

***THE ADMIRAL NIMITZ HISTORIC SITE -  
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR***

***Center for Pacific War Studies  
Fredericksburg, Texas***

***Interview with Frank Mendez  
First Cavalry Division***

## **Interview With Frank Mendez**

This is Gigi Duke. Today is January 31, 2002. I am interviewing Frank Mendez, and this interview is taking place in San Antonio, Texas at the Minger Hotel. This interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies, Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks & Wildlife, for the preservation of historical information related to this site.

**Ms. Duke:** Mr. Mendez, I would like to get started on your background. When and where you were born, your parents and their names.

**Mr. Mendez:** My name is Frank Mendez. I was born in Tucson, Arizona, December the 22, 1923. My father passed away when I was three years old. I don't know too much about my father. My mother was born in Tucson, Arizona. She passed away when she was 93 years old, her name was Lizzie Frazier.

**Ms. Duke:** How did she support you?

**Mr. Mendez:** She did housework, whatever she could, to bring us up. We had a big family, ten children.

**Ms. Duke:** And where you were you, were you the oldest or one of the youngest?

**Mr. Mendez:** I was one of the younger.

**Ms. Duke:** Where did you go to school?

**Mr. Mendez:** I went to school in Tucson, Arizona. I started kindergarten at Miles School in Tucson, then I went to junior high at Tucson Mansfield Junior High School. After that I enlisted in the Army.

**Ms. Duke:** Why did you pick the Army?

**Mr. Mendez:** I picked the Army because the adventure part of it was for me, I was just a young kid, 16 years old.

**Ms. Duke:** Did you mother have to sign papers?

**Mr. Mendez:** Yes, she did. This was right after coming out of the Depression years.

**Ms. Duke:** But this was prior to the start of World War II.

**Mr. Mendez:** Prior to the start of World War II, yes, 1940 when I got into the service.

**Ms. Duke:** Where you when the war started, on December 7th, 1941?

**Mr. Mendez:** I was at Fort Bliss, Texas. That's where the First Cavalry Division was stationed. It was horse cavalry. When we went overseas, we got rid of our horses, of course. Two days before I went overseas I turned in all my saddle equipment, all my horse equipment.

**Ms. Duke:** When did you go overseas?

**Mr. Mendez:** 1943. The war had already begun, it was going full blast by then.

**Ms. Duke:** So you were in Fort Bliss, Texas, when the war started.

**Mr. Mendez:** Yes.

**Ms. Duke:** What were your feelings when you heard that Pearl Harbor had been bombed?

**Mr. Mendez:** Boy, it was not . . . nothing . . . it didn't really faze me, to where I thought, oh, my god, I'm gonna have to go to war, I'm gonna have to do this, I'm gonna have to do that. It didn't really hit me, I guess until actually I was in it. That's just the way it happened. It didn't really faze me in the respect that, oh my gosh, I'm scared. I didn't have time to think about that. Being young, young and reckless. It didn't really faze me.

**Ms. Duke:** Do you have any other special recollections about when the war started, or just pretty much that it was a long way away, and it was not going to affect you?

**Mr. Mendez:** When the war started I was—actually, I had been in Mexico, I had been on leave, I had been over to Juarez, Mexico. I spent the night in Juarez, and when I came back across the bridge into the United States was when I found out that we were at war. That the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor.

**Ms. Duke:** When you turned in your saddles and everything like that, what was your job then? Were you infantry or . . .

**Mr. Mendez:** When we turned in all our horse equipment we were attached to the infantry. The First Cavalry Division. We were cavalry in name, which it still is today, the First Cavalry, but there were no horses. The only ones that had horses were the officers. Even overseas.

**Ms. Duke:** So you went over the beginning of 1943?

**Mr. Mendez:** I went to Australia in 1943. It was in April, March or April. It was spring for us here, and summer for them.

**Ms. Duke:** How did you get there?

**Mr. Mendez:** On a slow boat. A slow boat to Australia. Very slow. Thirty days without seeing land. We set in at Brisbane, Australia. We were there, and we set up camp. We had an advance

cavalry that went across before the division finally got over there. We had to set up the camp, clear the eucalyptus forest to set up our camp site for the division. We had a camp that was outside of Brisbane, Strathpine. We spent six months in Australia taking jungle warfare training from the Australian troops. Of course, the Australian troops had already been fighting in New Guinea, so they were pretty well experienced in jungle warfare.

**Ms. Duke:** Did you think you were going to be going . . .

**Mr. Mendez:** Well, then we knew that we were going to New Guinea. We landed in, it was probably September or October of 1943.

