NAVAJO CODE TALKER SAMUEL F. SANDOVAL TALKS ABOUT
"MAKING A "UNBREAKABLE WW2 NAVAJO CODE"

NOTE

SAMUEL SANDOVAL PASSED AWAY ON JULY 29, 2002 AT THE AGE OF 98

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During his time as a Navajo Code Talker, Samuel F. Sandoval remembers a Marine following him throughout his service.

"He was always by me and with me all the time. I didn't mind," Sandoval said. He eventually saw that Marine as a friend, a comrade, even.

One day, when the war was over for Sandoval and he was safe, he found out why that Marine followed him.

"He's your bodyguard," Sandoval remembers his commanding officer telling him in 1945 after the Battle of Okinawa. "That's the way I found out."

Sandoval learned that it was a direct order for every Code Talker on the front line to have a bodyguard, and thinking back on it, he can remember the subtle differences between this Marine and others.

For instance, Sandoval said the man carried a .45-caliber pistol when most Marines carried rifles unless they were a sergeant or higher rank. From what he remembers, his comrade was a corporal. So why did he carry a pistol? Sandoval's commanding officer told him.

"If you get captured by the enemy, that pistol is for you," Sandoval said, pointing at the middle of his forehead. Sandoval's bodyguard, his friend, would shoot him if he were ever caught by the enemy.

"(The Marine) didn't use it, now I'm here talking to you," Sandoval said.

Stories about Sandoval's experience as a Navajo Code Talker in the United States Marines have been told many times. Sitting on top of the entertainment center in his Shiprock, New Mexico, living rooms were copies of his book and a documentary about his life as a Code Talker. Both are titled *"Naz Bah Ei Bijei: The Heart of a Warrior."*

At the age of 96, Sandoval's hearing is not as good as it once was. Before he started talking, Sandoval adjusted the volume on his hearing aid, helping him hear the questions better.

His wife, Malula Sandoval, 58, sits in a love seat across from Sandoval in his wheelchair at the center of the living room. She occasionally leans in to rephrase the question in Navajo if he doesn't understand the first time, and she even gives her husband suggestions on what stories to share.

Today, more than 75 years after their first mission in 1942, the Navajos are recognized as national heroes. In a White House ceremony held by President Donald Trump to honor them last November, 90-year-old code talker Peter MacDonald said that their act of patriotism crossed all boundaries of language and culture. *"What we did," he said, "truly represents who we are as Americans."*

Sandoval is also proud of his service to the country, of being a Navajo, and of his unique part in using a military code that was never cracked by the enemy.

"Many have tried throughout the world to break that code," he says. "No one can."

Sandoval is one of only 4 living Navajo Code Talkers *(as of Aug 14, 2020)*.

THIS IS HIS STORY

He chose the Marines and enlisted at 19

Sam Sandoval at age 19 in 1942 (left) and as he is today.

***For 12 years, Sam Sandoval was forbidden to speak his language*.** Like many generations of Navajo, he was sent away from his home in New Mexico to a boarding school as a child. There, he was forced to abandon much of his native culture and speak only in English. Sandoval and his friends "used to sneak away and talk Navajo," he says.

Then, on December 7, 1941, Japanese planes attacked the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The assault killed more than 2,400 Americans and plunged the U.S. into World War II (1939-1945) against Japan and its allies. Like millions of other Americans after Pearl Harbor, *Sandoval signed up to defend his country, enlisting in the Marines at age 19.*

But he wouldn't be an ordinary recruit. To his surprise, the Marines chose him for an experiment: to help devise and use a secret code based on the Navajo language.

Sandoval would become part of a legendary group of some 400 Navajos known as the code talkers. Their unbroken code helped turn the tide in key battles in the Pacific Ocean and win the war against Japan.

"The Marine Corps was my choice, to begin with," he said, and it was thanks to the influence of Marines he encountered while working in Hawthorne, Nevada, with his father in November 1942.

While working construction for the defense department in the area, Sandoval said there were two units of military personnel, the Navy and the Marine Corps, stationed on-site. None were Navajo.
"I would become companions with some of the Marines stationed (there)," he said.

He recalls them asking him one day why he wasn't joining the Marines. Sandoval didn't ask them why he should join. He already knew what their answer would be: It's the "toughest outfit in the world."

