



SAMUEL BILLISON
1925 - 2004

Honored as a Historymaker 2005
Navajo Code Talker



The following is an oral history interview with Samuel Billison (**SB**) conducted by Pam Stevenson (**PS**), Agave Productions, Inc., for the Historical League, Inc. on March 6, 2004, at the Heard Museum in Phoenix.

Original tapes are in the collection of the Arizona Historical Society Museum Library at Papago Park, Tempe, Arizona.

PS It's Saturday, March 6, 2004, and we're here at the Heard Museum and I'm Pam Stevenson. And I'd like for you to give me your name, so we'll have it pronounced correctly. Can you just tell me your name?

SB I'm Samuel Billison, B-I-L-L-I-S-O-N.

PS And tell me, when were you born?

SB I was born sometime in - I use my birthdate as March 14, 1925. But that's - that's not really it because when I was born, they didn't have any, um, I was born in a hogan and the - the lady, the elder ladies and the medicine man were delivering babies. And when you're born out there, you don't have a birth certificate. So, from there on they - they just guess my age by virtue of being put at school at certain age.

PS Oh, okay. Where were you born?

SB I was born north of Ganado, Arizona, a place called Kinlichee.

PS How do you say it again?

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SB Kinlichee.

PS Ah.

SB: K-I-N-L-I-C-H-E-E. Kinlichee, Arizona.

PS Does that mean – what does that mean?

SB That means red house.

PS It's – you grew up your early years, you spent there?

SB Yes, ma'am.

PS Where did you go to school?

SB I started school when I was 4 years of age. They put me in a parochial school at St. Michael's. It was a boarding school.

PS Did you learn English at boarding school then?

SB Right.

PS What was that like?

SB Well it – it was very different from – from where I came from – from home where only Navajo was spoken and, uh, of course my father and my mother never been to school, so the original language was Navajo, and to start a new language was something different.

PS How did you feel about moving away from your family?

SB Well, at 4 years old, you know, I – I used to cry every time my mother comes and visit me and, uh, she used to give me a quarter to – to shut me up and, in those days, a quarter would buy a lot of things and I used to be satisfied with that.

PS What would you buy?

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SB Oh, I used to buy mostly cookies and candy and something that can last, you know, and I used to eat my cookies at night, and it'd be under my mattress.

PS And where did you go to high school?

SB I went to high school in a government school in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The name of the school was Albuquerque Indian School.

PS Were you a good student?

SB Well, I guess so. I graduated.

PS When did you graduate?

SB I graduated 1943.

PS Then what did you do?

SB I enlisted in the United States Marine Corps when I was a senior in the – sometime in April, but the Marines told me to stay in school, finish school, get your diploma. They said then we'll come and get you. And they did.

PS Why did you want to be a Marine?

SB Well, in those days, they used to have captions in the newspaper and radio that, the few, the brave, the Marines. And I really wanted to be one of those and – and every time I see one, I want to get in and to make it worse, uh, John Wayne was making a lot of Marine Corps pictures and, uh, and that – that really, uh, stuck in my mind and – and that's why I got in.

PS Did you know other Navajos that were in the Marines?

SB Well, I got to know a lot of them, yes.

PS But when you enlisted, did you have other friends or family that had joined the Marines?

SB Say that again.

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- PS When you first enlisted, did you know other Navajo friends or family that had joined the Marines?
- SB Well there were three of us enlisted from, uh, from Albuquerque Indian School in 1943. But, uh, just one of them got in the Code Talkers program, but the other one I think in the Air Force, the Marine Air Force and, uh, and then in – in a platoon and basic training at the, uh, boot camp. There's only one other Navajo in that platoon.
- PS Where did you go for basic training?
- SB San Diego.
- PS What was that like?
- SB Well it – to a lot of people it was very difficult, very hard and, uh, rough training but – but to me, it was easy because I had just come out of school. I been playing football, basketball, baseball, and running track and – and all those obstacle courses were – were real easy for me.
- PS So when did you first find out about the code, the Navajo code?
- SB Not until after the basic training. After the boot camp.
- PS And how did you find out?
- SB Well, an officer came by and asked me if I was an Indian. And I said, no. I'm – I'm a Navajo. And then he said, well, good. He said, we – we have a program for you. And there was this other Navajo and he asked him, how about you? And he said, uh, me too. So, *[laughs]* so the officer said, grab your sea bags, throw it in that Jeep. We'll take you to Oceanside. And I just wondered why – what he's gonna do with us at Oceanside. I didn't even know that was the name of a town. So, he took us up there and then, Oceanside, California there was big Camp Pendleton. And there – we drove in front of a big barracks and that's where all the Navajos were studying outside – outside the barracks. I guess they were studying the code. And I thought – I thought gee, I just came from the Reservation. I – I don't want to be with these Navajos. I wanna be with the Marines. And we got there, registered and started the program and it got real interesting, so I stayed with it.
- PS What was it like? What – what did you first think when they started telling you there was a code?

