Micah Merrill

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Interviewed by Leah Cohen
Transcribed by Natalie Yaw
Edited by Matthew Gipson
Web biography by Natalie Yaw & Leah Cohen
Produced by Brad Guidera & Angel Melendez

Cohen: Today is July 23rd 2019. My name is Leah Cohen, I'm the Oral History Reference Manager at the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. [1]And we have the honor of interviewing Sergeant Micah Merrill, who is working for the U.S. [United States] Army Public Affairs for the 4th Infantry Division. So welcome, and we'll start off with some questions about your background and then your service as well as the attitudes you faced and reflections and take it from there. [laughs].

Merrill: All right!

Cohen: So, when and where were you born?

Merrill: I was born September 2nd 1985 in Detroit, Michigan, at St. John's hospital.

Cohen: What was it like growing up in Detroit?

Merrill: I-I can't speak very much to growing up in Detroit, because I was only four years old when we left Detroit to move to Oregon, but I do remember some things and then we would visit from time to time after that. And so I do have very fond memories of the families and friends that were there as part of the community and as part of the church. And we've still kept in touch with many of those people even-even now.

Cohen: Where in Oregon did you live?

Merrill: So, we moved to a little town called McMinnville, Oregon and my dad was a minister at a church there.

Cohen: What type of church was it and was religious practice and belief a big part of your growing up?

[1] An updated introduction reads, "We had the honor of interviewing U.S. Army Sergeant Micah Merrill, a Public Affairs Sergeant assigned to the 4th Infantry Division, at Fort Carson, Colorado. Since this interview, Staff Sergeant Micah Merrill has since been promoted and is serving with the 24th Theater Public Affairs Support Element, at Fort Bliss, Texas."

Merrill: Yes, religious practice, in essence, was a very big part of growing up and especially on my dad's side of the family. There are multigenerational, uh, ministers on that side of the family and although they would probably say they're non-denominational, it probably aligns closest to a Baptist background or something along that line, so.

Cohen: Was your mom's family also of a religious heritage?

Merrill: They were religious, of more along the Methodist line but that's-that's kind of a different upbringing than say, Baptist. My dad's grandparents—or, well, his parents and my grandparents, his parents, both traveled and performed in ministry and opportunities and concerts and that kind of thing. And then also served as ministers at various religious organizations and youth camps and that kind of thing.

Cohen: Hmm, okay, had any of your family been drafted in World War II or the Vietnam war or have a connection to the military?

Merrill: So, my granddad, on my mom's side, served during the Vietnam period. I don't have anyone on my dad's side that served. But my, on my mom's side, I also have cousins who have served. So, my granddad has five grandsons who all serve in the military.

Cohen: What-what sparked your interest and did the family connection on your mom's side, have a, you know, an encouraging...?

Merrill: Sure, sure! I think when I was probably about fifth grade, I had always had an interest in military history and really enjoyed reading it [and] studying it, but in fifth grade I met someone in our travels who was a [United States] Navy recruiter and he made a very big impact and I kept that for a very long time, and I always thought I would join the Navy, but then things turned out differently and, and I end[ed] up joining the [United States] Army, and I'm very glad I did. So.

Cohen: Wh-what did he say that so strongly encouraged you?

Merrill: I-I think, uh, it wasn't necessarily the words, although I think if I was to kind of capture the sentiment that was expressed, was that there's something powerful attached to being a part of something bigger than yourself and that selfless service that's involved, but also, I think that's it's, it's a challenging environment. It's a way for you to grow, and a way for you to lead, and a way for you to serve at the same time. And one of the things that impressed me, you know, he gave me a hat, and probably all the way up until high school I still had that ball cap,

that, you know, says in bright gold letters, you know, 'NAVY', across the front but that made an impact. That somebody would look at somebody as potential at that age. They're not looking just for somebody, you know, that could go tomorrow, let's say to boot camp or whatever, but that they have an interest in you at that age. And they give you the potential to serve. And I think that probably it was that mindset that encouraged me down the road to say, even with the social situations and other situations, yes, I still have the potential to serve. So, I think that's probably the motivation behind it.

Cohen: Interesting, [laughs].

Merrill: [Merrill laughs]

Cohen: What were your interests growing up and in high school?

Merrill: I had a lot of interests! Uh, let's see… probably, I-I enjoyed wood carving, I enjoyed working in a, on a work shop, on wood projects. Fishing, hiking, art, photography, violin, piano, guitar, foreign languages, Italian, Spanish, and American Sign Language. So, kind of a broad sense of interest there.

Cohen: Wow, and-and which high school did you go to?

Merrill: I went to Lighthouse Academy. It's a private school.

Cohen: And…did you have a chance to go to college before you decided to-to join the Army?

Merrill: Yes, I did. So, I went to college initially working through an associate's program in interpreting for hearing impaired and deaf people. Then pursued a bachelor's degree in graphic design and photography through Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina.

Cohen: And where were you employed initially?

