

**Bill Harrison, Choctaw,** [REDACTED]  
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**Interviewed by Judy Allen April, 2020**

**Photos include Bill's military photo, photos of his leadership of Okla Chahta Clan during annual Gathering.**

**Story appeared in Memory Keepers book.**

### ***Bill Harrison***

#### **Keeping the Choctaw Culture alive –Veteran is founder of Okla Chahta group**

Bill Harrison, Choctaw tribal member living in Bakersfield and founder of the Okla Chahta group, remembers his time spent in the military.

"I spent a year and a half in Alaska on top of a mountain on an isolated missile site. The temperature reached 80 below zero. There were special precautions and if you didn't follow them, it was a court martial offense. These precautions were put in place to save our lives because of the dangers associated with the cold."

Bill Harrison continued speaking, "The site was a Nike Hercules missile site and I was a radar technician." He served in the Army for six years, the first few years specializing as a Radar Tech for the Nike Hercules.

"We were part of the Dew Line Defense. We had nuclear capabilities – surface-to-air or surface-to-surface missiles.

"I was on top of that mountain in Alaska for eighteen months and the Russians attempted to overrun us three times. They flew airplanes in and tried to defeat our defense. They had Russian fighters coming at us. Once, Russian fighters and NORAD put us up in the status - the message was: 'Site 22 receiving fire – Challenge and Reply.' *We got down to a two on the countdown to firing a missile on Russia.* It was really scary."

"We were a part of NORAD," Bill said. "Our radio system with NORAD was open communications. Russians had trollers in the Bearing Strait and would check our communication and defenses constantly." Bill said Russians continue to troll U.S. systems today to check how good the defenses are.

While in Alaska, even though he was Army, he was assigned to the Air Force. Bill said the missile site and defenses he was assigned to was part of the Strategic Air Command (SAC). He was at Fairbanks high in the mountains.

"Pilots would fly B-52s bomber aircraft and our Air Force Base had refuelers for the B-52s so they could go anywhere in Russia if they needed to. They would go to Russia, turn right and follow the border. Planes, (armed with nuclear weapons) would stay up 24 hours a day. They would fly awhile, then another would take its place." This maneuver was called Operation Chrome Dome.

"By flying along the border, they could go into Russia on a moment's notice if ordered. It was all really serious stuff," he said.

“Everybody on the site had Top Secret clearance because of the nuclear weapons. When I went home on leave, everyone thought I was AWOL because the FBI had been asking questions. I had to explain it was because of obtaining my clearance,” said Bill.

“Alaska was considered my overseas duty. I was then assigned to Painesville, Ohio, just a little outside of Cleveland. We had five sites underground in the middle of town and no one even knew were there. We were Air Defense in the middle of Ohio.”

Military men were not respected by a lot of the general public during Bill’s service, as the Viet Nam war was receiving a lot of mixed coverage by media. He said he was on a train platform one day wearing his dress greens and was told by a man to, “Be sure and be off by dark or you will be dead.”

Bill said, “While I was in Ohio I was on Officer-of-the-Day duty when the astronauts walked on the moon. I was able to watch it on television. I will never forget that moment.

“Then I was assigned to Travis Air Force Base in California. On the way there, I married Theresa Cullen – a girl I knew from High School in Texas. We were driving to California listening to the radio and heard about the murder of Sharon Tate and four others by Charles Manson and his cult. That is another deep memory I have of a moment in time – just not a good one. It was August 9, 1969.”

While serving at Travis AFB, Bill once again saw first-hand the bias against the military during the Viet Nam era. The base was fenced, yet rioters came to the fence with weapons and fired upon the base. “They unloaded on us. We were told we could not fire back upon the civilians unless they came beyond the fence upon the base, even though they were shooting at us,” said Bill. “Our commander told us if they came on base, we were to shoot to kill.”

Bill said, “Travis AFB used the C-5A Galaxy airplanes, the largest planes made at the time, to haul caskets. Travis AFB had the largest mortuary of any base. They would take empty caskets from the USA, filled with supplies and ship overseas, then bring the caskets back with soldier’s bodies. The planes flew in and out 24 hours a day.

“I am still overwhelmed with the memory of caskets stacked ten high and placed the length of four or five football fields down the runway at Travis. That is a picture in my mind I will never forget,” said Bill.

