

# National Park Service (NPS)

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Mariana Islands Wartime Experience through Oral Histories Fellowship  
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Thomas Begay  
June 17, 1994

Interview conducted by Daniel Martinez  
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Interviewee: Thomas Begay

Military Rank: Navajo Code Talker, USMC

Interviewer: Daniel Martinez

Saipan, N. Mariana Islands

Date: June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1994

#### Audio Description

– 00:00:00 - 00:00:25

Thomas Begay is a Native American man from the Navajo nation. He is wearing a red cap with wire framed glasses, a yellow button-up uniform with a military insignia, and name tag on the left. He is also wearing a traditional Navajo necklace. Behind him is a black background with palm leaves

**--00:00:26 - 00:00:37**

Q: The following oral history interview was conducted on June 17<sup>th</sup> at 10- June 17th 1994 at 10:30 in the morning by the National Park Service American Memorial Park in cooperation with the Marianas Cablevision. The subject today is Thomas Begay, Navajo Code Talker and veteran of the Marianas campaign. The interviewer is Daniel Martinez, historian for the National Park Service at the USS Arizona Memorial. Good morning Thomas, how are you?

Begay: Good morning! Fine, thank you.

Q: For the record, could you please state for us your full and complete name?

**--00:00:38 - 00:01:28**

Begay: My name is Thomas H. Begay.

Q: And the H is for?

Begay: Uh, just an initial. When I entered the Marine Corps, they asked me. I got to have

something, so I slipped that in. Just an initial.

Q: And how do you spell your last name?

Begay: B-E-G-A-Y.

Q: Okay. And where were you born?

Begay: I was born in a small community at home, around [Navajo name] community on... off reservation. Checkerboard area, they called it.

Q: They call it the Checkerboard area?

Begay: Yes, Checkerboard area. That is where you have private land and Indian land allotment and all that. It's really out in the remote area. Of New Mexico.

Q: And what date were you born on?

**--00:01:28 - 00:01:56**

Begay: I was born on February 2<sup>nd</sup> 1927, they say. See, I was born at home so my parents are not- they didn't go to school, so it's just a date that was given to me.

Q: As your birthday?

Begay: As my birthday.

Q: What were your parent's names?

Begay: My parents are Mary H. Begay and Charlie H. Begay. They are traditional Navajo

people.

**--00:01:57 - 00:02:19**

Q: And how many brothers and sisters did you have?

Begay: I have six brothers and three sisters.

Q: And how many are still living today?

Begay: I think we lost one, one brother. The others are all at home.

Q: And where are you in that group, are you the oldest?

Begay: I'm the oldest.

Q: You're the- that's tough being the oldest.

**--00:02:19 - 00:02:48**

Begay: Well, I don't know.

Q: I'm the oldest, it was tough on me.

Begay: I left when I was 16 so-

Q: Where did you leave to?

Bengay: Well, boarding school.

Q: Boarding school?

Begay: About 13 years old I guess, I entered school.

Q: Which school did you go to?

Begay: I went to Fort Defiance Boarding School that is run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Arizona.

Q: So this was for Indian people?

Begay: For Indian people, Navajo people.

Q: Navajo people. You didn't go to Carlisle or anything like that.

Begay: No, no, I stayed close, I guess.

**--00:02:48 - 00:03:13**

Q: What were your interests in school? What did you like to do there?

Begay: Learning English because I didn't know English when I entered school. It's kind of a sad situation, but I wanted to learn the English language and that is what I did.

Q: Were there other Navajos like you that didn't know-

Begay: Oh yes, there were some older than I was and they were kind of making fun of me because I didn't know English.

Q: Is that right? Tease you?

**--00:03:13 - 00:04:30**

Begay: Yeah, well, sort of, you know they say, you know, you don't know anything. You know, just kinda... you know. But I didn't feel too bad because I know I didn't know English.

Q: How about sports? What sports did you like to play?

Begay: The sports, we had a little football and softball. At that time, there is no such thing as wearing a glove. You wear bare hand and catch the softball. I think only the catcher had a glove and first baseman, the others we were all bare hands.

Q: So you had to have tough hands, huh?

Begay: I guess so. And we didn't have no field, grass, or anything, we out, you know-

Q: Played in the dirt, right?

Begay: Yeah, in the dirt.

Q: How about traditional Indian games? Were there traditional Navajo games that you played?

Begay: Well yes, running... that was number one because we were told to endurance ourselves to be- withstand anything. Any weather, any type regardless. And that was the way, the life of a Navajo used to be, you know, do anything any time, hunger, thirst, whatever.

Q: Endure.