That interaction stuck with him, and about a month later, Sandoval said he told his dad that he wanted to go home to Nageezi, New Mexico, to enlist in the military.

Over the years, Sandoval said he's heard stories about how recruiters would tell Navajo men who were hoping to enlist that they would become Code Talkers.

"That's not true," he said. "You don't know what you're getting into. I didn't."

On March 26, 1943, Sandoval said he enlisted in the United States Marine Corps at a recruitment office in Farmington, New Mexico. His first stop was Santa Fe, New Mexico, for his physical.

Sandoval enlisted nearly a year after he completed boarding school at Navajo Methodist Mission in Farmington. He was one of 11 Navajos from that school who enlisted, and he became one of eight who passed and went to boot camp.

FROM BASIC TRAINING TO A CODE TALKER

After saying goodbye to his family in Nageezi, Sandoval was put on a train from Gallup, New Mexico, to San Diego, California, for boot camp.

At the time, Sandoval said he entered the Marines with a group of 60 other Navajos from across the Navajo Nation. Some he knew, but many of them he didn't.

All 60 of them went into military training together, Sandoval said, and no matter how tough it got, physically and mentally, they took it in stride.

"We went through boot camp with a breeze," he said.

Their life experiences made boot camp easier. Sandoval said they had already experienced the military-like atmosphere of a boarding school and handled the tough environment in the Navajo Nation. Many did well on the rifle range and in marksmen training because they had experience shooting already.

"We carried rifles when we were out shooting rabbits or looking for coyotes," he said.

Once they completed basic training, Sandoval said the group was transferred to advanced training at Camp Pendleton in Oceanside, California.

"We went into the big barracks not knowing what we're getting into," Sandoval recalled.

Inside, Sandoval said they saw some Navajos sitting at some tables and desks. Who were they? Sandoval was told they were the first 29 Code Talkers, recruited by the United States Marines in 1942.

They were responsible for helping develop the unbreakable code used across the Pacific during World War II.

"We asked them what they were doing," Sandoval said. "They said, 'We're making a Navajo code.'"

He can remember seeing Navajo code words assigned to every letter in the English alphabet and a few more attached to various military terms, but nothing more.

The alphabet had one code word for each letter, Sandoval said, and he remembers how his group told them that was not enough.

"We said the Japanese could easily decipher those 26, let's add on to it, so we did," he added, and by the time they were done, each letter ended up with one, two, or three code words.

That made it easier for Code Talkers to use them interchangeably in the combat zone, he said. "They (the enemy) wouldn't catch on."

Sandoval said the code was difficult to construct because the Navajo language has no words for military equipment or personnel. They had to get creative with how to translate those words using the Navajo language. For example, the Navajo code word for a patrol plan was "ga-gig," which translates to crow in the Navajo language.

"Some of the words we couldn't agree on," Sandoval recalled. "So we argued about it."

In the end, some code words had to be spelled out letter by letter, which Sandoval said was something they wanted to avoid because of the extra time it took. "You can't go spelling out there while you're on the front lines," he added.

Sandoval said creating the code was hard work, but during his time, 60 Navajo Marines were able to complete about 600 Navajo code words, compared with the 200 the original 29 created.

By the time their training was over, Sandoval said they had to have all the code words memorized. They wouldn't be carrying around dictionaries when deployed.

FIVE COMBAT TOURS: FROM GUADALCANAL TO OKINAWA

After they went through advanced training to become Code Talkers, Sandoval said he and the others boarded a ship from the San Diego bay to go overseas on Sept. 18, 1943.

All 60 Code Talkers were sent to Noumea, New Caledonia. There was a station there, Sandoval explained, including the Navy, Army, Coast Guard, and the Marines.

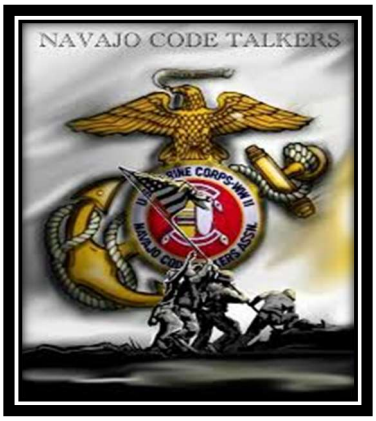
"We stayed there for two or three weeks," he added. "From there, they dispersed us in three divisions.