Merrill: So, I first started working as a student while I was there. I worked security and I also worked as an interpreter for some of the deaf and hard of hearing students there at the university, and also in the area. And then I worked, as well, with the county EMS [Emergency Medical Services] system as a medic, and then continued through other opportunities. So, I also worked as a street performer for a time with a local organization, and then also, you know, the typical college job, right, you would, like do pizza or whatever and I worked for Papa Johns at that point. So, kind of a variety.

Cohen: How did you get involved in some of them, like EMS Technician and…?

Merrill: So, when I worked security, I had always had an interest in serving others and public service and I had some friends - they said, "I think you'd be really good at this". I'd always had an interest in that kind of thing and I had done first responder classes-- CPR, that kind of thing-- so they said, "Why don't you-why don't you try this"? And I found that I really enjoyed it and I did really well with it, and that's kind of where I pursued that as-as part of a partial career. Then I went on to get my state certification as a 9-1-1 telecommunicator through the state of South Carolina and-and just one piece after another, right, and when it was an opportunity for public service and ultimately, that's part of what I see in the military too.

Cohen: Di-did you find rules to be something you could accept when you're working in security or the emergency, or did you balk at rules?

Merrill: I think that any human being at a certain point, right, struggles with rules on a given day, right. Maybe we all have that-that terrible Monday or whatever it is, but rules to me are, to a certain degree, I feel like it makes it easier, if-if you know what the rule is and you can work within that, or very close to it, then it creates, generally speaking, a lot less headache. Not just for you, but for those around you and everyone involved. So, I don't think that I ever really viewed them as difficult to get along with, but at the same time, everyone, I think, has their moments, right?

Cohen: Right, right, where you just gotta, you gotta do it,.[laughs]

Merrill: Right, right.

Cohen: That's funny. So, in the article in *The Atlantic*, it mentions that when it became clear that there would be a lifting of the official of the US policy of the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell,' [2]you decided at that point to-to join. Do you want to talk about how you made this decision?

Merrill: I think that, everyone has a journey in life, right? And that journey, sometimes we think we know where it's going, and sometimes we don't necessarily have any clue and we can try to shape that to a certain degree, but I think that, ultimately, there-there is a point of destiny for each person, right? There's, some people say it's a higher power, some people say it's providence, some people say it's, you know, whatever it is that guides life for people, and everything kind of worked in that direction for me, one piece at a time. And as I saw the

[2] In 1993, the Clinton administration issued Defense Directive 1304.26, stating that military applicants were not to be questioned about their sexual orientation

opportunity for President Obama to become president, I said, "If we have an opportunity for something like this to change, and for people to see a different side of this issue," then in my belief, that was the time that was feasible. And I think probably that was guided, in part, by my upbringing. We talked a little bit about like, the religious background and most of them would claim to be Republican and so, for me, it wasn't really about whether it was a Republican or a Democrat, it was more about the personal values. And when you see someone speak, you hear them speak, you recognize those characteristics that make you say, this person cares about humans, in general, or they connect with humanity as a whole, they realize the greater good, they speak to issues of equality and fairness, dignity, [and] respect. That was what really said to me, "This is the opportunity," and I went to the recruiter knowing that wasn't necessarily in effect, so, that was kind of a risk, in that sense, to take, but I felt like the risk was-was worth it at that point, and then it turned out well, so.

Cohen: What was the recruitment like?

Merrill: I think, honestly, and I know not everyone has a positive experience, ya know, from what I'm-I'm-I'm told or have heard from their stories, but mine certainly was. And I really enjoyed working with our recruiters. They were phenomenal in a lot of ways and I think they were kind of stunned, because my friend Kyle went with me to the recruiter, we both enlisted, and we both went infantry, and we both had very high scores on our ASVAB [Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery] and so, they were both stunned, like, "Why would you both chose infantry"? You know.

Cohen: [Laughs]

Merrill: But at the same time, they were very supportive along the way and they knew that closing out one career and stepping into another career is a transition. And so they worked with us in that DEP process, that Delayed Entry Process, that allows you a certain amount of time to say, "Okay, I can't go right away, but three months, four months, six months, whenever, I can go", and so that was more or less what we both did. And then we were able to attend basic training together. They worked the packets at the same time, so that when they went through the system, we ended up going to Fort Benning and had the opportunity to do that. So, from time to time you could see them, and although we didn't get to interact a lot during that time period, you knew that you were both experiencing something very similar, almost identical, in some cases. So that was, that was a neat experience. And I really think that a lot of people, it, that experience was what prompted me to say down the road I would love to pursue being a recruiter. Because I believe that when you can speak to those things and be genuine and authentic and you know the issues that matter to young people today, then you have a different opportunity in recruiting them. And that

experience was probably for me, one of the keys in me going to the Army, was the recruiting experience, from the local Navy recruiter and then the [United States] Air Force recruiter and then going to the Army recruiter, and that was part of what prompted me to go to the Army. Obviously, the recruiter that I had met so many years ago was not there where we were in South Carolina. Maybe it would've been different, I'd be in the Navy then. But I think it's well worth it. And I look forward to it if I get the opportunity to be a recruiter.