Begay: You have to get used to it, yes.

**--00:04:30 - 00:05:04**

Q: And running was one of the ways to -

Begay: That was the way to do it because you run with the, you know, in the snow and roll in the snow, and the only thing you wear is, you know, little shorts.

Q: Is that right?

Begay: Yeah, that is right. And you shake the tree on yourself and the snow on the tree. So that was the kinda- I guess that is what they call Ranger training or special force, whatever it is, today. It was a good training.

Q: Does that still go on at the reservation today?

**--00:05:04 - 00:05:32**

Begay: Not really, not really.

Q: That tradition is slowly fading?

Begay: It's slow and then there is all kinds of sickness I guess and, you know, you catch cold, pneumonia, whatever. So they don't really do that anymore.

Q: But that was a way that young men on the reservation-

Begay: Yes, that was the way at the reservation. At that particular time. My time.

Q: Did you like school?

Begay: Yes, I liked school.

**--00:05:33 - 00:06:19**

Q: And when di- when did you leave school? How old were you?

Begay: I was 16 when I left school. I joined the Marines when I completed 5<sup>th</sup> grade. In the Marine Corps, I guess they were hurting so they would take anybody, so they took me.

Q: So you completed 5<sup>th</sup> grade and you-

Begay: And I entered school- I mean, Marine Corps.

Q: Now, did the Marine Corps come to you or did you go to the Marine Corps?

Begay: I went to a Navy recruiter and told them I want to join the Navy and then he referred me to a Marine recruiter. I went over there and told them that I like to be machine gunner on, you know, aerial gunner, whatever they called it.

**--00:06:16 - 00:07:09**

Q: Right.

Begay: Sure, he said, sure come right over, he said. So he took me in, took my application and, of course, I was born at home so I guess my age was flexible. I could be older or younger.

Q: So how flexible was it that day?

Begay: Well, that day I was 17, even though I was 16. You know, I didn't lie. And then they sent me to Albuquerque for a physical. From there he sent me to Santa Fe and over there we were in the gym, big gym, and we all took our clothes off and all they gave us, a little bag for our money and wallet. We went around-



Q: Were there any other Indian people that had volunteered like yourself?

**--00:07:09 - 00:07:47**

Begay: No, no, I was the only one that went in that particular... August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1943.

Q: Why did you want to get into the war?

Begay: Well, one thing that bothered me was I asked for a job that summer in 1943. I went to Flagstaff on [unclear] where they handle ammunition. I asked for a job and they told me I was too young. Too young, I said, I'm old enough. So I kinda... I kinda, you know, I didn't feel right.

Q: Did it make you mad?

**--00:07:48 - 00:08:30**

Begay: That kinda make me mad and I said, I will show you people. I'm just as good a man as- I want to go sign up and I will show- when I come back, I will show you.

Q: Now do you think it was because of your age or because you were Indian?

Begay: I don't really know the circumstances, but you kinda, you know, you feel sad.

Q: Because you want to contribute, right?

Begay: Yeah, I want to contribute. So that is what made me, you know, join the services. I can be fight in the war and I'm just as good man as any other.

Q: Had you known that the Marines were a pretty tough outfit?

Begay: No, I really didn't.

**--00:08:30 - 00:09:12**

Q: You found out though, they were pretty tough, right?

Begay: Well, it was easy for me, I said, this physical training, it was just- plus in the boarding school we were made to march to eat, to school, everywhere. They use it, Company A, Company C, Company D, that is the kind of - we are kinda used to marching.

Q: So you were used to some military training before you got there?

Begay: Uh-huh.

Q: So you didn't find the training that tough?

Begay: So no, that was a- that is easy.

Q: How about those drill instructors? Now, did they get in your face and yell at you?

Begay: They did, but they didn't bother me.

Q: Did you just smile at them or?

**--00:09:12 - 00:09:39**

Begay: No, you didn't smile, if you did, you don't smile, you just do like they say.

Q: Right.

Begay: And the only thing that I couldn't do was swimming because we had no water out there.

Q: Did they teach you to swim or did you just never learn?

Begay: I- we never had a chance to swim at home because we didn't have any lakes or anything.

Q: Right.

Begay: But it took me only three days to learn it.

Q: Oh, you did learn to swim?

Begay: In three days.

Q: Wasn't that a little scary to learn to swim?

**--00:09:39 - 00:10:18**

Begay: It was. They threw me in and say, are you- they thought I was kidding that I didn't know how to swim.

Q: They threw you in the pool?

