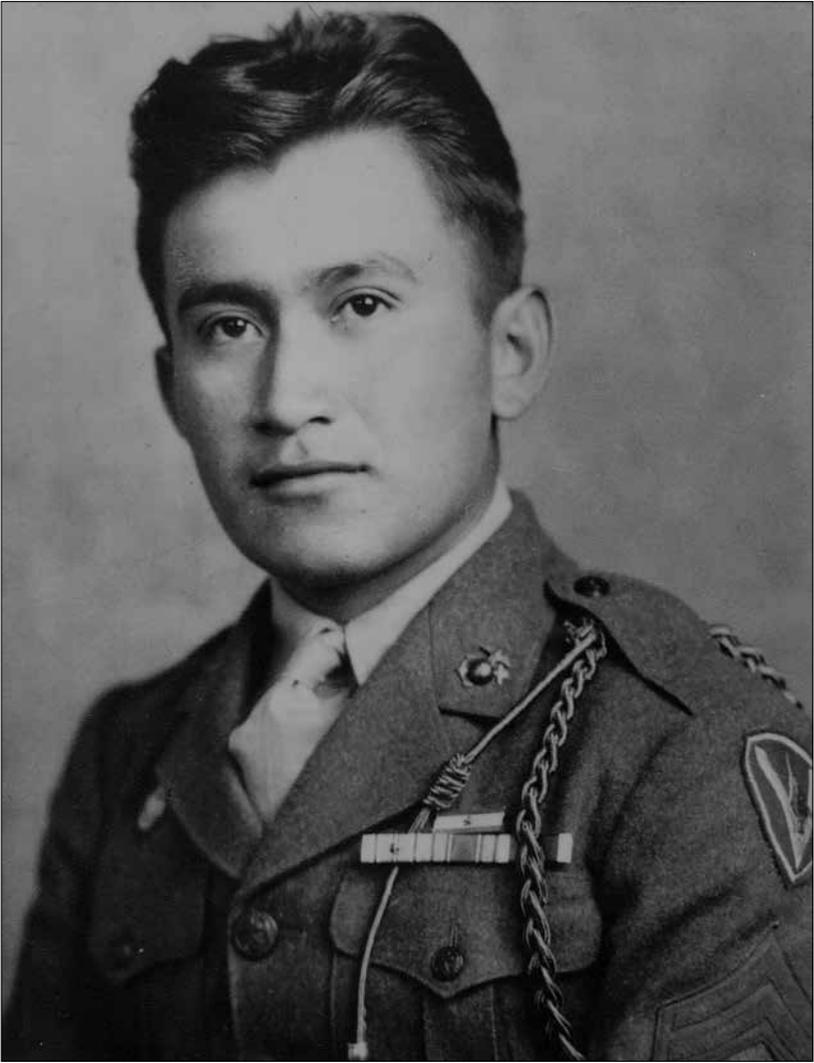
Our language is very sacred and it represents the part of life that is true. It saved a lot of people.

—Code Talker Dan Akee (1919–2016) in
Code Talker Stories by Laura Tohe

Thomas H. Begay crouched on the volcanic island of Iwo Jima, off the southern coast of Japan. He was 6,250 miles from his home on the Navajo Nation, a dry, rocky region in the southwestern United States. The steamy, rain-choked climate and dense jungles of Japan were as unfamiliar to Thomas as the violence surrounding him. He had just turned 19.

Known as Sulphur Island because of its occasional volcanic activity, Iwo Jima was the site of one of the fiercest battles of World War II. All the **civilians** had been evacuated seven months earlier. When Thomas splashed from ship to shore with the 5th Marine Division in February 1945, he found an island occupied only by military forces. It was fortified with hidden **artillery** bases and a system of **bunkers** linked by miles of secret tunnels. America's goal was to capture the entire island, including its three airfields and 21,000 Japanese soldiers.¹

“I got scared, really scared,” Thomas said. “Sometimes I was so scared my whole body went numb.”²



Thomas H. Begay, one of more than 400 Navajo men to serve as Code Talkers during World War II, is pictured in his Marine Corps uniform during the early 1940s.

Courtesy Thomas H. Begay

As his marine buddies engaged in battle, Thomas had a different task. While wading through smelly bogs and dodging gunfire, Thomas also sent and received radio messages in a **code** based on his native language.

That language was Navajo. The code was unbreakable.

Thomas, one of 430 men known as Navajo Code Talkers, helped the United States win the five-week Battle of Iwo Jima and, ultimately, World War II.

The Code Talkers had all grown up on or near the Navajo Nation, a 27,000-square-mile **Indian reservation** that covers parts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. They were a long way from home.