**Ms. Duke:** Where did you land?

**Mr. Mendez:** In Una.

**Ms. Duke:** Did you meet any resistance immediately?

**Mr. Mendez:** No, we didn't. We didn't meet resistance there at all. It was pretty clear right there, when we landed. We were there probably three or four months. Then we went into the Admiralty Islands.

**Ms. Duke:** When you were in New Guinea, there was no fighting?

**Mr. Mendez:** Not as far as we were concerned, not as far as the First Cavalry Division was concerned. We just trained, more jungle warfare training, preparing us for our initial invasion.

**Ms. Duke:** What kind of food you have? Did they feed you well?

**Mr. Mendez:** Not very well. It was all dried food.

**Ms. Duke:** Like rations?

**Mr. Mendez:** Even worse than rations. The rations were excellent. It was a treat when we got rations.

**Ms. Duke:** Did you live in tents?

**Mr. Mendez:** Yes, we did live in tents.

**Ms. Duke:** Was it rainy?

**Mr. Mendez:** It rained every day. You could figure by three o'clock every afternoon you'd have rain.

**Ms. Duke:** How did you keep your boots from rotting out, and all that?

**Mr. Mendez:** You didn't. You got used to being wet. You let the clothes dry on you, your shoes, boots, everything.

**Ms. Duke:** So then in late 1943 you went to the Admiralty Islands? Where did you land there?

**Mr. Mendez:** We landed in Los Negros.

**Ms. Duke:** What kind of resistance did you have there?

**Mr. Mendez:** We had light resistance. There were Japanese Marines on the island. It wasn't heavy resistance. We had sporadic encounters with the Japanese on that island.

**Ms. Duke:** Like skirmishes?

**Mr. Mendez:** A little more than that. You would go into action. It wasn't what you'd call a full-length battle.

**Ms. Duke:** What was your feeling when you'd be going into a situation like that?

**Mr. Mendez:** Scared. Scared. Very scared. And I did a lot of praying. I just wondered what would happen.

**Ms. Duke:** What were your immediate superiors like? Were they well trained?

**Mr. Mendez:** We had some regular officers. We had very good officers, had good noncommissioned officers.

**Ms. Duke:** Do you remember any of their names?

**Mr. Mendez:** Yes. I remember Lieutenant Blevins, I remember Captain Hart. Captain Hart was the troop commander. Sergeant Gray, Sergeant Powell, Sergeant Black.

**Ms. Duke:** Did you have any close buddies?

**Mr. Mendez:** Yes, when I enlisted in the Army there were five of us from Tucson that went together. One afternoon just out of a clear sky, a friend of mine was digging an outhouse. I looked over, saw him digging in the outhouse, and I said, "Let's join the Army." He jumped out of there and said "Let's get out of here." So we went and enlisted. We were in the Army two days later. Those five people that enlisted with me, we all went into the cavalry.

**Ms. Duke:** So you were all at Fort Bliss together?

**Mr. Mendez:** Yes.

**Ms. Duke:** And then you all went to Australia together?

**Mr. Mendez:** Yes.

**Ms. Duke:** And you went to New Guinea together?

**Mr. Mendez:** Yes.

**Ms. Duke:** So then you all went to the Admiralty Islands together?

**Mr. Mendez:** Yes.

**Ms. Duke:** Did you all make it back?

**Mr. Mendez:** Of the five of us I think I'm the only one that stayed living. They all made it through the war.

**Ms. Duke:** Did you write home pretty often during this time, or did you get mail pretty frequently?

**Mr. Mendez:** I used to write home every chance I got. Of course, you couldn't tell much. You couldn't tell them where you were going, or where you were at. But I got mail quite often. I wrote to my Mom, and my family, and my sister-in-law. My sister-in-law, she was great.

**Ms. Duke:** What were they mainly concerned about at home?

**Mr. Mendez:** Their main concern was, I guess, if I was going to make it home or not. I think that was their biggest concern.

**Ms. Duke:** Did they send packages to you?

**Mr. Mendez:** Yes, they sent packages, food. But it took so long to get those to us it wasn't hardly worth for them sending it. They didn't really know where you were going to be when that package was going to get to you. It was great to get things. I remember one of the fellows that, when we were in the Philippine Islands, he said to me—he's the one that I pulled out of the outhouse—he said to me, "Frank, I'm going to make tortillas." I said, "Oh, go to it. Let's see what they came out like." And he made some.

