

CODE TALKER

**A NOVEL
OF THE
NAVAJO**

IVON BLUM

outskirtspress
DENVER, COLORADO

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Outskirts Press, Inc.

<http://www.outskirtspress.com>

ISBN: 978-1-4787-1925-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2012916903

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

For Beverly

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Down through my writing years, the Cambria Writers' Workshop gals and guys have been there to help, befriend and guide me. My thanks to each and all of them.

Also by this author: *River of Souls, A Novel of the American Myth*, (Sunstone Press).

CHANGING WOMAN MADE IT SO.

Changing woman felt every blow; but did nothing because it was to be. She bled with the severed peach trees of Mother Earth, rotting. She fried with the flaming corn of life, dying.

She burned with the smoke of corpses branding black foot trails on her breasts.

Bled, Changing Woman fed us our dreams from corn nipples of life.

Burned, she carried our babies from starvation on callused wings.

Smoked, she quelled the earth-roaming monsters with her whiteshell cane.

Healed, she returned us to the land of our four sacred mountains.

We, the Dine, the Navajo People, are born again to survive the fearing times – always.

Changing Woman made it so.

IWO JIMA

D-Day Plus Four - February 22, 1945

‘Dearest Penny Joe.’
I tried to write the letter in my mind. Pain cut in and out.

‘Dearest Penny Joe.’

I saw the perky look on her round face which always made me smile. I remembered her full lips pouting in the traditional way and that she didn’t cry when I left her. Maybe she doesn’t care so much, I thought - the way I think I care for her. Probably. I don’t know.

‘Dearest Penny Joe,’ I started again. The pain, this time electric. I panted. The pain pulsed, pulsed and washed away.

‘I see Coyote coming,’ I wrote in my mind, ‘to kick up the ironic dust of my dead ancestors, to bother me here. Coyote and morphine confuse me. I remember the old songs; but, in my mind, the ancient harmony falls apart.

‘What do the wind-song words mean?’

‘When I know the meaning of the wind-song words, maybe I can live again. Maybe, then, I can make you care.’

“Here, Indian,” I heard the corpsman say from the far end of the tunnel of my mind. “This will ease the pain.”

“Ouch!” I heard myself reply.

The corpsman shot me with morphine and I sank and I saw Coyote coming.

Whistles hooted. Horns filled empty consciousness. I was sucked up and up through layer upon layer of morphine memories until I heard men shouting cheers as I re-entered the world.

“Now hear this!” came over the destroyer’s PA system. “The American flag flies over Mount Suribachi.”

I recognized the name, “Suribachi.” Forever, it seemed, I was engaged in the battle for that Jap fortress of volcanic rock and death.

I raised up on an elbow and looked out across the fantail of the ship which had become my stretcher-bearer. I saw the small flag flying less than a mile away.

To the south and east, I saw a sea full of rolling ships. I heard them hooting the glory of Old Glory as if the battle for Iwo Jima were won. Among the hoots and toots, the island still rocked with the clap of artillery and mortars. Explosions smoked the eastern landing beaches.

I saw American marines instantly vaporized who’d stood solid just the instant before. The bomb-pocked sand flats just north of Suribachi were littered with torn flesh; and, now and then, a ship of the vast American fleet flamed and billowed to the beat of the incessant Jap bombardment.

In four days of vicious fighting, the Japs had lost a mountain stronghold. They still held eighty percent of the five mile long island of jagged stone and honeycomb caves.

The man next to me said, “flag makes it all seem worth it. Hell, I never got off the beach. Mortar got me just as I landed.”

“That for the flag?”

“Yeah,” he said.

Like me, he had no leg where one walked just this morning.

“What it’s all about, aint it, Buddy?”

He poked me and offered a cigarette. From habit I reached out with my left hand. He dodged the bandaged stump where my hand

had been and stuck the butt into my mouth.

“Takes some gettin used to,” he said as he held the Zippo across the wind to light my smoke.

“Habit,” I said, embarrassed.

Just as I lay back on the stretcher, the deck exploded. Seawater surged over me. I heard shrapnel hit the steel planking. I heard the sigh of the man next to me like air rushing from a balloon.

“Cor’mán! Cor’mán!”

