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 Navajo 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 Navajo Americans were the first to enlist because of the feeling that the land is our mother. The philosophy, the prayer, the religion—leaves and flowers and the Earth is our mother. That’s the reason that we fight.”

The United States had been caught unprepared. In addition to being outnumbered and 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 material 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 had 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 Corregidor fell, and the survivors began their long nightmare 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 Corregidor fell, and the survivors began their long nightmare through American forces with alarming speed. Within weeks the Japanese had 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 Corregidor fell, and the survivors began their long nightmare through American forces with alarming speed.

The image of the battleship Arizona sinking into the harbor while smoke roiled above her inflamed not only white Americans, but Navajo 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 Navajo Americans were the first to enlist because of the feeling that the land is our mother. The philosophy, the prayer, the religion—leaves and flowers and the Earth is our mother. That’s the reason that we fight.”
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 came up with a code nobody broke. Not the Japanese, not the Marines, not the Navajo, 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 bombers 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 Marine problems. Code Talkers would radio positions to command ships 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, 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.

“They told us, ‘Say nothing about the mission to drop the atomic bomb on Japan,’ ” Billison says. “Come to us so we can honor you,”” 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 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.

A paper copy of this issue is available at call number LH 1 .06S6 in Bizzell Memorial Library.