



Thomas H. Begay

Navajo Code Talker, USMC WWII
5th Marine Division (Battle of Iwo Jima Survivor)

Korean War, US Army, 7th Infantry Division
(Chosin Reservoir Survivor - (North Korea – Task Force Faith).

Background: Thomas H. Begay was born on February 5, 1926, in a remote area 18 miles south of Gallup, NM (Two Wells, Chi Chil-Tah & Jones Ranch areas). Thomas H. Begay grew up speaking only Navajo. He attended school at Fort Defiance, Arizona at the age of 13 and learned English. At 16 he enlisted in the United States Marine Corps.

Military Service: United States Marine Corps (USMC) (2 Sep 43 to 23 Jul 46) & US Army (22 Jul 47 to 1 Aug 53). Thomas H. Begay enlisted at the age of 16 and was Honorably Discharged from the USMC and US Army. He was selected as one of the 33 Navajo Code Talkers to be assigned to the renowned 5th Marine Division Signal Company and in the Radio Section of the H & S Company, 27th Marines. The Navajo Code Talkers developed and used a secret coded Navajo language for radio communication in the Marine Corps battle campaign. During the Battle of Iwo Jima, Private First Class Begay transmitted hundreds of secret messages over the radio network from H-Hour, 19 February 1945 to 27 March 1945. The Navajo Code Talkers were so effective that the Japanese cryptographers were completely baffled and were never able to break that code. Major Howard M. Conner, signal officer of the Fifth Marine Division at Iwo Jima said: “during the first 48 hours while we were landing and consolidating our shore positions, I had six Navajo radio networks operating around the clock. In that period along, they sent and received over 800 messages without an error. Were it not for the Navajos, the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima and win the war”.

Thomas H Begay was honorably discharged from the Marines as a Lance Corporal in 1946. He then served in the US Army during the Korean War as a parachutist, glider-man and in combat with the 7th Infantry Division in North Korea. He is a survivor of the Chosin Reservoir battle in November to December, 1950 against the Korean and Chinese forces. He was honorably discharged in 1953. Among his many awards are the Presidential Unit Citation with three Bronze Stars and the Meritorious Unit Citation with the Korean Service Medal with five Bronze Stars. Years later in 2001, he received the Congressional Medal from President George W. Bush. Upon his discharge, he and his wife, Nonabah Doris Yazzie Begay, moved to Gallup, NM then Chinle, AZ to raise a family. They had three boys and one daughter, all of whom served in the Armed Forces.

Federal Service / Retirement: After a two-year correspondence course from Utah State University, he began a career in the U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs. This culminated with his distinguished service as a Line Officer (Agency Superintendent of the Chinle Agency, GS14) where he was responsible for Navajo Nation tribal trust programs. *He retired after 40 years of federal service in 1984.* . He is a member of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) Association, in addition to, lifetime memberships to the following associations: 5th Marine Division, Iwo Jima Survivor's; First Marine Division; 7th Infantry Division and the 11th Airborne Division. In early 2015, he starred in the movie, “Legends from the Sky” as Chei (grandpa). His wife also retired from the Federal Government after 32 years as a Nurse with the Indian Health Service.

He was also very active community leader with the school board, youth activities (he started the Navajo Youth Baseball League in Chinle, AZ), the Lions Club, National Rifle Association (NRA), and assisted relatives in developing their community infrastructure. He also was the 1st Navajo interpreter for the “Navajo Hour”, sponsored by the Catholic Church in 1960 on a Farmington, NM radio station and broadcast reservation wide. He continued to interpret for various US Congressional dignitaries, tribal leaders and officials, During his retirement, he and his wife of 68 years continued to travel around the world, and participated in various national and community events/conferences, chapter meetings, and traditional ceremonies as well as participate in Song in Dance across the Navajo Nation. On April 9, 2013, his wife passed away in Gallup, NM at the age of 84. Thomas H. Begay continues to travel, participate in various parades, military functions and speaking engagements.