I heard the yelling inside my head. It was me yelling and the yelling fading back into the morphine dream and the dreaming, saying, “dead. Dead.”

I’m dead? And, feeling nothing now, floating on the dreaming.

* * *

“Sir! My name is Talking Boy Gorman, Sir!” I was yelling at the Marine drill instructor.

“I can’t hear you, Boot!” he yelled back at me.

I felt his spit peppering me too. I screamed, “Sir, Talking Boy Gorman, Sir!”

I was not used to talking loudly. It was against the rules of my people to shout. Now, I screamed. “Sir!”

“Talking Boy?” the Marine drill instructor whispered. “What the fuck kinda name is `Talking Boy?” Now, he spit my name back into my face. “Talking Boy?”

“Sir! Navajo Indian, Sir!”

“Injun? Y’all don’t look like no Injun to me. You look Jap. Are you a fuckin’ Jap?”

“Sir! No, Sir!” I yelled.

* * *

“Sir, no, Sir,” I whispered and thought I was yelling. I opened drugged eyes. I was lying on my back on the deck of the ship. In the distance, I still saw the stars and stripes waving in the wind from atop Mount Suribachi.

I heard someone say, “didn’t even scratch the Indian. How’re ya doin’?”

“Who?” I said. “Me? I’m doing just fine.”

“What? Talk English, Boy. Leave that Injun jive for the Japs.”

I must have answered the corpsman in Navajo. He knew I was a Navajo Code Talker. I relayed combat communications, orders, data in Navajo lingo. Navajo code. Jap-proof. Even U.S. university Japs’re stumped by the guttural sounds of my savage tongue.

Funny. In my work, I think, talk in Navajo, in English - back and forth. But, my private thoughts, like these, are only thought in Navajo. I feel smarter that way.

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

Things cleared a little. I still held the soaked butt of a cigarette in my lips.

“I’m okay. Just wet.”

The corpsman wiped my face and gave me a lighted smoke.

“Your Buddy’s dead,” said the corpsman. “That goddamn shell got him. Piece of shrapnel buried in his head. You’re some lucky Indian.”

“Yeah,” I said.

I watched the flag flutter in the war-driven wind above the mountain fortress.

“I left my body parts on that mountain. My left leg. My left hand - and all five fingers.”

“One thing,” said the corpsman as he injected me with a new batch of morphine. “Whatever you donated to Suribachi, it aint as bad as the alternative.”

“Oh? Yeah?” I whispered. I was getting drowsy again.

“Death.”

“Yeah. Well, what’s a leg, a few fingers when your country’s at stake?” I thought I laughed. “My great, grandfather was called ‘Two Fingers.’ Must run in the family.”

No one replied.

I was swimming in the dreaming; but this time my mind seemed clear. The images were like rain clouds reflected sharply in the mirror of a quiet mountain lake, threatening. The question that had never really surfaced because it was too important to face, now seemed like the cloud images - clear, distinct, pressing.

The same flag, the stars and stripes, now waving victoriously over the Jap fortress rock not long ago flew over the deadly destruction of the Navajo People.

My father told me the stories told to him by Juan Garcia - Juanito - my father’s grand father. Stories of the fearing time when the U.S. government, the Army, caused ruin, massacre and needless Navajo death. To me, a young boy, they were just stories, family legends, entertainment for snow-bound nights.

Now, as I lay afloat in the morphine twilight, I knew the stories must answer for this Indian’s leg and five fingers and other Navajo Code Talkers who’ve died for the flag carried into battle by the enemy of my grandfathers. Must answer for buddies I gladly tried to die for. Must answer for marines who succeeded in dying for me - marines, white men, friends for whom I mourn with a pain the corpsman’s needle can’t reach.

Marines like the Mormon, Heber Smith, who swore to protect me because I was a member, he said, of the lost tribes of Israel; and Alfredo Vargas, who tagged an “y M” after his name, a high class Mexican - he thought - from my own lands of Arizona and New Mexico.

Vargas called me ‘Cousin.’ And, tried to kill me, shoot me in the back. Why?

I began to sink again into the morphine world; but the questions burned. The old stories must answer for all these.

'What do the wind-song words mean? My Long Walk never ends.

'How come?

'Penny Joe. How come I change flags so easily?'