



MERRIL SANDOVAL  
1925 - 2008

Honored as a Historymaker 2005  
Navajo Code Talker



The following is an oral history interview with Merrill Sandoval (**MS**) conducted by Pam Stevenson (**PS**), Agave Productions, Inc., for the Historical League, Inc. on March 6, 2004, at the Heard Museum in Phoenix.

*Original tapes are in the collection of the Arizona Historical Society Museum Library at Papago Park, Tempe, Arizona.*

PS First, I'll just identify that today is Saturday, March 6, 2004. And I'm Pam Stevenson doing the interview here at the Heard Museum. And I'll let you give me your name, so we'll have it pronounced correctly.

MS My name is Merrill L. Sandoval.

PS Merrill is your first name?

MS That's right, M-E-R-R-I-L.

PS Okay. Sandoval. When were you born and where were you born?

MS I was born in 1925 in Farmington, New Mexico; not in a town but about 30 miles out on the Reservation, the eastern part of the Navajo Reservation.

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PS And were your family sheep herders there?

MS: Oh yeah. We had a lot of sheep. And the families had a lot of sheep. And that was our chore. All of a sudden you're a code talker and then you herd the sheep. And we done that between school vacations.

PS Where did you go to school?

MS I went to Farmington, New Mexico, near the Colorado border and it happened to be a church school, a boarding school. Most of those schools were boarding schools that was either run by the government or churches.

PS So you had to leave your family to go to school?

MS Yes, I left nine months out of a year I was at that school. And then three months out of that, we're back on the Reservation.

PS Did you like school?

MS I did at a certain time, but of course it was a different type of environment once we got there. 'Cause I didn't speak any English. I didn't read in English. And I didn't talk English. I had to learn English.

PS That must've been hard.

MS It was hard in the beginning. And those days they're only start right off sixth grade. Right off the bat. There was no such thing as kindergarten or Head Start in those days. And nobody graduated in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade either. There was no graduation. Just high school.

PS Where did you go to high school?

MS Right there, same place until I went and got...

PS So, in high school were you a good student?

MS I think I was. I like the school. I liked my subjects and being a church school, we had the Bible as well, the curriculum. So, we learned a lot about the Bible there.

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PS So what were you going to do after school?

MS I really don't know. Other than finding a job, I guess, and I had no thought about the time. And I wanted to learn the – the English language.

PS Well, you must've learned the English language by high school and...

MS Yeah, by the time I was a sophomore, I was pretty good fluently in both Navajo and English language.

PS So how did you come to enlist in the military?

MS Well, one church day on a Sunday, after we got out of church, we heard that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor. Of course, none of us knew where Pearl Harbor was. But later went through history it was on the Hawaiian Islands. And, later on, we found out there was different branches of services, like Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force, Coast Guard and one day, there's a couple that came on the campus. And we happened to find out they were from the Marine Corps. And what they were doing, they were interviewing some high school students that could speak Navajo and English fluently. And we – we just figured that they were taking us into the Marine Corps, and everybody wanted to go, as you know, in that time when the attack was so sudden, surprisingly compared to what happened in New York and Washington recently, everybody sort of got – want to go. They want to fight or do something. And I was only 16 years old at the time. And I had a brother that was a little ahead of me, he was two years older than me, and he volunteered. They were saying that we had to volunteer to take us into the Marine Corps and pass some tests, plus get permission from our parents. So, course my brother went in. They took him and he qualified and shipped him off from Santa Fe, New Mexico.

But I wanted to go too and follow my brother. But they told me no, you're too young. You gotta wait one more year until you turn 17. Then you can ask your dad and – and, uh, course we only had a dad then. My mother had deceased already. So, it wasn't too long I turned 17. Right away I volunteered. They were still coming around. And they were doing all those Reservation, not only our school, maybe four or five other boarding schools on the Reservation. See what they were doing, recruiting. But we didn't know what – we just knew they were going in the Marine Corps.