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SB Well, I don't remember what I think, but it was very difficult, uh, to learn that because it was Navajo language, but it had no – no semblance or no relationship with what – what you're actually talking about. And a lot of Navajos took that, but a lot of them didn't pass that. Some of them had to take that two or three times before they passed it and only 420 passed that code during the duration of the war.

PS So, once you passed the code, then what did you do?

SB Well there's a lot of things we did. We – we practiced the code. We practiced landing. We went out boondocks. We camp out. But continuously, uh, we sent messages in code and – and right from the beginning the code was top secret. We – you couldn't take notes. There was no – no dictionary or nothing and what you learned in the class, in the classroom just stays there. You don't – you don't keep anything. You don't talk about it. During the war it was top secret, you sent a message, and you don't talk about it. It's – it's sent, and it's done and, uh, 20 years after the war, it was still top secret. So eventually, finally they declassified the code in 1968.

PS Why did they keep it secret for so long?

SB That's a good question. I don't know. They – they have all kinds of ideas about it. Uh, one of them they thought that China and Russia were kind of unfriendly and they thought maybe they might go to war with one of those countries and – and they think that the code might be used again, but this just – this is just a hearsay. It's not – it's not part of a document anywhere.

PS So where were you assigned? Where did you go when – when you were using the code?

SB Well, originally I was with the 4th Marine Division, but a word came out that they did away with the Carlson Raiders. That was the front group that they used in the South Pacific and they disbanded; so, they organized what they called a Reconnaissance Company. So, they asked for volunteers and, but four or five of Navajo Code Talkers volunteered to get in that organization and we had a different camp. We had a camp where they trained Carlson Raiders in San Clemente away from Pendleton. And they had a special training for us, and they called it the amphibious reconnaissance and they – strange thing was that we had to learn how to swim underwater. And at the beginning when we first got into, uh, when we first got into Marines, one of the requirements was that you learn – you learn how to swim.

And when we were enlisted, they asked us, do you know how to swim? And all Navajos say, yes, yes, I know how to swim. There's no water on the Reservation. So, uh, and come to find out the Reconnaissance Company, you have to learn how to swim underwater and we had these non-

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swimmers that – that just learned how to swim and, uh, so it was a really different type of training and so they put that company with the 5th Marine Division. The 4th Division went – went across and they kept us, uh, for additional training and they put us in the 5th Marine Division.

And Carlson Raiders, one of the things they did was they – they sent a part of the company into the island three days before D-day. So, they kept that concept with the, uh, Reconnaissance Company and on Iwo Jima, they sent half of our company three days before D-day, they went in to reconnoiter the look for mines and look for, I guess, positions of big guns and also mines and water lines under the ocean. But most of them were wounded when – when they – and they were just sent back to the states.

PS Where did you go? Did you go to Iwo Jima or where did you get assigned?

SB Well, we weren't assigned. We – we were with 5th Marine Division and, our job was to invade Iwo Jima, so that's what we did. And landed there on February the 19th. And Reconnaissance Company, we were on the front line for 26 days. And uh, a lot of people think Code Talkers were sitting somewhere in their rear echelon talking radio, but we were out in front line that – that's where the messages have to come from, from the front line back to the headquarters and sometimes to the – to the airplanes, sometimes to the ships and so we – we were trained as infantry people; there were some were assigned to artillery. Some were assigned to infantry. Some were assigned to tanks. Some were with the aviation, and some were assigned to aboard ship.

PS Where were you?

SB So, code – code was just coming all direction and, well like I said, I was on – on the front line for 26 days.

PS So you saw a lot of action, then, huh?

SB Right.

PS Were you wounded?

SB No.

PS What was that like?

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SB Well, it was terrible. That's all I got to say. It wasn't – it wasn't funny, or it wasn't – wasn't like Sunday school picnic. We had people scattered all over and we just don't talk about that part of it.

PS Well you were probably pretty busy with your – the code and passing messages weren't you?

SB Yes, and protecting ourselves, protecting our company and keep from – keep the Japanese from coming through the lines and ...

PS Did you have to know how to use all that radio equipment and stuff?

SB Oh yes.

PS What have you been doing since the war?