"Sandoval went into the 1st Marine Division with five other Navajos he trained and went to school with.

"We all came back, us five," Sandoval added.

Sandoval's active military service lasted from 1943 to 1945 and involved five combat tours. He can list them all from memory: Guadalcanal, Bougainville, Guam, Peleliu, and Okinawa.

"I know where I've been," Sandoval said with a laugh.



There are Navajo Code Talker stories where his name is mentioned in the battle of Iwo Jima, but he has never been there. He wants people to know that these five battles are where he has been. Nowhere else.

It's clear Sandoval is only sharing part of his story, touching on the main parts of his narrative. He refers often to his book or documentary for the full story or more details.

His voice was soft when he leaned on the armrests of his wheelchair. At times he put his head down and closed his eyes, as if he was trying to remember properly.

Asked about his memories of being on tour, Sandoval pauses to think about it, and his wife, Malula, sitting a few feet away, chimes in and suggests he talk about the time they were having a Thanksgiving dinner.

"An incident occurred when we were having turkey at a break," Sandoval said.

It happened in 1944 on Peleliu after the United States was able to take one of the islands. Sandoval remembers the island being calm after they reclaimed it. There would be stragglers, Japanese soldiers, who would show up once in a while.

"Stragglers come around not knowing the island been secured by U.S. allies," he added. *"They didn't know they lost the island to us, so we had dinner."*

Before they could sit down for dinner, Sandoval said they heard planes coming.

"We hear them," he said. The planes sounded like washing machines.

"We used to go out and watch for them coming at us," Sandoval added. It wasn't uncommon for Japanese soldiers to swoop down in their planes, bomb them, and leave.

With the table all prepared for dinner, a Japanese plane swooped down and opened gunfire across the table, Sandoval said. No one was hurt, except for the turkey, and everything else on the table.

"So we didn't have no turkey dinner, we went back to K-ration."

TO BE A CODETALKER OR NOT

At the end of the war in 1945, Sandoval said was faced with a decision, "not to be a Marine or to be a Marine?"

Sandoval was sent to China after the battle of Okinawa. Malula remembers Sandoval talking about how he spent four months there in case any more conflicts arose. "They'd be ready," she added.

While he was in China, he remembers hearing: "You Code Talkers are going home."

Sandoval was told not to say a word about his service as a Code Talker when he got back to the States.

"Commander says: 'Don't talk about it after discharge,'" Sandoval said, and then he got handed a piece of paper and was asked to sign on the dotted line.

Before he signed, Sandoval asked if he could read it first.

"Good thing I knew how to read," Sandoval said.

The paper would have re-enlisted him for four more years. He handed the paper back to his commander without signing it and told him: "I'm going home."

Sandoval was discharged on January 26, 1946.

“There are so many things you miss out there,” Sandoval said of his service. “I wanted to come home, that’s what I wanted. I did my job, why stay another four?”

COMING HOME TO THE NAVAJO NATION

The war dragged on until August 1945, when the U.S. dropped two atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Sandoval still remembers the greatest message he ever decoded, on August 14: “The Imperial forces of Japan have surrendered.”

Soon the code talkers would begin coming home, but not to the post-war economic boom that the rest of the U.S. enjoyed. *Instead, the Navajos headed back to their reservation, where jobs and opportunities were scarce.*

To make matters worse, the code talkers couldn’t reveal what they had done. The U.S. government had declared their operation top secret. *The Navajo code wasn’t declassified until 1968.*

No one knew they were coming home. Even Sandoval’s father didn’t know. There was no communication about his whereabouts to his family.

There were no celebrations thrown when Sandoval got back to the Navajo Nation, but his family did have a ceremony in honor of his return. Sandoval didn't share the details behind what type of ceremony was held, which is not uncommon because traditional ceremonies are personal for the Navajo people.

After he got back, Sandoval said he missed his little brother, Merril Sandoval, who also served as a Navajo Code Talker.

Sandoval remembers his younger brother wanted to enlist at the same time he did, but their father said no because Merrill was only 16 at the time. His brother would end up enlisting when he turned 17 in 1943.

His brother didn't return home until March 1946, a few months after Sandoval. Merril passed away at the age of 82 in 2008.