PS So you went in at 17?

MS Yes, when I turned 17.

PS And where did you go? Where did they take you?

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- MS I went through the same process, induction at Santa Fe and took us by train down to San Diego. Down to the Marine Corps base to attend the boot school – boot camp. Which we did.
- PS Had you ever been on a train before?
- MS No. Never had.
- PS What did you think about that?
- MS I think it was quite an experience. But when we got hungry, we didn't have that much money. Everything was so high. A sandwich was so high that – but we stood it. It didn't take long to get to San Diego.
- PS So had you ever been off the Reservation like that to go to a...
- MS Only on sports, maybe I went into Colorado, that was the closest state, and Arizona. That's about the only, uh, chance I had to go off from the school in sports events.
- PS So what did you think of San Diego?
- MS Well San Diego was something new, a big town, big city. Nice place. A lot different from what we just got out of our livelihood there on the Reservation, a lot of change.
- PS What was boot camp like?
- MS We, it was okay. I know they teach you a lot of things like discipline, cleanliness, obedience, you even learn how to swim. I didn't know how to swim when I got in there because there was no such thing as pools and lakes or anything like that. I had a river there, but you couldn't swim in there. So, I learned that and, as far as physical training, it – it didn't bother the Navajos at all. 'Cause we came right off the Reservation and we're out there herding sheep, we had to get up early. That's the daily deal when we were young kids. You get up before the sun comes up and take care of your sheep and come back in the evening and, so getting up in the morning was no problem. And physical training was no problem. We were already used to it. We're adapted to living outside, sleeping outside and didn't bother us, so the only thing that we had to learn a lot is marching. There's a type of marching that you had to learn and, that's the way I went through. I'm pretty sure the rest of the Navajo recruits had that experience also.
- PS How did you get involved with the code then?

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MS Well, after we graduated, a bunch of us graduated from boot camp and final ceremony, they transferred us to another camp. Well, in between there was a rifle range where you can learn there - two weeks of all types of rifles, shooting, all calibers, all – so then we had to qualify there and when we finished there, it was two weeks. They took us to another camp which is on Camp Pendleton, where Oceanside, California is. And they had one of the biggest, training camps for Marines there. And they took us there and we were isolated in the barracks. I think there was about – at the time I was transferred there, there was over 200 Navajos in one barrack. And we found out they had a school there that we had to attend. But they didn't tell us what for.

Until we got into the classroom, that's when we found out. And when we got in was a whole bunch of Navajos in there, in classes. They told us that they were gonna use our language to go into communication for the Marine Corps. That's when we found out, the first time we found out.

PS What did you think of that?

MS Well, I didn't think much of it. I was, well, as long as I can speak both languages I guess it's okay. It shouldn't be hard, I figured. Well, we found out it was harder. *[laughs]*

PS Tell me about it. How was it hard?

MS Well, we had to memorize it because there was no such thing as a Navajo dictionary on the Reservation. So, on top of that, we had to learn English in military terms, military equipment, military rank, and military – what you use in war like – like a bomb or – 'cause there was no such word as a bomb. No Navajo word. No Navajo word for grenade, artillery, dive bomber, aircraft carrier and then ranks. No such word for colonels or generals or sergeants. Same with units. No such word for big battalion, or regiment, or company. Those had to be devised, before we got to school. Course there was a lot more added when the war went on. And we improvised a lot. By the time we got to Guam, Saipan and Tinian, it was – it was starting to get perfected so much. It just came natural to us. And it all had to be memorized. We couldn't be carrying any references out there in battle, so we memorized everything. At that age, I guess we were pretty good at memorizing. That's how we – that's the hard part of it. But that's where we perfected a lot, improvising a lot and adding some more. It came out real good.

PS So was everybody able to do that? Or was it only certain people that were good enough to do that?

