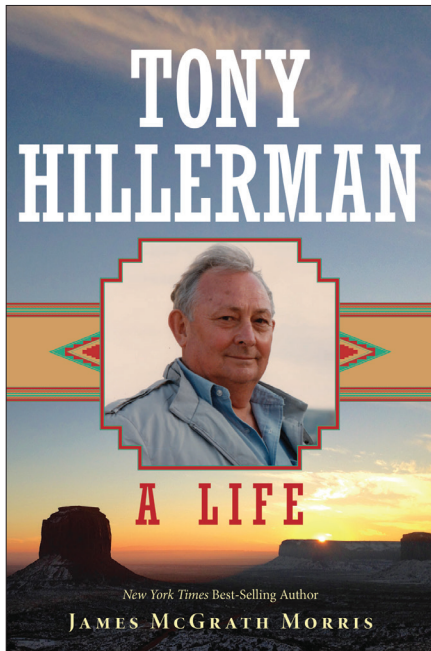


TONY HILLERMAN A LIFE

BY JAMES McGRATH MORRIS



Prologue

In late August 1945, two trucks stirred up plumes of dust on a dirt road in western New Mexico as they neared the delivery point for the oil-drilling equipment they carried. It had been a long trip from their starting point in Oklahoma City to this barren spot on the edge of the Navajo Nation. For one of the two drivers, still nursing wounds from combat in the war that had just ended, the long trek had been particularly arduous. The vision in his left eye was limited, the land-mine damage to his left leg still gave him a pronounced limp, and haunting memories of war remained fresh in his mind. On this late afternoon, as he drove the last miles of the journey, a group of Navajos dressed in ceremonial clothes emerged on horseback from the side of the road in front of him, crossed over, and disappeared among the piñons and junipers.

A few miles later, upon reaching the delivery site, he asked the white rancher what the Navajos he saw had been doing, especially dressed in that manner. The riders, said the man, were headed to an Enemy Way, a Navajo ceremony to cleanse two returning marines of the evil to which they been exposed while fighting in the Pacific. Would they let him attend? the driver asked. Yes, said the man, they would likely permit it if he didn't disturb the ceremony with drink or rude behavior.

That night, twenty-year-old Tony Hillerman parked his truck and limped over to the campfires where the Navajos were gathered. "I still remember," he wrote years later, "the bonfires lining that packed-earth dance ground, the dust raised by shuffling feet, the flickering yellow firelight, the perfume of the burning piñon and juniper, the sparks blown by the night breeze, the four drummers, the smell of roasted mutton, and two marines—exhausted but happy to be cured of war and home again—surrounded by their friendly people."

Years would pass before Hillerman returned. When he did, however, he would be the one to create unforgettable memories for millions of readers around the globe with novels that captured Navajo culture and the people's spiritual devotion to achieving *hózhó*, a harmonious existence with one's surroundings and place in life. In doing so, Hillerman would travel a path of healing that began that night in the summer of 1945. He, like the two marines, would find in the Navajo world a salve for the horrors of combat. He would come, as the Navajos might say, to walk in beauty.