Before he left, his family owned a lot of livestock, from sheep to cattle and horses. Sandoval hoped to ranch again when he came home.

But by 1943, most of the family livestock was gone. So he went to his grandmother's house and asked what happened; that's when she told him the few there were all they had left.

"They took it all away," he recalled her telling him.

His family lost their livestock as part of the fallout from the Navajo Livestock Reduction Program from the 1930s, which is when the U.S. government wanted to limit the amount of livestock Navajo people owned due to grazing on the Navajo Nation. *The livestock were all killed as a result of the program.*

Without livestock, Sandoval was at a crossroads. He needed to decide on what to do next. He could either go find work or go back to school; he chose school and used scholarships he received from his time in the service.

Sandoval studied surveying and went on to work for a surveying crew with a local oil company, according to Sandoval's documentary.

During this time, Sandoval was dealing with hardship caused by the mental and emotional wounds from the war.

There were nights he would sleep soundly, but on others, he would be plagued with nightmares, the documentary states. So Sandoval turned to alcohol as a way to cope, but that only led to other problems.

One day in 1966, Sandoval felt a calling and wanted to help people in his community who struggled with substance abuse and addiction.

He returned to college to earn a certificate in substance abuse counseling and then worked in the Farmington area as a counselor. After years of working for other people, Sandoval ended up opening his clinic in the late 1970s, a halfway house called To-Tah Alcohol Counseling.

I had one building for male patients and another one for female patients. No matter who, no barriers between races or nationalities," Sandoval said.

The house served the Farmington area for more than a decade before it closed down when Sandoval retired in the early 1990s.

Sandoval and his wife, Malula

TALKING ABOUT HIS SERVICE

When asked about the first time he talked about his service as a Navajo Code Talker, Sandoval doesn't answer. *His wife Malula answered for him.*

"I don't think he ever did," she said. When she married him in February 1990, he had never mentioned it. "I knew he was a Marine, that's it."

Malula leaned forward on the loveseat and said she didn't find out her new husband was a Navajo Code Talker until a month after they got married.

She does remember Sandoval handing her a book, and asking her to read it. It was "The Navajo Code Talkers," by Doris A. Paul.

"That was the first time I ever found out he was a Code Talker," Malula said.

After being given the book, she asked Sandoval if he was a radioman. He said yes, confirming that he was a Navajo Code Talker. However, Malula said it took more than 10 years for Sandoval to share his story.

"He never talked about it," she added. "It took him a good 10 years to open up to me."

If she had to pick a time that he started to talk about his service it would be around 2002 when the movie *"Windtalkers"* was released. The movie *shares the story of the Navajo Code Talkers, starring Nicolas Cage and Adam Beach.*

The Navajo Code wasn't declassified until 1968. After that, Navajo Code Talkers could finally talk about their role during World War II, but it was not widely discussed.

CONGRESSIONAL GOLD MEDAL
(TO THE ORIGINAL 29)

CONGRESSIONAL SILVER MEDAL
(ALL OTHERS (371)

In 1982, President Ronald Reagan declared Aug.14 as National Code Talkers Day. In 2000, the Honoring the Navajo Code Talkers Act was signed into law. By 2001, the Navajo Code Talkers were honored with Congressional Gold and Silver Medals. Sandoval received a silver medal.

Over the years, Sandoval said he's heard from siblings and descendants of other Navajo Code Talkers telling him that their loved ones never talked about their service. Sandoval doesn't think that is a bad choice.

Sandoval's father never knew he was a Code Talker. Sandoval said he never wanted to tell his father or grandparents about his time as a Navajo Code Talker.

Being raised traditionally in the Navajo Nation, Sandoval said the teachings he learned from his great-grandfather, who was a Navajo medicine man*, included not talking about "bad things like that."*

No one in his family asked about it. Sandoval said his father knew he was in the military, but couldn't talk about it, so he didn't.