Begay: Yeah, they threw me, they pushed me in. I was standing there. Because everybody, you know, you stand at the edge of the pool and then I hit the bottom the first time. The second time I did, the third time, they believed me and then I paddled on the side. They said, go paddle over there and you will learn to swim. That is what they told me, so...

Q: That had to be scary.

Begay: Well, it was, but after I learned it, it was nothing to me.

Q: It's those first times hitting the bottom that would have scared me.

**--00:10:18 - 00:10:48**

Begay: Oh yeah, it was, it was scary yeah. You know, you swallow all that water.

Q: Oh boy. That's a big -

Begay: You are trying to get air and there is no way. You try to float, there is no way. You just hit the bottom and then- I don't know, but that is the teaching they had.

Q: Wow.

Begay: It was- after that, it was fun.

Q: How was the weapons training?

Begay: It was good. They teach us how to shoot M-1. I had an M-1 that was about my size.

**--00:10:48 - 00:11:17**

Q: Yeah, M-1 gerund.

Begay: I was small, always at the rear. My platoon was 789 and they gave us a good haircut, they gave us baggy clothes and they gave us shoes that was inside out. You know those fuzzy leather shoes?

Q: Yeah, the rough combat shoes.

Begay: We had to make them shine like your shoes. I mean sparkle shine.

**--00:11:17 - 00:12:00**

Q: No kidding?

Begay: Yeah. You shine it and you make it, you know, real shiny shoes.

Q: And you had to square away your bunks and inspection?

Begay: Everything, they would drop a quarter on it, and make sure it bounced. And we had those jungle helmet, you know, for the summer-

Q: Oh yeah, the tropical helmets.

Begay: Yeah, the tropical. And they gave us white underwear and you had to make it white every day after the drill. They had a big wash table out there and there was water, plenty of soap, they gave us buckets and that was it. And there were no PX, no nothing, all through the boot camp.

**--00:12:01 - 00:12:23**

Q: No privileges.

Begay: No privilege of any kind. They gave you a coupon to buy- and I didn't shave either, but they make me shave.

Q: You didn't have to shave, right?

Begay: I didn't have to shave.

Q: You were a young boy.

Begay: Oh yeah, but they made me shave. They told me I had fuzz on my chin and that it needs

to come off.

**--00:12:24 - 00:12:38**

Q: I'm sure there were other young men that didn't need to shave either, right?

Begay: Yeah, we were all treated the same.

Q: Wow. You did your basic training, what they called boot camp at-

Begay: Boot camp at a Marine Corps base.

Q: Pendleton? Or Elliot?

**--00:12:39 - 00:13:41**

Begay: At the advanced trainings over at Camp Pendleton. But the boot camp is at San Diego and that is harder system. And then they gave me PFC out of the boot camp so I guess I did okay. Only a few us got it. We got one stripe and boy I was so proud. There were others that didn't get anything, they were privates.

Q: Right. Thomas, after you completed boot camp, basic training and you went to your advanced training, when did they come up with the idea of using Navajos as Code Talkers?

Begay: I really didn't know about the Code Talker, but when I completed my boot training, I was sent to Camp Pendleton and then we were dropped off at a certain place. Here, I was dropped off at the stairs and here was a whole- a lot of Navajos there, going through this Navajo Code Talker training.

**--00:13:43 - 00:14:24**

Begay: And that is when I learned that I was to be a Code Talker.

Q: This was probably the first time that you met up with people from your tribe?

Begay: Yes.

Q: Did you know a lot of them?

Begay: I only knew one individual that went to school at Fort Defiance. He was an older person.

Q: I bet it was comfortable, though, being around your own people again?

Begay: Well, not really when they go through training, you know. They tell you to be trained in the field, a certain field like Code Talking, of course I'm not familiar with the Code Talking. They told me I was to go through this training.

Q: Okay. What was Code Talking training like? What did they do?

**--00:14:25 - 00:15:04**

Begay: Well, number one, first session was to climb poles with spikes on your leg and try to climb. And you look down and you would fall off sometimes and go down and probably lose some of your- part of your clothes in the front, sliding down the pole.

Q: And other things as well, probably.

Begay: Yeah, and then wire. Stringing wire.

Q: Stringing wire and-

Begay: That is number one. Then of course telephone. Field telephone. Switchboard. Radio and

all. They teach you that first.

**--00:15:04 - 00:15:45**

Q: So not only are you learning to be able to talk over the radio, you got to learn everything about communications?

Begay: Yes, that's right. Panels, semaphores, blinker, flag hoists - all this we had to learn.

Q: So blinker, semaphores, flag hoists, all of this stuff.