MS Well some couldn't pass it in the States like Camp Pendleton, how it was. So, what they did, they just held them over or joined another class or joined another unit. When they did qualify and then start going overseas. Some had to be discharged.

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PS So did you have any trouble passing that?

MS No I didn't have any trouble. Course we learned a lot of things, too. Not only code, Navajo code, but we had to go into other equipment like what the other armed forces use, like semaphore panels, all those things, ship – ship to shore communication. They even had flag communications from airplanes and all that. Panels, they call it. And upgrading radios. There's a whole equipment then. We had to learn all that.

PS So when you passed the test and graduated, where did they send you?

MS They take you – they keep you there until they start forming some more units to start a division. And I just so happened to be there when they were forming the 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Division. And when that was completed, then off we went from San Diego to Hawaii.

PS You went to Hawaii?

MS Hawaii. That was our rest camp. The big island, Hawaii. Because Hawaiian Islands got about eight islands, but we were down – way on the other end, the biggest island, they call Hawaii. And there's two volcanoes there. Bigger than the Frisco Peaks. And they're forever busy, active. At night our mess kits would be shaking, all the time. That's where our rest camp was. The 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Division was on Maui, it's another island north of big island, Hawaii.

PS Which division were you with?

MS 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Division.

PS And then where did you go from there?

MS We trained there quite a bit and from there we went to Pearl Harbor. That was our starting point all the time, Pearl Harbor. They didn't tell us where we're going. And all they told us that we were going to an island, not even giving us any name or anything. We're gonna take that island, invade that island and I went to Saipan, but I didn't get off there. I was reserve with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Division by then and from there, later, I joined and was in the 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Division. All of a sudden, we headed out again. We were headed north toward Japan and finally they told us that the name of the island was Iwo Jima. That's where we landed February 19, 1945. And it was a rough landing. And we had so many ships. I think we had about ten or twelve aircraft carriers and they were smaller aircraft carriers then. But we needed the planes. And we had battleships, six or seven battleships, cruisers, destroyers, boy, that place was crowded.

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And that island was so fortified, the Japanese were still there. They were all underground. And then Mt. Suribachi on one end, they had tunnels in that one, too. So, when we landed – I landed near that mountain, Suribachi, we're underneath and from Mt. Suribachi we were an easy target. There's a beach right there. That beach was a mess. Dead Marines, equipment, oh boy. And if the Navy didn't get us in straight to the beach, the thing with our - our little boats would start going over. Ours turned over, so we actually had to swim to shore. See, they're in a hurry. They were gonna unload us and get back over and unload. The Navy, coxswain they call them, the ones that guided our landing boats. But there was plenty equipment on the shore.

PS So your boat turned over?

MS Yeah.

PS Ooh, that must've been scary.

MS They lost a lot of equipment, yeah. And we got ashore okay. But that island's so – so hard to climb on and where we landed was kind of a hilly, volcanic ashes. It's just like walking on sand dune, trying to climb. And there was Marines all over, the lives ones and dead ones. See, I was with headquarters, signal company. I was with a major general all the time. Major general and a brigadier general. That's two-star general and one-star general and a bunch of colonels. And there was about five or six of us. Since we're in headquarters, that's where we were to transmit messages down the line, down to the regiments and battalions and companies, all the way up. And they had Marines – I mean Navajo Code Talkers down the line. We had a lot of work to do.

PS So you didn't lose your radio when the boat turned over?

MS Yeah, by that time our radios were advanced. We had Motorola radios that we carried on our back. You know, long antennas and phone deal and pretty handy. All they had to do was get a piece of paper, colonel or generals and just hand it to us. It's either an order or instructions on troop movement, any stuff like that and information, commands, and they give it to us, and we just go to our radio, translate it in the code and on the other end, a Navajo code talker receives it, and he translates it back to English. And give it to their commanders. And it's so fast. It just took them maybe a minute while the other code they had been using – they call it American Morse Code, all the other branch of service use those, but the Japanese were breaking those. It's just easy for them to break those. So, but they didn't break ours and theirs was slower. Ours were a lot – if their messages took 15 minutes, ours took 2 minutes. That's how fast it was. And no mistakes. That's the way we're trained. So, we did our job that way.

