

Elder Spotlight: Joe Mercier

The comforts of home

■ During World War II, Elder Joe Mercier travelled halfway around the world — but he's lived most of his life close to the Tribe.

By Brent Merrill

Tribal Elder Joe Mercier, 77, thought growing up in Grand Ronde during the 1930's was tough. But, life on the reservation was cake compared to surviving in the jungles of New Guinea and the Philippines during World War II.

"I remember we pinned down these (Japanese soldiers), but they had caves and we didn't know it," said Private First Class Joseph Arthur Mercier of his memories of war. "I was the lead. I was always the scout. I came up out of a moor and there was a Japanese soldier and he began to shoot. He was using an automatic rifle and he shot our sergeant five times in the legs. We finally got him out of there and that is how I got my Bronze Star."

Mercier said his battalion (163rd Infantry) got out of the area just as five U.S. Air Force bombers drilled the site from the air.

Mercier was awarded the Asiatic Pacific Service Medal, a Victory Medal, a Bronze Arrowhead Service Medal, a Bronze Star Medal, a Philippines Liberation Service Medal and a Bronze Star Good Conduct Medal for his valor in war.

As his battalion's scout (Rifleman), he was on the point. He would scout an area out before the other troops would come in. He was always the first one to get into the action. He said he could remember many times when the war raged around him.

Mercier said he was involved in five different landings. A landing is an attempt to take an area by force that is known to be occupied by enemy soldiers.

"I was always the first one at five landings," said Mercier.

When reminded that he should feel lucky to be alive after all the action he witnessed in World War II, he laughed and agreed.

The battle in which he earned the Bronze Star was nothing compared to what was to come.

"We no more than got settled into camp and I got typhus and that damn near killed me," said Mercier.

At a military hospital in New Guinea, Mercier's hair fell out and he suffered from a fever associated with the typhus.

Once he recovered, his battalion was sent to the Philippines for two more landings.

"We had a helluva battle in Zamboanga (Philippines)," said Mercier. Many of his fellow soldiers died in the battle when a mountain was literally blown apart during the battle of Zamboanga.

The fear the young men felt in their battles held them together said Mercier, who was 20 years old at the time (1943).

"Damn right we were scared," he remembered.

Mercier said his last memories of the Philippines was loading the big ships (aircraft carriers) headed for Japan with ammunition. Shortly after, Japan surrendered and the end of World War II finally came.

Back in the Northwest (at Fort Lewis, Washington), Mercier not only brought back his vivid memories of the war, but he brought back jungle malaria as well.

After recovering from the first stages of malaria and adjusting to the extreme climate change (from the hot, humid jungle to the cold Northwest) Mercier returned to Grand Ronde. When he left New Guinea it was summer there. When he returned to Fort Lewis, it was winter in the Northwest.

Mercier said he spent time catching up with his family and visiting with the people he missed.

"My son, Bob (current Tribal Council member), was born two weeks after I left for the war," explained Mercier. Mercier saw his son for the first time upon returning home.

"That was great," said Mercier.



This photo of Joe Mercier was taken in 1943. Mercier, age 20 at the time, served in WWII and was honored for his conduct and valor during the war.

After returning to work in the woods near Grand Ronde, Mercier started his own logging business less than a year later. He and his brothers and friends were all in the logging business at that time.

"There was my brothers Hubert (Mercier) and Harold (Mercier) and my friends Dewalt Houck and Fremond Bean all in the business at that time," said Mercier.

When asked if it was a good life working in the woods, Mercier said being a lumberjack was all he had ever done.

Mercier worked in the woods until a back injury in Waldport forced him out of the logging business. He then returned home to Grand Ronde and started doing mechanic work for just about everybody he knew. Mercier became the family and neighborhood mechanic and people relied on him.

His proficiency as a marksman made him the best shot when hunting with friends like Pete Petite, Arnie Leno, Fremond Bean and Lester Holmes.

"I did most of the shooting," said Mercier of his frequent hunting trips. "Those deer didn't hardly ever get away from me."

Mercier remembers one hunting trip, with best friend Fremond Bean, in which he needed more than a gun to make the kill.

"Fremond came by and wanted to go hunting," said Mercier. "He said I should drive because he wanted to do the shooting. So, I drove. We went up the hill and halfway up the butte, he shot this deer that was fairly close. Fremond started out down the hill after the deer and left me up top. I didn't have a gun. I went over to where I thought the deer was and damned if it wasn't standing there looking at me."

What Mercier didn't know at the time was that Bean had shot the deer through the ear and the deer was near death, but still on all fours.

"I looked around there until I found a good-sized limb and I hit the deer in the head and knocked it down," said Mercier. "It would get up and I would knock it down and it would get up and I would knock it down."

Finally Mercier had a chance to take the deer down for good.

Mercier said things were different in those days. He said neighbors helped neighbors and people in the community shared their wealth. Mercier said when he and Bean would take a deer down they always shared with others.

"You live right next to people now and you don't even know them," said Mercier of how things have changed. "It didn't used to be that way."

Mercier said he remembers when people in Grand Ronde didn't lock their doors and if you needed something to eat you could just go into your friend's house, even if they weren't home, and have something to eat. He said you just left a note and said thanks.

"That's the way it was," said Mercier.

Memories of his childhood brightened his eyes as he spoke. He remembers living with his parents (Arthur Joseph Mercier and Agnes Leno Mercier) on the Siletz River, until he was nine years old, before there was a road up there. He got back and forth to school in a school boat.

He said he went to the Agency School in Grand Ronde after moving back at the age of 10. Mercier attended Agency School until he graduated from the eighth grade. Then, he said, he talked his dad into letting him work in the woods.

He wanted to work to be like his dad and his two older brothers.

So many things are different since the days when Mercier was a young man.

"There sure are a lot of changes," said Mercier. "I drive down the road and it doesn't look anything like it did when I was young."

Mercier said he is amazed at the tribal clinic and the modern facilities they have. He said he likes the idea of Elder housing.

"I think it's good," said Mercier of all the changes the Tribe has gone through over the years.

Tribal member Tom Bean, the son of Joe's best friend Fremond Bean, said Mercier has always provided a safe haven for him at his home.

"When I was straightening my life out I would come here (to Joe's house) because I knew it was safe," said Bean of time spent at Mercier's house working on cars and drinking nothing but coffee. "We would go out to his shop and work on cars. He taught me a lot of tricks to working on cars."

Mercier said his message to the youth of the Tribe is to stay away from alcohol.

"That's the main thing," said Mercier.

Family and friends have always been important to him. Mercier, who has four children (Bob Mercier, Bonnie Tom, Carol Olson and Jeff Mercier), has many grandchildren and great grandchildren to be proud of.

"My dad, while we were growing up, was always a very strong person," said daughter Bonnie Tom. "He had his ideas about how we should be raised and about what life was like. I think the benefit to us, as being his children, we learned there was a time to work, a time to play, a time to listen and a time to talk. He taught us a really strong work ethic which has carried us through a lot of years and really made us better people."

Bonnie said her father always made them feel safe, and they always had a home and the things they needed. She said he has become her friend as well as her father.

"We always knew he loved us and we were always secure," said Tom. "He is not just dad — he is a friend. He is somebody I can go and talk with and he gives me feedback about things. He has always been very supportive through my life. I love dad a lot. I value him a lot. He has made a huge difference."