Begay: Yes, all of this stuff that they- everything you have to learn at one time. And then you go into code talking in the afternoon and you learn words. You have notes, I guess, I don't remember having notes, but we were told not to take any notes out. They would pick up all the papers and-

**--00:15:45 - 00:16:53**

Q: The enemy could pick that up.

Begay: At the end of the day, yeah. And we had a couple Navajos as Corporal Conts and Sergeant- I forgot. Anyway, there was a sergeant that was teaching Navajo and we learned and we learned military terms. They had devised and improvised the alphabet, names of ranks, divisions, companies, sections, all that.

Q: So they almost had to invent a new Navajo language for these terms.

Begay: That was new to us, but some that we supposedly already know. So it's hard for some people that not appointed, not growing with the Navajo language and those are the ones that they reassigned to other companies or sent 'em to motor school or stretcher barrier or cooks or whatever.



**--00:16:53 - 00:17:17**

Q: The Navajo language is a very difficult language to learn, is that-

Begay: That's what they say. Of course, I already knew, so it wasn't hard for me.

Q: For an outsider it's difficult.

Begay: For an outsider, yes, I don't think anybody can comprehend that good. Even though they are out there. We have some non-Indians out on reservations. They know trading post Navajo.

**--00:17:17 - 00:18:10**

Q: What is trading post Navajo?

Begay: That's just a name of, like, the items that they sell, money, that's it.

Q: Just to get by.

Begay: Just to get by, say hello, how are you? That is about it. But the real Navajo is, you know, you can talk, go on and on and talk in your own language and understanding and so it was hard to memorize all those military terms, but we already knew a lot of these months and numbers and birds and animals of different kinds. So that is what we had to learn to go through this training.

Q: How long was the training?

Begay: It depends on an individual. If you comprehend those training, about three months. Mostly-

**--00:18:10 - 00:18:45**

Q: And yours was about three months?

Begay: Mine was about three months. After that, they formed 5<sup>th</sup> Marine division so I was assigned to signal company, radio platoon there.

Q: So you were in the 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Division and Signal Platoon?

Begay: Signal Company, let's see. Radio Platoon, Signal Company. Headquarters Patel and 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Division.

Q: Wow, that's some title. Now, among the Navajos that were there, did the military encourage you to speak your language? In other words, could you talk to each other-

**--00:18:45 - 00:19:48**

Begay: We weren't barred from anything, but we were told not to talk to news media or anything. A Commanding General put out a flyer saying that no news media of any kind could write up about Navajos. They could write about us about being in the war, but-

Q: But not what you were doing.

Begay: Not what we were doing.

Q: Who came up with this idea of using Navajos for code talking?

Begay: There were- talked about it way back in '41, some time around late '41, '42. Between the Bureau of Indian Affairs, there is a general superintendent, he was, they called him Mr. Fryer. In Navajo, they called him [speaks Navajo] that means he fries things. He had a name. And then the United States Marine Corps out of Washington, they had some correspondents.

**--00:19:48 - 00:20:57**

Begay: I see the correspondents saying there was three Indians that was selected but it was Navajo that was selected to do that honor.

Q: Because the toughness of the-

Begay: Because there is a thousand or more dialects and different types and all and it was unwritten and so they selected Navajos. So they wanted to recruit in April or May sometime, 29 Navajos.

Q: And you were one of them?

Begay: No, I wasn't one. The first group that went in. And the first group, I understand, according to documents, four of them devised. They were put in a room and they were all ready, these words and terms and regarding military language. They put it on the board and they are to devise it and that is what they did. There were 234 words and terms and different... They devised that and-

**--00:20:57 - 00:22:05**

Q: So they had kind of a- kind of a meeting?

Begay: Quick, I guess, quick job. Improvise it and devise it. And then they went through and trained the 29. When they finished their training, they sent out all 28 to South Pacific, down in Guadalcanal, the first Marine Division of a division. And they kept one, John Benally he was, and they made him a sergeant, I guess after that. So that is what happened and he start teaching the others and then by the time we came to us, when I went, there were 508 different. We developed, all of us. And that what we used on the battle of Iwo, that I'm familiar with.

Q: So it was about 508 of you guys.

Begay: 508-

Q: Were they all Navajos?

Begay: No, 508 words and phrase and different, yeah.

Q: How many total were in your unit, do you know how many?

**--00:22:05 - 00:23:11**

Begay: I don't- My unit was, we had 28 Navajos. Of course there were 30 of us but two others were not code talkers.

Q: I see.

Begay: The division that I was with, 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Division. We had 28 of us.

Q: Now the purpose of this, for those that don't know about the Navajo Code Talkers, the purpose was that when you stretch this wire, the Japanese could come in and maybe listen in on that wire.