**Ms. Duke:** Were they good?

**Mr. Mendez:** Yes.

**Ms. Duke:** How long were you in the Admiralty Islands?

**Mr. Mendez:** We stayed there until October.

**Ms. Duke:** Almost a year, then.

**Mr. Mendez:** Yes.

**Ms. Duke:** So there was just intermittent fighting then.

**Mr. Mendez:** Yes. We had **Los Mangos (sp???)**, we had Manus, we had three island groups that were in the Admiralty Islands. It turned out that one of the best natural harbors was in Los Negros.

**Ms. Duke:** So this was late 1944.

**Mr. Mendez:** Yes.

**Ms. Duke:** When did you leave there?

**Mr. Mendez:** It had to be in October, because in October we went on the initial invasion of the Philippine Islands. That was on October 20.

**Ms. Duke:** You went from the Admiralties straight over to the Philippines?

**Mr. Mendez:** Yes.

**Ms. Duke:** And you went by boat?

**Mr. Mendez:** By boat, yes.

**Ms. Duke:** And where did you land?

**Mr. Mendez:** We landed on White Beach, and first invaded the Philippine Islands.

**Ms. Duke:** So you first invaded the Philippines at Leyte, which is a small island . . .

**Mr. Mendez:** It's a smaller island, yes. We had stiff resistance there.

**Ms. Duke:** How long did it take you to get . . .

**Mr. Mendez:** We captured Santa Tomas—not Santa Tomas, but Takloban. We went into Takloban, which is the capital of Leyte. We went there and they were still fighting. Then we shipped across to another island, Samar. That's another island that's across the channel, and we fought there.

**Ms. Duke:** Any resistance there?

**Mr. Mendez:** Yes.

**Ms. Duke:** Did you have good air cover?

**Mr. Mendez:** No, that's what scared us the most, because the jump we made from the Admiralty Islands to the Philippine Islands, we didn't have our land-based planes to where they could fly that far and get back. So we were really worried because we couldn't see any of our planes that we knew were land-based planes, not aircraft that came off a carrier. When we finally saw the land-based planes, we were overjoyed. We were real happy then.

**Ms. Duke:** Do you feel like you had good equipment?

**Mr. Mendez:** Oh yes, we had very good equipment.

**Ms. Duke:** How long did it take to clear Samar?

**Mr. Mendez:** Well there again, it wasn't completely cleared. We went to Luzon, and we were there for three days, roughly three days. Then they got some of us, probably less than 300 troopers, that they gathered, and they said, "You're going on a mission." And we went on that flying column to release the prisoners in Santo Tomas, the prisons that were in Santo Tomas. There were over 3,000 American prisoners there.

**Ms. Duke:** Did you volunteer?

**Mr. Mendez:** No, they just told us we were going. I believe at Omaha they picked them.

**Ms. Duke:** So were you fighting all the way to there?

**Mr. Mendez:** We had to fight our way through, we fought through and we were behind the lines. We went through enemy lines. We all called it, afterwards, a suicide mission, because of the fact that we had to go in behind the enemy lines and not a half mile or so, it was miles and miles beyond.

**Ms. Duke:** What was the reaction when you first got to Santo Tomas?

**Mr. Mendez:** It was a sad sight to see the prisoners that were so malnourished, skin and bones. They had been living off of the meagerest of rations, which was probably a bowl of rice a day. The older people were in bad shape. The younger kids, the children, were in fairly decent shape because the parents would give them the food rather than taking all their food. So it was a very sickening sight to see so many Americans in the rundown condition that they were. Elephantiasis and beriberi, their ankles swollen, little bitty arms and legs. I almost break down telling about it.



**Ms. Duke:** Were they happy to see you?

**Mr. Mendez:** Very, very happy. Yes, they were very happy. There were two girls that I met that first night, the night that we liberated that camp, Liz **Lautzenheizer (sp??)** and Jeanette **Whist(sp??)**. Liz's parents were principals at the high school, American high school. I sat there on the steps of Santo Tomas and fed them chocolate candy bars, chewing all night long. And of course they got sick because they weren't used to eating something that rich. I still keep in touch with Liz, she lives here in San Antonio. We correspond with one another, I call her and she calls me. Which is special.

**Ms. Duke:** How did you get those people out of this camp through enemy lines?

**Mr. Mendez:** We didn't get them out, we just took over the camp. We took over the Santo Tomas. I was there two days, then other troops came in, the main body came in. We were relieved and we had to go back out to fight again.