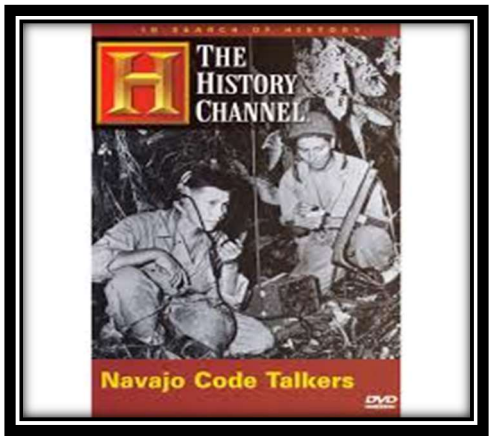
It wasn't until he met Malula that he started to open up more about his experience, *and Malula has been documenting her husband's stories.*

She keeps journals of the stories her husband has shared with her, and she has photos and videos throughout the years." What he shared with me, it's in me, and I treasure that, " Malula said.

During the interview, Sandoval pointed at his wife, giving her credit for why his story is being told. He said he is proud of his service as a Navajo Code Talker, and he looks forward to outliving his grandfather, who lived to be 109.

It should be noted that during the peak of WW2, there were over400 Code talkers and Samuel is one of the four that remain today at the age of 96. **SAMUEL SANDOVAL PASSED AWAY ON JULY 29, 2002 AT THE AGE OF 98**

The Navajo code talkers served in some of the fiercest battles of the Pacific. They saved many lives and helped the United States and its allies win the war. However, the code talkers were never allowed to discuss their work with anyone. Most Americans did not know about the code talkers' role in World War II until much later.