Begay: They did, but we have, I know, we have a friend, Joe Kioni, he was captured in the Philippines and was sent over in Tokyo somewhere. POW camp. He said they tried to have him break the code, but. He knows what we talking about, but don't know the meaning because he wasn't trained as a code talker.

Q: I see.

Bengay: So it was coded and within code. There are other code talkers, I understand, but I think

they use- I assume they use straight language. But ours was coded.

Q: So the Japanese never broke that code?

**--00:23:11 - 00:23:46**

Begay: No, they never did.

Q: It was extremely useful there.

Begay: It was.

Q: What was your first combat action?

Begay: My com- my first combat action, we went by here, they were still fighting. We out there on the ship around [unclear]. I think by [unclear]. They call it [unclear] or there's a big hill. We seen people jumping off from the ship, so there must have been a lot of fight.

Q: Yeah, the north end of the island.

**--00:23:46 - 00:22:14**

Begay: North end of the island, yes, we were parked out there somewhere. We seen it. So we were already in combat. When we leave San Diego, we are already in combat because it's hostile water, hostile area. You don't do certain things. You can't smoke. You can't, you know, throw things overboard because a submarine, the enemy submarine, could pick up and start trailing you and all this.

Q: You had to be very careful.

**--00:24:14 - 00:24:52**

Begay: And then the radio silent and the naval are using blinkers and [unclear] when we travel in the ocean.

Q: Now, I want to talk a little bit about that, but were there Navajos here fighting in Saipan?

Begay: Yes, they were here. They were in 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Division and 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Division. There was also some in Fleet Marine force, that's higher echelon, like Corps.

Q: Have you met some of these men?

Begay: Yes, yes we have. They want to come here for this reunion, but they had some other problems, so they couldn't come.

Q: So you are representing them.

**--00:24:52 - 00:25:52**

Begay: Yeah, I'm representing them, yes.

Q: Were any Navajos lost in action?

Begay: Yes, we- in my unit, we lost two. So there were 26 of us that survived at [unclear] but later on, of course, other things happened so we only have a few.

Q: There is only a few left out of your group?

Begay: Yes, out of my group.

Q: Your first battle actually was Iwo Jima?

Begay: Iwo Jima, yes. We used most of Navajo because Major Harold Connor was our commanding officer and he direct 100% I would say, you know. 48 hours we sent over 800 messages and he really gave us a good comment on his, you know, news media or whatever it is. Told some people that we effective.

Q: What was Iwo Jima like?

**--00:25:53 - 00:27:01**

Begay: It was hell. I tell you. We started our communication before even landing. We had some Navajos in the boat. They out there ready, you know, going in circle. And we had the radio set up on top deck and communicating, checking, you know, do your radio check, make sure everything works, ready to go. And then-

Q: You landed on the what? First wave?

Begay: No, they, usually the infantry unit, like 28<sup>th</sup> Marine and 27<sup>th</sup> Marine, they landed first. Green Beach and Red Beach one and two. So we- it was kind of hard to tell because the island is so much debris, you know. The Japanese, we had a debris because they knocked out some of the landing craft and all of this, you know-

**--00:27:01 - 00:27:24**

Q: A lot of dead.

Begay: A lot of things like traffic jam. You know how these big, big highway like I-5 in California and you have a traffic jam? It was like that. So they had to pull some things out of the way so we, you know, the landing is kind of slow, but eventually they land.

Q: With very heavy firing.

**--00:27:24 - 00:28:57**

Begay: Very heavy and then they establish communication.

Q: When did you go ashore?

Begay: Ashore, late in the afternoon. Late in the afternoon on that day. But there was the breeze, you know, it was heavy traffic for wounded, they trying to get them back to the hospital. They tried to move men that are wounded and then they, you know, all this- a big traffic jam. At the beginning, you know, early in the morning, they woke us about at about 3 or 2 o'clock in the morning, they- it's like the last meal, they give you a good -

Q: Good breakfast?

Begay: Good breakfast with steaks and then they- Marines were kidding, you know, they say, oh, this is your meal, you better eat or we may not see you again, you know, this kind. And of course we watch as the air crafts striking, bombing, Suribachi. The beach. And I have seen- an aircraft got knocked out of the air. And this individual parachute. I don't know if they picked him up or what happened to him. But they were shooting down from the Mt. Suribachi into everybody around. So they had- I guess the [unclear] before prior to that didn't do much damage because these people were dug in, the Japanese.

**--00:28:57 - 00:29:18**

Q: And they were tough, huh?