SB Well the – one of the good things that I got from the Marine Corps was, uh, I served in the Marines three years – three years and ten months. And they gave me a scholarship for three years and ten months. And once I got out, I went to – I went to school and went to school in Oklahoma, at a junior college. And I got a small scholarship from a friend of mine, and I played football, basketball, baseball and got my associate degree from Bacone Junior College in Muskogee, Oklahoma. From there I went to East Central State in Ada to get my bachelor's. From there I went to Norman, Oklahoma. Oklahoma University get my master's. And I just went in the fall, in the winter, the spring, the summer. I just kept on going. And I didn't want to lose the GI bill. I just – just went until I used it up.

PS And you got your – you have a doctorate, too, right?

SB By that – by that time, I had a master's degree.

PS In what?

SB In school administration. Both teaching and, uh, school administration.

PS And then when did you get your doctorate?

SB I got that later, not until 1971. I got that at the University of Arizona in Tucson.

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PS So what have you – have you been a teacher and school administrator then all your life?

SB Yes, I had a month to go in Oklahoma University and I ran out of scholarship. So, they negotiated with me, that they would go ahead and pay for that and if I finish, get my degree, they would get me a job so I could pay them back. So, usually you have to teach several years before you can become a principal. But my first job was high school principal and also teaching. A small school – I was the principal and I taught business math and typing. And also coached high school basketball and both boys and girls and also softball and baseball.

PS Where was that?

SB This was Terrill, Oklahoma.

PS So when did you come back to the Navajo Reservation?

SB Well after Terrill, Oklahoma, I went across the Red River to Nocona, Texas. The salary was much higher, so I went to Texas to teach in a middle school and coach basketball, football and track. And during the summer I helped – I coached Little League baseball, swimming and tennis. So, after that I got scholarship go to law school from the University of New Mexico. I went there and before the first semester was over, I – I ran out of money. So, the Navajo Tribe wouldn't give me any money, so I just dropped out, out of law school and went – went to work for the Navajo Tribe and elevated myself into a – finally became the head of education for the Navajo Tribe.

And I ran for chairman of the tribe in 19, uh, 1950 something and then I got defeated and then I stayed in the head of the education. I ran – they ran me again in 1966, to be chairman of the tribe and I lost the election again and that time the guy that beat me fired me, and I came down here to work for Governor Williams. So, and while I was doing that, 1968, I tried to enroll at the University of Arizona, and I had a hard time getting accepted there. Did several times and several times I didn't get in and finally I had to get Senator Goldwater to help me. And I got in right away and so I guess about a year and a half I got my doctor's degree from University of Arizona in school administration.

PS So what did you do with that? Did you go back to the Reservation then?

SB Well, I went to the, yes. I started as a principal for a BIA school and then in three years I was – I went to be a superintendent of schools for eleven elementary schools. And three years later, they gave me an IPA from the government to the tribe. The tribe wanted me to set up a department of

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education for the Navajo Tribe, but before we get it done, the election came, and I don't know what happened to it. And so, but I been teaching, and then after that, I was on the Council, the Tribal Council Education Committee and a friend of mine and two other people, we had a study made of the Navajo students and public schools and about 6,000 of them were not being challenged in high school. They were above the curriculum, so we started a Navajo Academy. And we went to East Coast, visited all those academies up there. In one place we found one of the Kennedy boys going to school there. And we used that concept to bring that Navajo Academy to Farmington. We started at Ganado with eleven students and they had a junior college there and the junior college was filling up, so they – they moved us out and we got a lease – a lease from a Methodist high school in Farmington for \$1 a year and we set up Navajo Academy there and – and the agreement was that we – we keep all the students there until they graduate and after that we – we changed the curriculum to be above the state – the state curriculum, state requirements both in science and math and English. And that's the only way we could become a college prep. And over 50% of our staff had to have masters or better. So it was Navajo Academy for about two or three years and then it became political and – and the tribe got involved and they took it over and it – it's not – it's not an academy anymore. It's not a college prep anymore. They lost it.

PS Getting back to talking about being a code talker, what has it meant to you through your life to have been a Navajo code talker?

SB Well, you know, we never knew the magnitude that we contributed to World War II until after 1968 when the code was declassified. Everybody started coming around say, hey, you're a Code Talker. Come here, we want to honor you. This thing started, you know, and – and we thought, gee, what – what did we do? You know, we – we just fought with the Marines and that's what we did. And it just kept going and finally we got the Congressional Medal through, some of the senators from Arizona and New Mexico. They helped us and then one from Hawaii. They were instrumental in getting the code – but the original idea came from the Daughters of the American Revolution from Texas. They wrote a letter to Arizona legislators - told them specifically, why don't you guys give Navajo Code Talkers Congressional Medal of Honor? That's how it started. And eventually we got that and then of course, the motion pictures, several motion pictures were proposed, but only one was finished and I think they're still working on – on one.