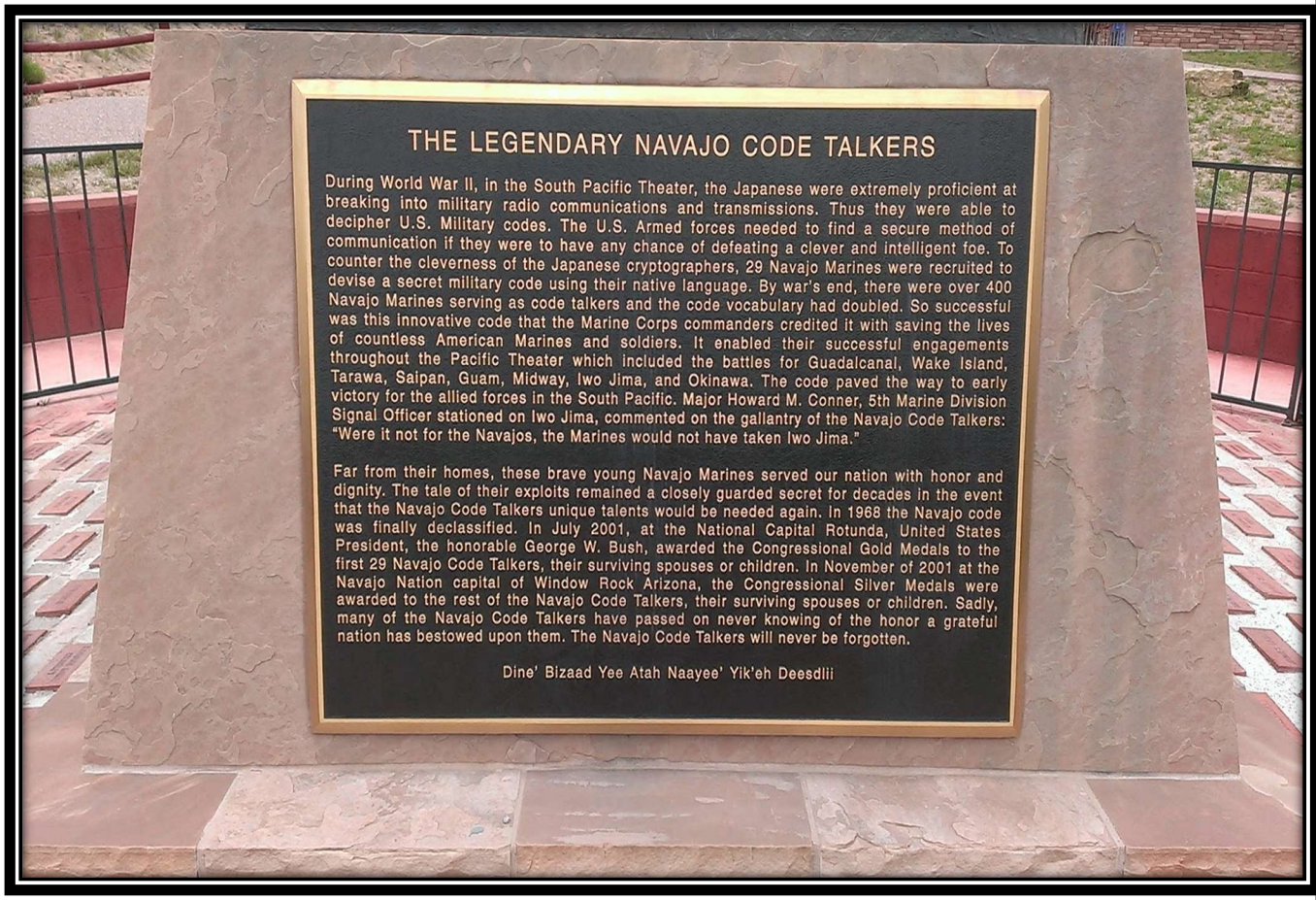
NATIONAL NAVAJO CODE TALKERS DAY ESTABLISHED

For their bravery and service*, President Ronald Reagan set aside a special day to honor the Navajo code talkers. In 1982, he declared August 14 to be National Navajo Code Talkers Day.*

At the turn of the century, President Bill Clinton awarded Congressional Gold Medals to 29 Code Talkers, and a year after that in 2001, President George W. Bush presented more medals to honor these veterans.

Even when the WWII code talker program was declassified in 1968, *national recognition of code talkers was slow.* While there was some recognition in the 1970s and 1980s, it wasn't until 2001 that Congressional Gold and Silver Medals were given to the Navajo and other code talkers.

NAVAJO CODE TALKERS MONUMENT IN WINDOW ROCK, ARIZONA



MY COMMENTS

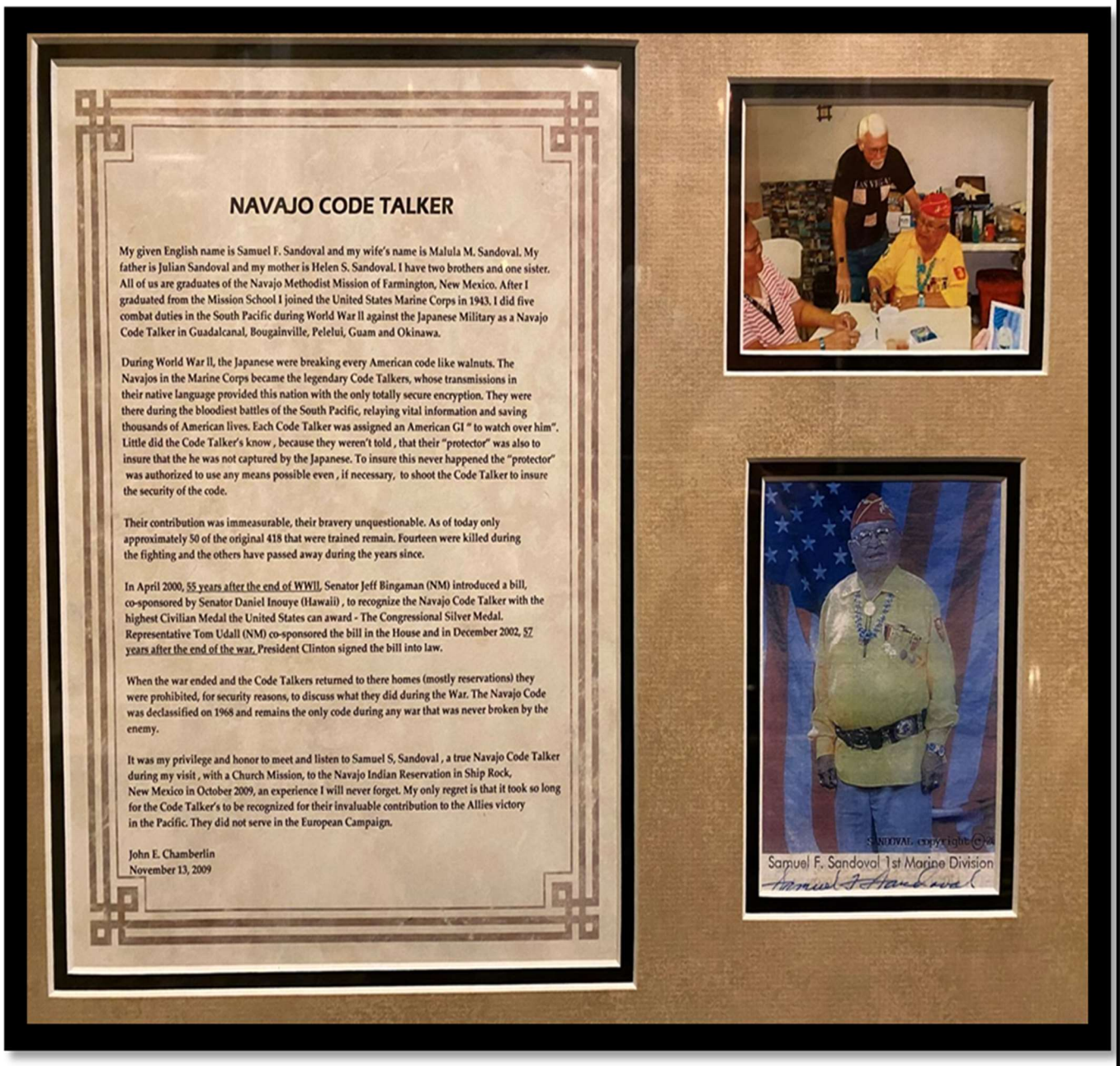
It was my privilege and a great honor to meet and listen to Codetalker Samuel Sandoval tell of his WW2 experiences when I went on a Mission trip with a group from St James UMC to the Navajo Indian Reservation in Ship Rock, New Mexico in October of 2009.