Begay: Yeah, they tough. They tough. They got bunkers that are six feet thick or-

Q: Concrete.

Begay: Concrete. And that is where you get shot. If you got it, you got it, if not, you are lucky. It



didn't matter where you were.

Q: Were you frightened when you came to shore?

**--00:29:18 - 00:29:47**

Begay: Sure. My legs were numb.

Q: Is that right?

Begay: Then I thought to myself, what in the heck am I doing here when I could be at home herding sheep.

Q: Herding sheep in Window Rock, right?

Begay: No, in New Mexico.

Q: In New Mexico.

Begay: It's kind of numb, you know, and you feel like walking in one place of that ash or sand or whatever it is.

Q: Black sand, right?

Begay: Kind of steep like, you know.

Q: Hard to get footing?

**--00:29:47 - 00:30:26**

Begay: Hard to get the footing, you know. But after a while, you know, you kind of get used to it.

Q: Did any bullets come your way and kick up dirt?

Begay: Well, there is people around me, they got it. There was mortars. There was all kinds of weapons. Ammunition coming down.

Q: In your group, how many Navajos were with you?

Begay: In my group, we were- there were four of us. There were four of us. There was Milton Gishal and there's Paul Kinlahcheeny, he was killed. And then-

Q: He was killed at Iwo Jima?

**--00:30:27 - 00:30:57**

Begay: Yeah, he was killed. And then the other one, Gleason, was wounded. So it left us two. So that was-

Q: Your job then was to go and set up a communications? Where was that at? How many- Was it off the beach?

Begay: It would be inland. Not too far off the beach, you know. We had communication with headquarters, back and forth.

Q: That was a very tough campaign.

Begay: Oh yes. It was.

**--00:30:57 - 00:31:48**

Q: And you were there throughout the whole campaign?

Begay: All the- I think we left until March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1945. According to my discharge papers, it says March 16<sup>th</sup>, but it wasn't so. We left until March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1945 because I remember on the north side, one of those small craft that we went- we walk in. The ramp came down and we walked in and then they took us out to the bigger ship and we came back on the bigger ship. Two carriers.

Q: Were you involved in any other battles besides Iwo Jima? Or was that-

Begay: I have been in another battle in Korea. I had a five battle star out of there.

Q: Oh, you fought in Korea as well.

**--01:31:48 - 00:32:58**

Begay: Yes, but not a code talker, I was a radio operator but I had a radio team, so I seen all of it. I have been in five major battles on Korea. All the way to Frozen Chosin.

Q: You were in the Chosin as well?

Begay: Yeah, I am a Chosin Few, member of the Chosin Few also. So I have been in combat and I found out that the communications- the communications is the most important because the commander or commander general has to have a system and the regimental commander, he has to have a system and all the way down to the small unit. You got to have because that is how he find his target that is how he find his enemy. And of course you have an observer who give him all the information, where it is most needed- infantry, artillery, and motor, whatever it is. So the communication is very important and I think in any battle, what I went through.

**--00:32:58 - 00:33:42**

Q: You were right at the center of it.

Begay: Yes, you right and I think you are the target too.

Q: You bet you are.

Begay: You are the target because they, you know, they try to knock out the radio or a machine gunner. The machine gunner is another one that is he is targeted because he's the guy that they try to knock out and the radio also.

Q: That's why they have a one, two, three man machine gun. I had interviewed a machine gunner yesterday. He was telling me he was the number two man and the number one man here in Saipan was knocked out almost immediately.

Begay: Yeah, they look for that, the enemy. They try to do away with the fire power at first, then of course the radio man.

**--00:33:42 - 00:34:11**

Q: When did all the publicity and notoriety start with you folks?

Begay: It was June of 1969.

Q: It took that long?

Begay: Yeah, before that, we had forgotten. Of course we never thought about being special or anything, we just-

Q: You didn't see yourself as being unique?

Begay: We just did- we came home, we walked home, we didn't have no band. We didn't have big banner. We didn't have no-

Q: No parades?

**--00:34:11 - 00:35:11**

Begay: No parade, no nothing. In fact, I had to work about six months to go home with my sea bag.

Q: You came home on a bus? And with your sea bag?

Begay: On a Greyhound bus. I got off at Lupton, Arizona and I carried my duffle bag way up the mountain, the hill, and came home and threw my duffle bag in the house. My parents said, yeah, we are glad you came. They don't know what I went through. I don't think anybody, you know.

Q: They do now. There has been a couple of books-

Begay: Of course, because of media. Because of media. Look at Desert Storm. They got the whole bit.

Q: They got it down.