PS Did you know at the time when you were doing this how important that was?

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- MS They told us it would be very important, and we learned that communication is really critical in any war. If you didn't have communication, you might as well not move ahead. And that's the idea, to move ahead. And if you didn't have any communication, you might as well stay – stay put or go home. We found out that and later as it went on, we started to realize that our code was doing a very good job and we kept it up and we did it. No matter how they tried to interfere with us, the Japanese, every day and night they tried to interfere with us – but our messages went through. They really did.
- PS Sounds like you really missed your life there.
- MS Sure we did.
- PS Or landing on the beach.
- MS Yeah. I was there about 30 days, and the island was not all secured, but there was 22,000 Japanese there. I think there was only – by the time I left, they figured there was only about 1,000 of them left. And we had pretty close to 80,000 Marines on that island. And the island was only eight miles long in the widest part, about 2 ½ miles. So, we're pretty crowded on there. But the Japanese were underneath, and we were on top.
- PS They were hiding underneath?
- MS Boy, they were protected. They had 25 years to fortify that island we found out.
- PS Yeah, I heard some were concerned that – that you would be mistaken for Japanese. That the Code Talkers looked a lot like the Japanese?
- MS Well, you've seen – I don't know if you've seen *Windtalkers* or not? I believe in it about 50%. Some of it, very well true. Some are true Marine action. And all that action is Marine action. But very little demonstration of code talking. And they didn't use – there's only one Navajo on there. And he got killed at the end. And, I can always say, wherever I speak, the reason that movie was made was that we all had bodyguards. One example on Iwo Jima, after there was a lull there, kinda quiet down a little bit, we had two other Navajos that took over our jobs while we rested a little bit. And then we, another Marine Navajo Code Talker named Wilson Price and I, good buddy of mine, we decided to take a little walk, not very far. Just to stretch and do something and we didn't go more than – less than 40 yards. Here comes a Marine lieutenant and a Marine sergeant with their guns. They were ready to kill us. And we told them that we're Navajo Code Talkers. They didn't believe us. See, a lot of those other units didn't know we were there, and our job. A lot of them didn't know. And they thought that we were Japanese, two of them. And they were ready to kill us. And we told them, my buddy told them, we'll prove it to you, why

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don't you take us to your command post. We knew there's radios down there. And a lot of those radiomen, you know, knew about us and sure – sure enough, they marched us over. But they still didn't believe us. They still had their guns on us; on our backs and before we got to their command post, two Marines jumped up over there, two sergeants I think it was, they took out their guns. And yell at those two that were marching us over there. They used cuss words, SOB and all that, "You leave our Code Talkers alone or we're gonna shoot your guys." And they just took off. That's where we were saved. The reason is, there were Japanese coming through, live ones. And getting – getting Marines up front. Their uniform, all their equipment, helmet, everything. And they walked through. Somehow they come through, infiltrate, either for food, water, or just to get in the back. They thought we were two of them. And it happened to be an artillery outfit. See artillery outfits are always close to us, our command posts. And they were camouflaged, and we didn't see the camouflage part. That's why we were walking right in front of them.

PS So you needed those guards to protect you?

MS That's what I always say, "Where's my guard? Our guard?" Unless we had them sleeping back there, I don't know. But I heard, though, that some of them did have, but that's one example. We didn't have any guards.

PS So you didn't have guards?

MS Didn't even stop us or anything, nobody.

PS Did you realize how much you looked like Japanese before you went over there?

MS I imagine we did, no, not really, not really until we saw them in person. I mean, their features and color, you know? Mostly didn't – didn't get Japanese, you know, and I've seen – we've seen pictures, I guess, of you know, they had black hair and all that. And of course, being out there, we could look like anything *[laughs]*. Anybody.