It was a strange feeling while I was sitting there listening to a true Native American and wondering to myself….how many lives were saved because of his unselfish actions. I had goosebumps on my arms and legs as I listened to this hero speak. What an honor.

After his speech, he gave a small autographed picture to all who wanted one. I was also very fortunate in that a friend of mine took a picture while he was signing his picture for me. His wife Malula sits on the left. The picture of him signing his picture while I stand behind him is on the top right of the below picture while the bottom right is his autographed picture. The below picture hangs on the wall in my apartment.

Understanding that the code was classified until 1968 I think that it is shameful that they were given no recognition until 2000,55 years after the war ended and 32 years after the code was declassified when most had passed away with their families never knowing of their importance during the war. *The Indians from the reservations were outcasts and looked down on "second-class citizens" and despite their unrecognized heroics, they came back the same way they left….back to the reservations.*

Unfortunately, this was a time when segregation was at its peak in America and Samuel said that he lived with this during his time in the service. As Indians, they were second-class citizens…and not treated well or fairly while both in and out of the Army. John



NAVAJO CODE TALKER

My given English name is Samuel F. Sandoval and my wife's name is Malula M. Sandoval. My father is Julian Sandoval and my mother is Helen S. Sandoval. I have two brothers and one sister. All of us are graduates of the Navajo Methodist Mission of Farmington, New Mexico. After I graduated from the Mission School I joined the United States Marine Corps in 1943. I did five combat duties in the South Pacific during World War II against the Japanese Military as a Navajo Code Talker in Guadalcanal, Bougainville, Pelelui, Guam and Okinawa.

During World War II, the Japanese were breaking every American code like walnuts. The Navajos in the Marine Corps became the legendary Code Talkers, whose transmissions in their native language provided this nation with the only totally secure encryption. They were there during the bloodiest battles of the South Pacific, relaying vital information and saving thousands of American lives. Each Code Talker was assigned an American GI " to watch over him". Little did the Code Talker's know , because they weren't told , that their "protector" was also to insure that the he was not captured by the Japanese. To insure this never happened the "protector" was authorized to use any means possible even , if necessary, to shoot the Code Talker to insure the security of the code.

Their contribution was immeasurable, their bravery unquestionable. As of today only approximately 50 of the original 418 that were trained remain. Fourteen were killed during the fighting and the others have passed away during the years since.

In April 2000, 55 years after the end of WWII, Senator Jeff Bingaman (NM) introduced a bill, co-sponsored by Senator Daniel Inouye (Hawaii) , to recognize the Navajo Code Talker with the highest Civilian Medal the United States can award - The Congressional Silver Medal. Representative Tom Udall (NM) co-sponsored the bill in the House and in December 2002, 57 years after the end of the war, President Clinton signed the bill into law.