Begay: You know, over in Iwo, of course you see the training film, they take a lot of these film, they caught it.

Q: Yeah, there's a lot of footage.

Begay: Yeah, a lot of footage and they used that for training, you know. Future Marines or Army, whatever it is.

**--00:35:11 - 00:36:07**

Q: Are you planning to go back to Iwo Jima for the anniversary?

Begay: Yes, we plan. My wife and I plan. We plan to go. We have a deposit, the money, to go there so we have a person from 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Division that is coordinating.

Q: Why is it important for you to go back?

Begay: Because it's something that the wound is there. You never forget, ever. I want to show my wife where I have been.

Q: Now do you talk to your- to the Navajo children about your experiences now, are they curious?

Begay: Oh yes, there a lot of requests. There is a lot of Navajos don't know anything about it. They are involved in these islands all the way from Guadalcanal to Okinawa.

Q: And how are you treated there? I'm sure you are very well respected.

**--00:36:07 - 00:36:53**

Begay: Oh, yes and no. Some of the veterans of course, you know. They say some things about Code Talker, how come he's number one, and all that.

Q: Right. A little jealous maybe?

Begay: I think so. I think there is a lot of jealousy because they think that, you know, wow, they fought too, you know, but Navajo Code Talker, they legendary and that is the only one that ever happened in this Marine Corps during World War II. Just like Navajo scouts, way back in 18 or 1900. The Navajo scouts. They were the only ones and they-

Q: Worked for the Army.

Begay: Poncho Via and Apaches, you know they were-

**--00:36:53 - 00:37:11**

Q: Very colorful history.

Begay: Yeah, so they did that, so we in that- in that particular group, we are not bragging. That is not the case. It's just happened- we just happened to be there at that particular time. Maybe it was the wrong time, the wrong place, I don't know.

**--00:37:11 - 00:37:54**

[video and audio jumps]

Q: With great distinction.

Begay: Oh yes, we are.

[video and audio jumps]

Begay: Biggest contribution [cut] of all different [cut] people.

Q: The people- [cut]

Begay: Hispanic, the blacks. I think that is why we are strong. I think that is why we whipped some people because of all the [cut] cultures throughout the United States and that's what makes it- the country strong. That is what I think. I believe in that too.

Q: It's been my experience from Navajo people that I've met and Southwest Indian people, they

are very patriotic.

Begay: Oh, yes.

Q: Can you explain to me why they are so patriotic? Why they have such a love for the country?

**--00:37:55 - 00:38:59**

Begay: Well, it's been hand down I guess from way in the past. Our Tribal Council passed a resolution June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1940 that we will stand together and defend our liberties and our country and our belief and they don't, you know, like any... these people, trying to destroy the freedom that we have in the United States. And my dad was in the Council at that time. They had the majority that voted for. So since that time, I guess we always been. They like to serve their country. In fact we have three children, I mean, four children, three boys and a daughter. They all in military and they in reserve.

Q: Is that right?

Begay: And one active.

Q: They followed their father's example, huh?

**--00:38:59 - 00:39:29**

Begay: I guess so. And my wife's grandfather was in the Navajo Scouts way back sometime.

Q: In the early 1800s?

Begay: Something around there, yeah. He was in the Scouts.

Q: So there is a tradition that runs on both sides of the family.



Begay: Yeah, both sides.

Q: I noticed you have your necklace and on your necklace you have the medallion of Ira Hayes and the flag going up over Mt. Suribachi. Did you witness that?

**--00:39:29 - 00:40:06**

Begay: Yes, we were there. We all knew because we had the radio of communication, we all know, you know. I thought it was just another, you know, I didn't realize that it was going to make the history.

Q: Just another flag raising.

Begay: Just another, yeah, you know, [unclear] marine they taking picture, you know, but I guess that wasn't the case. And-

Q: Did you meet Ira- excuse me.

Begay: We were in the same unit, the same division, so we know.

Q: You knew Ira Hayes?

Begay: Yeah, personally, yeah. He was a quiet man, but, you know, sometimes he wasn't quiet.

**--00:40:07 - 00:41:33**

Q: He got a lot of publicity afterwards and he became kind of a symbol of American Indian people and that was a lot of pressure on him. He felt a lot of pressure. Did you ever have a chance to talk with him after the war?

Begay: Yeah, we did and of course at that time he was already too far in whatever bothered him and when his monument dedication at Sacaton, we went. We were personally invited by the Sacaton, the people of Iwo Jima and so we went there and we participated and on his behalf I talked. I knew him, we knew him and he was one of us then. And that is the way it was and it was just one of those things, I guess. We had Code Talkers that did the same thing. They don't even know their names anymore. Of course most of those are gone now, you know. It's sad, but it's something that they didn't get help at that particular time. Now they got all kinds of programs.