PS Any other stories about your experience that you want to tell?

MS After that campaign, operations, we get to go back to our rest camp, clear back to the big island Hawaii. But, before we got back there was a lot of other islands and stopovers and after that we trained some more. We're ready to go again. And we took off again. We didn't know where we're going then either. They won't tell you 'cause the Japanese already know through, not our Code Talker, but code talking through other means of communication. They all decoded, and they know troop movements and everything else. Where are we coming from, where we're going, all that.

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In fact, Tokyo Rose was famous for that. I guess you heard about her. She always broadcast from Japan. She always said the Marines are going here. The Marines are going there. Your girlfriends are all with somebody else back in the States, all that stuff. And so that was the longest time I been aboard ship, 45 days. From just maneuvering around, island to island, or here and there, and just about that time, we heard there's two atom bombs were dropped, one on Honshu and one on Kyushu, on the island Japan. And we heard that the Japanese did not surrender, and it went on and on. And then one day we heard that they are gonna surrender. Sure enough. But we were told later that we were going in to invade Japan, a whole bunch of us. Maybe it's a good thing we didn't. I wouldn't be here, maybe. They were well fortified. We kept going as occupation. We were still armed. Code Talkers were still with our radios just in case we were told to go ahead and land.

But it was a different spot from where we were supposed to land. And that was a beach. They could've just murdered us there. But we went in another port, a place named Shigeo, Sasebo. They had a real nice harbor right in there. And when you went on in there, I guess the Japanese were told to stay in their homes, don't come out on the streets, we're coming in. Sure enough, they did. We had no problem. We just got ashore, marched on the street to the closest barracks they had a naval base, naval academy there. We took over that academy. And that's where we lived for the next six months. But the Japanese, they just looked at us. They were in their houses, businesses and all that. And later on, we got acquainted with them and had a little liberty.

They were nice people. Just like United States. They're a pretty country. Course they were, you know, more of a poverty level where we were and – and most of the mothers there didn't know where their boys were. They knew they took them off to war somewhere. They didn't know. And we got acquainted with them and that's where they thought also – they wondered who we were, the Navajos. You know, those were Indians, I guess, too. And they would point to us and say, “You Nissan? Nissan?” “No, no. We're American Indians.” Then they would point, “India? Oh, India?” “No, no, not from India. American gene, American Indians.” “Oh, oh, okay. American gene, Indio.” And we found out later what Nissan meant. That was an American born Japanese, a Nissan. That's what they thought we were till they found out that we're American Indians. That's one experience.

PS Yeah.

MS And course, we disarmed them and boy, they had a lot of weapons. All their plants, manufacturing deal, new weapons, old weapons are replaced. Where we're supposed to land was well fortified, big guns from the hills and all that. We would've had a rough time going in there.

PS So when did you finally come back to the States?

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MS Six months later, in 1946, March of '46. We came back on a slow boat to China again. Took us two weeks to get back to San Francisco. Course we stopped here and there. We had our liberty on some island, you know? And beer bust or whatever they had and that's it. ...and that was our reward, I guess.

PS How long did you stay in the Marines?

MS I was in there from 1943 to 1946, about practically three years. And I finally made corporal.

PS What did you do after that? After the service?

MS Well they wanted me to stay in there. Like all Marines do that. I said, "No," I says, "If you give me one more stripe, I'll be a sergeant. I can stay then." He said, "No, it'd be hard to do it right now." "Okay, bye-bye. I'm out." Well, the first thing I had to do is finish my high school 'cause I was sophomore when I went in at 17. And I went to school in Riverside, California. There's an Indian Institute there. They call it Sherman, it's an Indian School. I think it's still there, but different type in '46, 1946. There were a lot of veterans there. They invited – they entered a lot of veterans, you know, different tribes, Navy, Army, Marine Corps and all, and we were treated like kings there. Over the students. *[laughs]* And we – we just went there one year.