**Ms. Duke:** How long were you in the Philippines?

**Mr. Mendez:** I was there from October of '44 until August of '45.

**Ms. Duke:** So the Philippines were completely liberated about February?

**Mr. Mendez:** No, that's when we released the prisoners, the third of February. They were still fighting. I came back under the point system. They had a system, you accumulated so many points for time in the service, for campaigns, for combat time, and accrued points to be able to get back to the States. They didn't really have a specific amount of points, but I had 115 points and I left with the third bunch that left the Philippine Islands. The people that fought in the Pacific had to have a bunch of points to be able to come back, more so than in Europe. It wasn't as hard for them, or as many points, but in the Pacific, I guess we had to spend a lot more time out there with nothing, amongst the uncivilized.

**Ms. Duke:** Was Santo Tomas the only one you helped liberate, or did you help liberate others?

**Mr. Mendez:** Santo Tomas was the only one. When we got relieved from that, we went very close to Santo Tomas, to **Wald(Sp??)** City. I was wounded in **Wald** City on February 12, 1945. It was a ricochet. I had a machine gun right beside a pillar, and it hit up above and ricochet into me, right in my face. My bone is shattered there. I have a hole there. When we were going to the hospital, three of us that had joined the service together were on that same ambulance.

**Ms. Duke:** You all three got wounded on the same day.

**Mr. Mendez:** In **Wald** City.

**Ms. Duke:** That's just incredible.

**Mr. Mendez:** It is, it is. The three of us were going back to the hospital. This friend, Mike, he and I were walking patients. The other friend was worse. He'd got creased on the top of the head by a ricochet off a bullet that came off of the pavement. He was partially paralyzed. He came home probably six months before I did because his wounds were that severe. He was partially paralyzed. He passed away four years ago. He was living a normal life.

**Ms. Duke:** When was the fighting over in the Philippines?

**Mr. Mendez:** The fighting was—when I left in August they were still fighting because we were fighting at **Mylapuno(sp???)** in the mountains. The Japanese were dug in in caves. We had to use flame throwers to try to get them out of there. That's how we were able to get them to come out. If you did get them to come out. They were still fighting when I came back home.

**Ms. Duke:** The war was over in Japan, but they didn't know it yet?

**Mr. Mendez:** The Japanese there didn't know the war was over.

**Ms. Duke:** So the war continued then.

**Mr. Mendez:** As far as they were concerned, yes, they were still fighting for Tojo.

**Ms. Duke:** You were there until VJ day, weren't you?

**Mr. Mendez:** Yes.

**Ms. Duke:** How did you get back home?

**Mr. Mendez:** On another very slow boat to China. Very slow boat. They pushed us into combat real quick but they gave us a slow boat to and from.

**Ms. Duke:** How long did it take you to get home?

**Mr. Mendez:** We stopped in Honolulu two nights. Of course, none of us got off the boat. Some of the officers did, but the rest of us stayed on board. We were there two days and two nights. This was the funny part. They asked for volunteers when we got on the boat to help out with some of the work there, being in charge of things. I was just a sergeant, and I volunteered, and I had officers, I had all kinds of people under me, I was telling them what to do. I felt kind of funny, doing that.

**Ms. Duke:** When you were at Santo Tomas, they were mainly civilians, was that correct?

**Mr. Mendez:** Yes, Americans.

**Ms. Duke:** Did you see any military POWs?

**Mr. Mendez:** I saw two. One of them was a nurse, she passed away in Tucson just last year. Madeline Fulton. She was a nurse there at Santo Tomas. Most of them were Americans, but very few military.

**Ms. Duke:** Did they seem to have worse treatment, or did they have the same treatment as the civilians?

**Mr. Mendez:** They had pretty rough treatment. I understood from some of the prisoners that they were scheduled to be slaughtered the following day, the day after we got into Santo Tomas.

**Ms. Duke:** Did you ever come into contact face-to-face with any of the enemy?

**Mr. Mendez:** Face-to-face from here to that wall, I guess. I just happened to see him, that was when we were going into Manila, he popped out of the brush and raised his rifle. I didn't have a chance to do anything else but fire from the hip. I fired, luckily I hit him. But that's the closest I got, very close.

**Ms. Duke:** Do you have any feelings about the enemy at this time?

**Mr. Mendez:** At times I do feel like, the Japanese, I still feel that the things they did, and how they prance around in our country like, "Oh boy, we didn't do a thing. We didn't do anything wrong." I was back in the Philippines in 2000. We went for a reunion, and when I got to the Philippines, the Philippines are just loaded with Japanese. That's a big paradise for them to go to the Philippines. That's when it irks me, the way they walk around like—well, I think you have to look at it this way. The schooling they have had, none of this was ever brought up to them.

**Ms. Duke:** I know there's a lot of opposition, because they're trying to erase that from their history as though it never did happen. Were you ever asked to testify against any of them?