But I don't know because to me I think – I always think it was the language. It wasn't us. We just used it. It's the Navajo language that did the work. And I always think that it's the language that should be honored. And then I also think any Indian tribe probably could've done it. And not – not just the Navajos and so I guess in a sense I do – I do feel all right. I feel proud, but I – I don't want to display it too much 'cause a lot of jealousy already. You know why? People say, "Why do you always say Code Talkers? I went to war, too, you know?" This type of thing. Even when we're getting the medals, there's a lot of officers, Army, Navy, some of them disagreed

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that we should get medal. But – but we composed a small petition whenever we sent these people out there were signing, they were signatures and over 6,000 signatures went into Senator Bingaman’s office and that’s how – that’s what supported the Congressional Medal. And it was legislation under President Clinton, and he signed it, but the medals didn’t come out until after the next president. So, he made the awards.

PS Did you go back for that?

SB Yes, some of us went back. Only the original 29 who developed the code. They got gold medals and, um, the rest of us that were not with the first 29, got a silver medal. So silver medal was awarded in Window Rock and just the gold medal was in, uh, at that time there were only five original 29 Marines left and a lot of gold medals went to their parents, their relatives, their children and so forth. So, that’s – that’s the way the – the medals were made.

PS That’s pretty special.

SB Yes.

PS What advice do you give young people today when you talk to them from your experience?

SB Well, whenever I talk if there’s some Indians there, I always tell them that they should speak their language. They should live their culture. And I tell ‘em that we found that Navajo language was very powerful, very sacred, very beautiful. And I say probably all the different Native American language are the same and – and likewise, other nationality, their language are very powerful and they should speak it and they should live it. And of course, I say military career is a good – good program for young kids and – and teach you discipline. They teach you to do things. You – teach you to accomplish things and – and really makes you a good citizen.

PS You still speak your Navajo language today?

SB Oh yes. Not the code, but just the regular language.

PS Can you say something for us in Navajo? What would be appropriate to say for – in Navajo for – for this video?

SB I don’t know, nobody’d understand it if I say anything.

PS You would know.

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SB What would you like me to say?

PS I don't know. I'm trying to think what would be good to say. You should say the few, the proud, the Marines. Could you say that in Navajo?

SB *[laughs]* No. That'd be difficult to say because, uh, there's really no distinction in Navajo of different branches. They all called...

PS There's no word for Marines?

SB They all call them "s'lout," so which means people that were in the service.

PS What – how do you say that?

SB "S'lout," so...

PS So is that sort of like veteran? Or service man?

SB Yes. But to really translate that, what it really says is, uh, the yellow soldier. I don't know why they – we got that. It's so – it's yellow, "s'lout" is military.

PS Anything else you want to tell us this morning? Maybe I didn't ask you that I should've asked you?

SB Huh?

PS Is there anything I should have asked you that I didn't?

SB Well you could have, but I guess you didn't want to.

PS What? *[laughs]*

SB *[laughs]*

PS You've done a lot of these interviews. I'm sure you've heard every question *[laughs]*.

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SB Well, one of the questions has always been that, uh, why did you want to fight for United States when they did all this bad things to your nation? Took all the land away from them, they killed them, and slaughtered them, and why did you want to fight for them?

I just simply say, well, to all the Native American Indians, North America is still our country. That's why we fight for it. We call it our mother country so – so when somebody tries to take your mother away, what do you do? You fight for it. You protect it. And that – that's my answer to that.

PS It's a good answer. *[laughs]*

SB Mm-hm.

PS Okay. Thank you.

SB Thank you.

PS We got what we need. He just wants to get a couple more shots. He's an editor, so he knows what he'll need. He has to edit it. You can just talk to me and not look at him.

SB Okay.

PS At least it's getting warmer out here. Sun feels good.

SB Oh yeah, it's great. Yeah. It's cold in there where we're sitting.

PS Yeah, eventually the sun will get over there, but you're kind of on the far side.

SB Yeah.

PS Yeah. It's nice out here. Looks like it's gonna be a nice day.

SB Yeah. The last two times I was here it was breezy and cold and rainy. Man, it was cold. We all caught cold.

PS Oh dear *[laughs]*. Not good.

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SB No.