Thomas H. Begay was born in 1926 in a hogan, an eight-sided log structure with a dirt floor. He spoke only Navajo until he was a teenager. Thomas's parents raised a family of eight children on an expanse of land surrounded by red oak trees in the small community of Chichiltah, New Mexico. There, they kept 2,000 sheep and rarely saw "outsiders." Thomas herded the sheep, spending long days alone in the desert. His only company was the occasional bobcat, jackrabbit, coyote, or skunk.

"My grandparents and parents never went to school," he said. "No one knew how to read or write, and no one recorded my birth date. At that time, there were no roads, just horse trails and sometimes wagon trails. We lived off the sheep, and there was almost no contact with the outside, with people who weren't Navajo."³

In fact, Thomas's parents didn't know exactly when their oldest son was born.

"The only thing we knew of my age was that I was born when the moon was in a certain position and there was this much snow on the ground," Thomas said, holding a hand about two feet from the floor.⁴ When Thomas enrolled in school, his parents guessed at his age and birth date. These estimates later appeared on his official military enlistment papers.



An eight-sided Navajo hogan in Datil, New Mexico, is pictured in April 1940.

Photo by Russell Lee. Library of Congress (2017786063)

In the 1930s, the U.S. government grew concerned with overgrazing in the Southwest. It started taxing livestock owners and reducing the number of sheep or other animals allowed on the land.⁵ As his sheep herd gradually disappeared, Thomas's father began seeking other options for his children. When Thomas was 13, his father sent him to boarding school in Fort Defiance, Arizona, a town on the Navajo Nation that was named after an army fort built there in the 1850s.

"My dad talked to me and told me there was no future in livestock," Thomas said. "He told me to go to school to learn the White man's way. He told me to learn to talk like the White man, to act like him, to cut my hair and wear a shirt and tie. He told me I would become a *naat'áanii*, a leader."⁶

Boarding schools like the one in Fort Defiance often imitated military life. Navajo children lived at these schools for months or even years at a time with no contact with their families. They were forced

to cut their hair, shed their traditional clothing and jewelry, wear uniforms, and march in formation.

When he arrived at school, the only thing Thomas could say in English was his first name—and he quickly learned not to say anything more.

“The only word I knew was my name,” he said. “Every time someone asked me a question, I just said ‘Thomas.’”⁷

Rules were strict and discipline was harsh at the boarding school. Teachers often punished children for speaking their native language or participating in their traditional ceremonies. Some teachers used physical punishments, striking students who spoke Navajo or forcing them to stand in the corner for hours on end. Others put bars of foul-tasting soap in students’ mouths.

Regardless of the punishment, the message was clear: nothing good would come from speaking the Navajo language.

During Thomas’s first weeks at school, White teachers taught him the alphabet. He learned how to say “good morning” and “good afternoon.” He traded his traditional velvet shirt with white trim for a pair of Levi’s and some boots.



The Fort Defiance, Arizona, boarding school, pictured in 1910, is featured on a postcard published by the *Feicke-Desch Printing Co.* of Cincinnati.

The young Navajo children also got something they'd never before had: last names.

"None of us Navajos had a last name before we got to boarding school," Thomas said. "Some person there just picked out a last name and gave it to us."⁸

Many of the children got the last name of Begay or Begaye, which comes from the Navajo word *biye*, meaning "his son."

When summer vacation came, Thomas took a children's book home with him, where he practiced reading out loud while herding sheep.

"I stood on a stump and pretended I was the teacher," he said. "I yelled that book to the sheep."⁹

As Thomas learned English on the Navajo Nation, World War II broke out in Europe, quickly becoming the most widespread war in history and involving more than 100 million people from 30 different countries.¹⁰ Then, on December 7, 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii, and the following day the United States officially entered the war.

Even as America's military forces prepared for battle, the United States knew it needed to find a special weapon. Shortly after the United States entered the war, the Marine Corps began recruiting young Navajo men for a top-secret project.¹¹

World War II began on September 1, 1939, when Adolf Hitler, leader of the Nazi Party in Germany, invaded Poland from the west. Two days later, France and Britain declared war on Germany, and two weeks later, Soviet troops invaded Poland from the east.

The war, which lasted six years, was the deadliest and most destructive war in history. It pitted countries like the United States and Britain (the Allied forces) against countries like Germany and Japan (the Axis powers). More than 30 countries were involved in the fighting, with more than 100 million soldiers deployed.

The boarding school teachers had been wrong. The Navajo language would prove to be one of the most valuable weapons in World War II.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Continental Marines, the forerunner to the Marine Corps of today, was established in November 1775, eight months before the Declaration of Independence marked the creation of the United States. It was the third branch of the military, following the creation of the Continental Army in June 1775 and the Continental Navy in October 1775.¹²