Q: For help that people have trouble with alcohol or drug abuse.

Begay: Alcohol, whatever it is. I wish they had that program. They could have saved a lot of our people. But that is just the way it is.

Q: They made a movie about Ira Hayes, too.

**--00:41:33 - 00:41:59**

Begay: Oh yes, we've seen it.

Q: Yeah, and I think- I forget the actor who played him off the top- oh, Tony Curtis.

Begay: Tony Curtis, yeah.

Q: I met Tony Curtis, he came to the Memorial to pay his respects. But I never had a chance to chat about the movie. What do you think is the legacy for the Code Talkers? When you are all gone, what would you like remembered about you? As a group?

**--00:42:00 - 00:43:10**

Begay: I think we need to, you know, our children maybe carry on what we did, we liked, you

know. Some documentation, and let the people know throughout the world that we did something. We contribute something. And to this, to our country, freedom and all that and because we all made the supreme sacrifice for our men and women and children, freedom, whatever we have that we enjoy. You know, these are some of the things that we like, you know, to say, somewhere I will put it in- inscribe in something. I think, to be remembered by all people throughout the world.

Q: Is there any monument or memorial on the reservation to you?

Begay: No. I tell you, we been asking for monument but it's real hard. We do have Iwo Jima monument in Washington. Yes we have.

Q: Yes. Which stands for all of it.

**--00:43:10 - 00:44:14**

Begay: We are part of that monument. Especially that flag raising.

Q: You were there. You were represented.

Begay: Yeah, we were there. But we sure would like to have one on the reservation somewhere.

Q: Is there anything being-

Begay: Not really. We don't see any out there. But we would like to see one of those monument there.

Q: What did you think of those memorials they built here in Saipan?

Begay: Yes, I think this is the kind of monument we need. And I'm real, real, real happy that

they did it. This is everybody. Army, Navy, Air Force, whoever. Marines, Code Talkers, we together. In fact, it's an honor that we were part of the ceremony and we cut the ribbon. So we are proud. Other people may not think so but that is the way I feel.

**--00:44:15 - 00:46:02**

Q: Well, that is why it's good that we had this oral interview this morning. Is there anything that I didn't cover that you would like to talk about before we close our interview?

Begay: Well, we would just like to thank the people of this island, the Commonwealth, Northern Mariana islands for invitation that we received, my wife and I, so we could be here to witness this memorable occasion and we want to thank the people in the States and also here.

Q: Well, I think that what I saw, witnessing the parade, that people sure came out to thank all of you. All of the veterans.

Begay: We all involved. Like I said, there is different kind of people, of all kinds that did it, so to defend these people here and the island. So we really appreciate it.

Q: Well, I'm glad and I'm glad we had the opportunity to talk. I was hoping that this would come about and this history, this oral history will be here for everyone to look at and so that your memory of those days will be here and I wish you well to be at Iwo Jima as well. And I'm trying to get there myself. So maybe we will see each other at Iwo Jima.

Begay: I would like to have a tape or something to- there is a Navajo Nation TV Network at Window Rock and we have a paper Navajo Times, and let them know that we were here today too.

Q: Right.

Begay: We have not been forgotten. I would rather have more Navajo Code Talkers here but they could not make it here.

Q: Perhaps we can get more at Iwo Jima.

**--00:46:02 - 00:46:43**

Begay: Yes, I hope so. Get us the passport for those that don't have, so they can go there.

Q: Good.

Begay: That is the request I would like to make.

Q: Alright, well, we are going to end the interview here for a moment and then we are going to bring your wife on and yourself and you are going to perform what for us?

Begay: Tonight?

Q: No, right here, I think you said you were going to sing here.

Begay: Yeah, she is going to do that. She does it better than I do, so-

Q: So she is going to do what for us?

Begay: She is going to sing Marine Hymn in Navajo. And all the verses, I think there is four versus.

**--00:46:43 - 00:46:43**

Q: Well, thank you Thomas for-

Begay: Thank you very much for this opportunity to talk about our contribution.

Q: I was happy to do it. Thank you.

**--00:47:02 - 00:47:18**

Q: I have with me, Nina Begay, Thomas' wife and she is going to perform for us the Marine Corps Hymn as it is sung in Navajo. So I will step away at this moment and let you have the floor Nina.

Nina Begay: Thank you.

**--00:47:25 - 00:49:21**

Nina: [sings in Navajo]

[END OF SESSION]