PS Yeah, there were some birds hopping around in the cactus behind you there.

SB Yeah.

PS They were coming out and enjoying the sun.

SB Right. Um, I was gonna say that the original 29, when they got out of boot camp, they were gathered and the officer put them in a room, locked the door. They say, okay boys, come up with a code, use your language. And these young Navajos, they thought, gee, how – how we gonna do this? What – what is a code, you know? And so eventually they said, well let's – we need to have an alphabet. See, Navajo is not a written language. So, they used the – the American alphabet. We use that now when – when they, when they write Navajo, they use a what they call phonetic alphabet. And it's by sound. So, they established a alphabet and that's how it started. And uh, and most of these guys were sheep herders. Who would think that a bunch of sheep herders would develop a code that nobody broke? Japanese didn't break it. The Marines didn't break it. The Baptist Church didn't break it. The Navajo tribe, they haven't broken it yet. So, why – why would, uh, so I always say that there must've been some – some help from somewhere...

PS Yeah.

SB ...spiritual help. And – and really put these kids in the right mind. These were all young kids, 17, 18, 19.

PS How many of them...

SB And a lot of them lied about their age so they could get in the Marine Corps.

PS How many are still alive?

SB We say around about 75 or 120, out of 420 total. But only four of the original 29 that developed the code are still living. One lives in Salt Lake City. One lives in Albuquerque. One lives in that village between here and Flagstaff, where that casino is.

PS Camp Verde?

SB Yeah, Camp Verde. And then one lives in Albuquerque. So, there's four of them. One lives on

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the Navajo Reservation.

PS So they – they're the ones that first invented the code.

SB They're – they developed the code.

PS And they had to teach it to everybody 'cause it wasn't written, so you had to just teach it one by one?

SB Well, they had a class. They had a class and they kept two or at least two people from that first 29 to teach the rest of them that are coming in. And that's how – how they did that.

PS Yeah, like you say, not everybody could even learn that code, huh? It was difficult to learn.

SB It was. It was.

PS I heard – somebody told me that some of the Code Talkers, the Marines and people thought that they looked a lot like the Japanese. That they couldn't tell sometimes that they were afraid they'd be mistaken for Japanese?

SB They were early part of the year in the South Pacific they, uh, the Marines thought well, on Iwo Jima, I mean, Guadalcanal in August '42, they invaded Guadalcanal. They landed there. And when the Marines heard this noise over the radio they – they told the officers, hey the Japanese are taking over our communications. And here it was the Navajos. So, they had to give them a – the officers didn't like that. They said, this – this may not work, so finally they decided to give them a test. They wrote a small message. The regular Marine Corps sent that message. When you sent the message in the Marine Corps code, which – which changes every day. It's composition of letters and numbers, changes every day. When they sent a message, when they receive it still in code, go to an officer to decode it. Goes to another officer to see if it's the right message. Goes to another officer to see if it's come to the right place to the right place, then gives to the captain or the officer. So almost two hours that – when they got to the commanding officers. So, the officers said, let's try the Indians. So, the Navajos, when we send a code in – in Navajo code, when the receiver gets it, it's in English. So, it goes directly to the commanding officer. Two and a half minutes. So, the general said, I don't believe this and let's have another one. So, they tried another one, same thing. The Marine Corps, communication almost two hours. Navajo code, two and a half minutes.

PS No wonder it was so valuable.

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SB So the general says let's keep those damn Indians *[laughs]*. Right. That's the way it was.

PS Well, that's great. We still recording all that?

SB He did?

PS Yep.

SB And they captured one of the Navajos on Bataan Peninsula. Only he was in the Army. They took him to Tokyo, and they said, what does this message say? And they tell him this what it says. It's Navajo language and this is what it says and the Japanese just jumping up and down. They said, they tortured him. He was out in the parade ground in the wintertime. His feet were frozen to the pavement. They had tore all his clothes off. Tortured him. More messages would be presented to him, and he'd say this is what it says. This is Navajo, this is what it says. Finally, they let him go. I guess put him back in prison. When the war was over, he came back. He came back to Tuba City, Arizona and they used to tell us about that he said, I don't like Code Talkers. They put me in trouble *[laughs]*. That's what he said, but he – he passed away about three, four years ago.

PS It wasn't enough just to know Navajo 'cause it was a code of...

SB Yeah.

PS ...of the words.

SB Yeah, yeah.

PS That's great.

SB And it didn't make any sense, you know?

PS Yeah unless you knew the secret code. Yeah. That's a wonderful story. Well thank you. Let's see if we can get more of the gentlemen to come back here for us.

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