They allowed only one year. And course we were kind of separate, you know, we were older and had our own liberty and stuff. And I finished my junior year there and I had to go somewhere else. I didn't go back to Farmington, New Mexico. I went to Albuquerque. That's where I finished my senior year. And after I finished my senior year, I decided to – I gotta do something. Get a job, learn something. But at that time, that was 1948, a tribe, or we didn't know anything about scholarship, nobody ever mentioned scholarship, but the only thing that we knew, they had vocational trainings all over the country. So, I decided to go to vocational school. And the only other place – well these Indians could've had them, but not the small ones. There is a bigger one that was over in the high school, Lawrence, Kansas. They had another big Indian Institute there. And it was big; it's a junior college now. And they had trades of all kinds.

So, I picked to be a machinist and so I went to vocational training for two years and I graduated, and they hired me there during the summer. I was looking for employment. Excuse me. And the only place I got hired first was in Kansas City, Missouri as a machinist and that was way out of town, the southern part, and for Bendix Aviation. It was an atomic energy, machine shop plant. It was restricted areas here and there, all over. I was there three years as a machinist. And I had a girlfriend in high school, and she was from out here, western New Mex- uh, Arizona on the Reservation. I married her in 1951. That's when I resigned over there. And I came back to Arizona. I'm still with her, by the way, 52 years, going on 53 years.

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PS Great.

MS She's here today. And, I laid around in Tuba City for a while, you know, and about three months. There was no – no such thing as a machine shop job there and all that, unless you build your own shop, which was expensive and all that. I finally decided to look for another job, machine shop. I figured my in-laws were getting tired of me, so I know I can qualify anywhere so I – I applied here in Phoenix. I applied in Albuquerque. I applied in Barstow. I applied in Page, Flagstaff, Winslow and I was hired here over all of them. And that was a job out here by Sky Harbor Airport. So, the old company they ... I think they're with an airline now, Signal, used to call it Air Research Manufacturing Company. It was their only plant down there across from Sky Harbor. And then they started building here and then Motorola was the only other plant. There was two plants. And aluminum – Reynolds Aluminum was the other one. That's it. That was in the 50's, '52. And I got hired here in the machine shop. About a week later, Albuquerque writes to me, Sandia – Sandia Corporation. They want me to come for work – to work. Everything's ready. And so, I had to wire back. I said, "No, I already got a job, thanks." And that had to be another atomic – atomic energy plant between Bendix Aviation, Kansas City, Missouri, Sandia Corporation, then it went on to Los Alamos. That's where the laboratory is. They was all atomic energy projects.

PS They were in demand, weren't they?

MS Yeah. I passed Q clearance. That's the highest you can go in security. Anyway, that's where I live here, ten years. Brought my wife down. We had three kids by the end of ten years. Then we decided – my wife decided she was working before, and she got lonesome for the Reservation. I said, well, we can go back. And we bought a home here. Bell Road was just desert out there. Nothing. They built the first homes there. Bell Road, Campobello, they call it. Still out there. It was an acre and a house. I bought that in 1950- '53, I think it was. So, then we moved back up. Now it's in the middle of town. Oh, everything was nothing out there. Just the area was there. It was the only one.

PS So you've seen a lot of changes.

MS Yeah. That was in the '50s.

PS Yeah, so all that time your – your work as a Code Talker was still secret, huh?

MS Yeah. It started to come out '69, '68 or '69. They finally declassified it then, I guess. The Marine Corps and the Navy, and by that time we were old guys. *[laughs]*

PS So you kept the secret all those years?