“President Nixon made a deal with the Russian president for a reduction in nuclear weapons and part of the deal was to destroy some weapons on both sides, so they disabled all of the Nike weapons. I was transferred to the 1st Cav Division in Ft. Hood. They had Vulcan weapons that had radar on them for tracking planes and shooting them down. They could shoot 6,000 rounds a minute with 30mm shells,” said Bill.

“I discharged out of Ft. Hood. I thought it was pretty cool to discharge there – that is where I was born!”

Bill and Theresa moved to Utah where he had an opportunity to get into the oil business. “The last eleven years I was in the oil company, I owned my own company as a down hole engineer. It was an analytical lab, designing oil country tubular (pipe) that goes into an oil well. I have the rights to a proprietary gauging system that can measure down to .003 of an inch.”

Bill has worked for different companies. After a major oil company had issues in offshore leakage, they used Bill to certify equipment. “Nothing was used unless it had my seal. They never had any more problems after that,” said Bill.

He also worked for an oil country supplier as director of quality improvement, then went on to find a job through the California Indian Health Board as Quality Inspector for the Tule River Tribe. His job with the Tule continued as Corporate Compliance Officer. "Chief Batton and I worked a lot together helping tribes in health care," he said.

"I had been told all my life I was Native American. My mother got a divorce when I was two or three years old. I was completely alienated from the Choctaw side of my family. When she remarried, she changed my name when my stepfather adopted me from Billy to Billie so my Choctaw family couldn't search records and find me.

"I was finally able as an adult to get in touch with an aunt in Nashville. I asked about my Native American heritage. I got copies of my father's old Choctaw 'red card.' I started researching and applied for a CDIB. Brenda Hampton, (then the Director of the tribal program) got hold of the application," said Bill. "I had been told by the state the birth certificate was sealed and I could not have access. Brenda called them and said 'You can keep it from him, but you can't keep it from me.' She got it and got me my Indian card."

Bill said, "(Former) Chief Roberts came to Los Angeles for a meeting and a lady stood up and cried and said she had lost her heritage. He said to sit down and shut up. He told her she had lost nothing and he could not do anything about it.

"I told Theresa on the way home that we could do something. Someone had told us stories about how they used to hold get-togethers with picnics and we decided we could do something like that for a Choctaw gathering. We had the first California-based Okla Chahta Gathering at the Tule Elk Preserve. Now, it is over 25 years later.

"After sharing the Choctaw culture, we decided we needed to learn more culture and keep building. Whatever we teach, we want to make sure it is accurate and correct," said Bill. "I have learned a lot from my experience with the Okla Chahta Gathering. The Choctaw family is extremely important. I am really missing seeing that extended family. We put out a notice (in mid-April 2020) about having to cancel (because of COVID-19) and have had 1,200 people respond. They understand but are disappointed. They had hoped restrictions would be lifted and allow the gathering to be held," said Bill. The restrictions were still in place May 2021, so a second suspension of the Gathering occurred.

Bill said, "Something that intrigues me that I have seen invented during my lifetime is cellphones and satellite communications. I am 70 years old. When I was growing up we didn't have phones or televisions. It was a big deal when we got a TV. It had three channels and I was thrilled that I got to watch Howdy Doody.

"My grandmother said she moved here on a covered wagon and said she thought she had seen it all when she saw man walk on the moon. 'They can't do any better than that', she said. I wonder what she would think about cell phones, talking without the phone being attached to the wall and even being able to talk face-to-face on phones."

Bill said, "I have a message to the youth of today. 'Don't let the culture die. Keep it strong. You don't keep it strong by watching. You actually have to participate.

"I am just a simple man, trying to do whatever I can do. What we did with the culture is like a bonfire that was stomped out. We wanted to blow on the embers and bring back the fire. The culture is here. It is built into you. You just have to make it alive."

Cut lines:

Main photo:

Bill Harrison in military uniform.

Bill Harrison at the 2015 Okla Chahta Gathering with Choctaw Nation royalty Loren Crosby, Neitha Hardy and Ariana Byington.

*Interviewed by Judy Allen April 2020*

Pictured at a previous Okla Chahta Gathering are Chief Gary Batton, storyteller Tim Tingle, late Chief Greg Pyle and Bill Harrison.