When the war ended and the Code Talkers returned to there homes (mostly reservations) they were prohibited, for security reasons, to discuss what they did during the War. The Navajo Code was declassified on 1968 and remains the only code during any war that was never broken by the enemy.

It was my privilege and honor to meet and listen to Samuel S, Sandoval , a true Navajo Code Talker during my visit , with a Church Mission, to the Navajo Indian Reservation in Ship Rock, New Mexico in October 2009, an experience I will never forget. My only regret is that it took so long for the Code Talker's to be recognized for their invaluable contribution to the Allies victory in the Pacific. They did not serve in the European Campaign.

John E. Chamberlin
November 13, 2009

SAMUEL SANDOVAL'S DEATH

FLAGSTAFF, ARIZONA — JULY 29, 2002

Samuel Sandoval, one of the last remaining Navajo Code Talkers who transmitted messages in World War II using a code based on their native language, has died.

Sandoval died late Friday at a hospital in Shiprock, New Mexico, his wife, Malula, told The Associated Press on Saturday. He was 98.

Hundreds of Navajos were recruited from the vast Navajo Nation to serve as Code Talkers with the U.S. Marine Corps. Only three are still alive today: Peter MacDonald, John Kinsel Sr., and Thomas H. Begay.

The Code Talkers took part in every assault the Marines conducted in the Pacific, sending thousands of messages without error on Japanese troop movements, battlefield tactics, and other communications critical to the war's outcome. The code, based on the then-unwritten Navajo language, confounded Japanese military cryptologists and is credited with helping the U.S. win the war.

Samuel Sandoval was on Okinawa when he got word from another Navajo Code Talker that the Japanese had surrendered and relayed the message to higher-ups. He had a close call on the island, which brought back painful memories that he kept to himself, Malula Sandoval said.

The Navajo men are celebrated annually on Aug. 14. Samuel Sandoval was looking forward to that date and seeing a museum built near the Navajo Nation capital of Window Rock to honor the Code Talkers, she said.

"Sam always said, 'I wanted my Navajo youngsters to learn, they need to know what we did and how this code was used and how it contributed to the world,'" she said Saturday. "That the Navajo language was powerful and always to continue carrying our legacy.

Sandoval was born in Nageezi near Chaco Culture National Historical Park in northwestern New Mexico. He enlisted in the Marine Corps after attending a Methodist school where he was discouraged from speaking Navajo. He helped recruit other Navajos from the school to serve as Code Talkers, expanding on words and an alphabet that an original group of 29 Navajos created.

In this Sept. 8, 2004, photo, Navajo Code Talker Samuel Sandoval poses for pictures during a ceremony where the Oreland C. Joe Code Talker sculpture was unveiled at the Navajo Nation Fairgrounds in Window Rock, Ariz.

Sandoval served in five combat tours and was honorably discharged in 1946. The Code Talkers had orders not to discuss their roles — not during the war and not until their mission was declassified in 1968.

The roles later became an immense source of pride for Sandoval and his late brother, Merrill Sandoval, who also was a Code Talker. The two became talented speakers who always hailed their fellow Marines still in action as the heroes, not themselves, said Merrill Sandoval's daughter, Jeannie Sandoval.

"We were kids, all growing up and we started to hear about the stories," she said. "We were so proud of them, and there weren't very many brothers together."

Samuel Sandoval often told his story, chronicled in the documentary *Naz Bah Ei Bijei: Heart of a Warrior* at the Cortez Cultural Center in Cortez, Colorado, said executive director Rebecca Levy.

Sandoval's health had been declining in recent years, including a fall in which he fractured a hip, Malula Sandoval said.

His last trip was to New Orleans in June where he received the American Spirit Award from the National World War II Museum, she said. MacDonald, Kinsel, and Begay also were honored.

Sandoval and his wife met while he was running a substance abuse counseling clinic, and she was a secretary, she said. They were married for 33 years. Sandoval has six children from previous marriages.

Navajo President Jonathan Nez said Sandoval will be remembered as a loving and courageous person who defended his homeland using his sacred language.

"We are saddened by his passing, but his legacy will always live on in our hearts and minds," Nez said in a statement.

Navajo Nation Council Speaker Seth Damon said Sandoval's life was guided by character, courage, honor, and integrity, and his impact will forever be remembered.

"May he rest among our most resilient warriors," Damon said in a statement.