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- MS Oh yeah. We were sworn to secrecy when we got discharged. They told us that we want to use you again in case, you know, we go back to war 'cause Korean War started about five years later or something like that. But they didn't use us over there. And the reason – one of the reasons, I think, was there was a lot of armed forces over there, Marines, Navy, Army, Air Force and other countries, like Australia and India and it wouldn't do it any good, just the Marine Corps would've used us. But they had to help each other and – but I heard the propaganda, I don't know, that they was thinking that we might go to war with Russia. That's – at that time. So, that's as far as it went. We didn't – we just plum forgot it, too, that secrecy, until later. It came out when we had a reunion in '68 in Window Rock.
- PS And then you started to get some honors and you...
- MS That's when it started, yeah. Still to this day, I been going to east, all over, I had the last – furthest I went was Albany, speaking tours. We do have speaking tours. And my contract runs out in August. We have an agent in New York City. And they call it Greater Talent outfit in New York City. They're the ones that book us. It's usually universities or colleges or museums or military bases. They're the ones that request the Code Talkers. But they have to foot the bill. That's up to the agents, I guess. They set that up for us.
- PS Who would have thought that by learning the code, you'd end up with an agent? *[laughs]*
- MS Mm-hm. Right.
- PS How do you feel about all of those experiences that you've had today looking back?
- MS It's quite an experience and sometimes you figure, well, maybe we should've done it this way or that way, but I don't think it's really – we hardly had any mistakes. I think we did our job the right way and that's what a lot of our commanding officers know. They're the only ones that can tell the world how we did it and how we operated. A lot of them are now deceased and, of course, they were older than us. I'm one of the youngest when I went in in 1943. I was 17. So, I'm 79 right now. I got an older brother that went ahead of me, he's still living. He's a Code Talker. He lives over in New Mexico. He still travels around. He's 80 – he's almost 81 now.
- PS When you travel around, especially on the Reservation when you talk to the young people today – what kind of advice do you give them?
- MS We do try to keep it as mellow as it could be. We don't talk much about the experience in war, what we seen, what we experienced and – and what we did is just to carry on that language. That's our main – main topics all the time. Because a lot of kids nowadays, they don't know

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their language, uh, original language. I don't know why, even though they have a Navajo father, Navajo mother, some of them don't speak or understand Navajo. But they're – they do have bilingual schools now on the Reservation. I've got grandchildren that come home; they talk Navajo to me. And they're learning. They're learning. Because the language is very important to us to keep it going. Don't lose it. It's used in religion. It's used in stories. It's used in all that – in ceremonials and everywhere. Now they're going into books and it's hard to read, but they do have text on it and the kids are learning it real easy, better than I am. I can't read what somebody else writes those things and that's the reason that it's still sacred to us. And we want to keep it that way in our culture and tradition.

PS If some people ask – as to why, as a Native American, you were willing to fight for the United States after, you know, you lost your lands.

MS That's the big question.

PS Yeah.

MS All the way – all over the country.

PS What do you tell them?

MS All the way over to Europe and stuff. They still ask us that. Well, main thing is defend, I guess. Defend our home – homeland. Just like our ancestor tried to do. They're still doing it. And it's just a tradition that our chiefs, our warriors, we act like warriors in the old days, just like the same way, dedication to our homeland, even though maybe we had treaties. We're not supposed to have arms anymore with the government and still they use us. But we still had to get permission or okay from our tribal council. If the council says no, we're a sovereign nation now. We don't have to fight your war like we did clear back to Columbus day. All the Indian tribes that were there then, they fought all kinds of wars. They either helped the French, they either helped the British, the Spaniards, whatever they did, they were still fighting. So, we're doing the same thing. That's why. And I think we're doing a – we're dedicated to our country and our homeland and safety of our people nowadays and that's why we don't hesitate if we're called upon to fight peoples' war.

PS Thousands of Navajos and other Native Americans have fought in the wars, or many are veterans...

MS True.

PS ... but only a few of you were Code Talkers.