**Mr. Mendez:** No, never.

**Ms. Duke:** When you went into the camp, did you go riding in on jeeps?

**Mr. Mendez:** We had ridden from the Lingayen Gulf to Santo Tomas in weapons carriers. And then of course we walked in. John Hinkey, that fellow that just walked out, being interviewed over there, he was the tank driver. I was right behind him when he broke the gate down to go into the camp.

**Ms. Duke:** I talked to a lady earlier, and the rumors were that the Germans were coming, and were the people were surprised to find it was Americans and not Germans that came through the gate, or were they anticipating your arrival.

**Mr. Mendez:** They were anticipating our arrival because American planes had dropped leaflets, not telling them specifically that we were on our way, but in a roundabout way they got the message, but they wondered if we were going to make it there in time. That was the big concern, whether we would be there in time before they were fired on, just lined up and killed.

**Ms. Duke:** What about returning home? What was your reaction?

**Mr. Mendez:** I was so happy, so happy. My sister met this friend of mine—we were wounded at the same time, the one that got shot in the head—she was overjoyed at seeing him, but then seeing the condition that he was in, she wondered what shape I was in. So that was a big concern for her. Thank God I wasn't all that bad.

**Ms. Duke:** So you went home on a bus, or drove, or a train, or . . .

**Mr. Mendez:** We got off the boat in Oakland, that's exactly where we shipped out of, too. We went to a bar, one the five of us had been in before. The MPs came around and tried to get me out of there, they said I couldn't be there, I was making too much noise, I was raising too much hell, excuse the expression, but that's what they said. I remember I said to them, "Aw, shut up." Here I'm coming back from 27 months overseas and they're trying to tell me what to do. It was very funny. It was comical, really, that they would say that to me. I was 21 years old when I came back and in that bar when we left, I was only 18 and they served me drinks, but when I came back they said I was too young to drink.

**Ms. Duke:** Did your family know you were coming home, or did you just walk in and surprise them?

**Mr. Mendez:** They knew I was coming home. I spent two days in San Diego to celebrate before I came to Tucson. Oh yes, they knew I was coming home.

**Ms. Duke:** How did you get there?

**Mr. Mendez:** I got home on the train. When we got off the boat in Oakland, that's when the war ended, really, officially, and oh my god, every place the train went by, crossings, people were throwing beer at us, kegs of beer, bottles of whiskey. It was something.

**Ms. Duke:** Did your family meet you at the train?

**Mr. Mendez:** Yes.

**Ms. Duke:** What was that like?

**Mr. Mendez:** It was an unbelievable feeling after what I'd been through and then to come back home, it was just, I don't know, it just seemed like a dream, like it had never happened, yet it had.

**Ms. Duke:** Did you feel like you had good medical treatment for your wound?

**Mr. Mendez:** Yes, I did. I had good medical treatment. I spent three days in the hospital, but then I went back and then I started spitting out little chips bone. So then they said to me, Dr. Crook, I remember his name too, Dr. Crook said, "You're going back to the hospital." So I went back another three days, three days I was back out again.

**Ms. Duke:** Are there any stories particularly that you'd like to share with us, or anything else we may not have covered?

**Mr. Mendez:** The only thing is, this friend of mine, the one that I got out of the outhouse, digging his outhouse, when we were transported back to the hospital we ran across Japanese fire, they started firing at the ambulance. The walking patients, my other friend and I, we got out of there, ran out of there. They quit firing on the ambulance but he always told everybody that I left him to die. I said to him, "Look at it this way. When we got out of that ambulance they quit firing on it, they started firing at us, not you. We saved your life." He just laughed about it. When he'd start drinking, he'd always tell people that story. And another time, he was going out on a three-day patrol in the Philippines. He asked me for my watch. I looked at him, and I said, "I don't know whether I want to lend you my watch. I might have to kill a damn Jap and take it off him to get my own watch back." All the time I was taking it off so he could use it. He told that story all the time, too.

**Ms. Duke:** What were the changes when you came back? What sticks out in your mind that changed the most?

**Mr. Mendez:** It was just a small little town. I didn't notice that many changes. It seemed pretty much the same, same people in town. I had some friends who used to go through Tucson and stop for a couple of days. At noon we'd stand on the corner of Fifth and Congress and some of these fellows who were from out of state, they'd say, "You know everybody in town, don't you." I'd say "Yes." That's the way Tucson used to be.

**Ms. Duke:** Mr. Mendez, I really thank you for sharing. We appreciate your input.

Transcribed by: Betty Paieda  
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