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- MS That's right. Approximately 420 are listed as Code Talkers.
- PS Pretty special group.
- MS Yeah. Now we only got less than a hundred, I think. Not very many. Even our association, that's why we have these uniforms. That's – even the most we had was 50 members, but maybe only 20 show up for meetings every – every month.
- PS Okay, well I think that's all the questions I had for you. Is there anything you wanted to tell me that I didn't ask you?
- MS Um, one other thing that we did a lot is communicate casualties. That's kind of a sad type of communication. During a day's fighting, during a night's fighting, we had to transmit to the command aboard ship – there were Navajos on board ship with the admirals, generals, higher ranking people. They want to know what's going on. We reported every evening how many Marines were killed; how many Marines were wounded and how many Marines were missing. Same way in the morning. In the morning we did the same transmission so the enemy wouldn't know, psychologically we done that.
- PS Yeah, that must've been hard.
- MS A lotta – yeah it is hard. And you see them coming in by the truckloads. And put 'em away. Yeah. That's the sad part about it.
- PS Yeah. But somebody had to do it, I guess.
- MS Yep.
- PS Did you want to get a couple of closeups. Getting warm in the sun here.
- MS Nice.
- PS Yeah, it's good. Birds are enjoying it behind you in the cactus.
- MS Yeah, they...
- PS Jumping around. *[laughs]* Yeah, it's gonna be a nice day, it looks like.

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*Merril Sandoval Historymakers Oral History Transcript*

MS Oh, I think so. I read the forecast was.

PS Get much snow in Tuba City?

MS Very little. We don't get much snow like Flagstaff.  
Pretty country, though, just outta Flag. Snow on the pines.

PS Yeah.

MS That means it snows a lot.

PS When did you drive down?

MS Yesterday. Yeah, it got pretty close to a foot all the way down to the rim. Then you start climbing down Verde.

PS We need that snow. *[laughs]*

MS Yeah, a lot of runoff. Yeah, water's already running. Should see New River up here, 30 miles.

PS It looked like a river, huh?

MS It's fall. It's full.

PS Yeah. They're gonna call it that. Most of the time it's dry. I think we'll go \_\_\_\_ river.

MS Oh yeah, yeah. Yeah, my kids are all grown up. I had five of them, my wife and I.

PS Where do they live? Do they still live around here?

MS They - some are around, and one lives in Santa Fe. She's here today. She works for Los Alamos. She's an engineer over there.

PS All right.

MS Software engineer. She's way up with the professors and the laboratory and all that stuff.

PS Yeah. Bet your kids are all proud of their dad?

*From Merrill Sandoval 2004 Video Interview*



*Merril Sandoval Historymakers Oral History Transcript*

MS I think they are. Yeah, and one is traveling. He's supposed to be back today at 2:00 o'clock from Newport, West Virginia. He's an engineer also. He's a power plant engineer. See they have power plants all over the world.

PS Yeah.

MS So he goes all over the world. I think his next trip is to Taiwan. He's been there before. He's been to China a couple times. He's been to South America, Europe, wherever they call him from. I imagine he's a good worker.

PS Yeah.

MS He trains them, too. Puerto Rico people and all that.

PS He must be good if they send him all those places.

MS Yeah. He's getting tired of it, though, once in a while. His family is up in Tuba City. He's the oldest. He's in his 50s. 51 or so.

PS Yeah.

MS And I don't blame him, but he flies a lot all over the world, yeah.

PS Yeah, it sounds like fun, but when you're really doing it, it's not much fun...

MS Yeah, I know.

PS ...when you have to sit around airports and...

MS Oh yeah, that's the worst place to be at.

PS Yeah.

MS Especially when you're going to fly.

PS Now, did you get the Congressional Medal of Honor?

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MS This one here is just a medal for a reunion in Chicago.

PS Oh. Yeah, your Congressional Medal, I bet you keep that at home in a safe place.

MS Those are big. They're heavy.  
They're too heavy. They're in a box.

PS Oh. Too heavy to wear.

MS Yeah.

*From Merrill Sandoval 2004 Video Interview*