Cohen: So, out of curiosity, what made you decide to choose the Army over the Air Force? And secondly, infantry in particular?

Merrill: That's a great question and I think, picking the Air Force, honestly, when I look at the Air Force, I went to them saying, "How can I be a combat photographer"? Because I recognized that their imagery was phenomenal. They always have such high quality for that, and it fascinated me, and I recognized that and said, "Oh, I would love to be part of that". I noticed that the way that they interacted as an organization was inherently different, and so I tried to pursue that, but the opportunity just wasn't open at that point in time. And my experience with the recruiter was different than what I had with the Army and so, when I went to the Army, it was kind of apparent at that point-- yes, go to the Army. So that's what I did and then I think the second part to that question, being why chose infantry, right? And I think, number one, in the Army you're a soldier first. So, we have different careers, but you're a soldier first. And so, to me, it was logical to do the soldier thing first and then pursue other things. And when you look across the Army, at least as it currently is situated, there is a lot more opportunities in the organization in general, for infantry personnel to serve as cadre or instructor or various other leader positions. And so, I felt that by doing that first it gave you a greater, you know, or broader opportunity to make selections in your career going forward, so I kind of pursued that from that, from that perspective. But also, because I think you tackle the basic soldier skills first, and then move on to whatever it was and honestly, I really didn't, I didn't even know that public affairs existed when I first joined the Army! [Merrill laughs]

Cohen: [Laughs]

Merrill: So, if I had known that maybe I would of considered something a little differently. I-I don't think so, and I certainly don't regret my time in the infantry.

Cohen: As you're saying to become a soldier first…

Merrill: Yes.

Cohen: And then take it from there.

Merrill: And I think the [United States] Marines [Corps] have a similar mindset, right? You're a Marine first and then you tackle whatever other specialty that you're gonna tackle, but certainly, that's the way I've found beneficial, and I think it has been beneficial to me in a lot of cases, to have that infantry background first. So.

Cohen: So how has it been beneficial, and should we tie in now into your basic training at Fort Benning [Georgia], like I'm wondering?

Merrill: Well, I think that, for example, I worked as part of a company intelligence support team, and I worked with a private who had just come into the Army, they'd been in the Army a very short time, and then we were deployed to Afghanistan. And so, their understanding of what it was to be an infantry unit and maneuver on the battle field was different than mine was. So, working through that experience, you're able to say, "Hey, I know they're going to be moving in this direction and they're going to perform this type of maneuver, and there's going to this many people." So, there's different tactics and techniques and there's different mindsets, and so that helped me in that scenario. And we were able to bring a lot of benefit to our commander and then to the units that we supported while we were down range there in Afghanistan. And over time he-he understood, "Hey, I need to ask you about this thing here, because you have that background." Where he went to school specifically for intelligence, so he didn't necessarily have that background. And that's not saying that everyone's experience is the same, but I certainly think that for me I found it beneficial to have that as a foundation.

Cohen: Yes, that you could contribute, as you're saying, your tactics and other things where you were trained.

Merrill: Right, right. I think it's also been beneficial too, now serving in-in a public affairs role. When I go out and we are out on the battlefield or out on the training area or wherever it is, you have a better sense of what they're actually doing. So, you have, hopefully, a better sense of how to communicate that, or illustrate that in a photograph or video or art work, whatever, to other people and you have a different eye for what it looks like, and so often times the guys that, they like, "Oh, you know exactly what to look for!" and it's like, well, 'I've been where you've been" or, "I've been in your shoes", so to speak and so, I-I think it's also beneficial in that sense.

Cohen: How did your training stateside help cultivate these skills, before you were deployed to Afghanistan?

Merrill: I think, one, we were in a very tough basic training unit. They have a reputation that they want to uphold. And going through, we had a very high attrition rate because of that. We were in Bravo, 1/50 on a place that they call, "Sand Hill" on

Fort Benning and that particular… I don't want to say stigma, but that idea that here's the standard, and we are not going to slack, was embedded in our minds from the moment you were stepping off of that bus during what they call a shark attack, right? The first seventy-two hours and those first seventy-two hours, you realize you are going to be a part of something bigger than yourself, and that standard wasn't going to change, and they were going to hold you to it. And so, all the way through that training mindset, you had to kind of hold your mind and say, "This is what we're going to do and I'm gonna to be part of this then, this is the standard I have to meet. And that, I think in a lot of ways, some people struggle to have that mentality, or that mental fortitude, but certainly the soldiers that I graduated alongside demonstrated that mental fortitude to be able to do that and I-I still have been in contact with some of them, and it's neat to see where they are and where they have been and what they've accomplished as a result of that. And I certainly think that, in a lot of ways, prepared many of us for the things that we would face ahead because, realistically, it was about one year, if that, from the time that I left basic training that I was down range in Afghanistan.

Cohen: Could you describe one scenario, for people like myself, that are not so familiar with military exercises, per say, like one scenario that was, you know, useful in terms of training or thinking about strategy?

Merrill: Boy, that's a tough question, that's a good one... You know, I think that maybe in a training sense, so from basic training one of the things that I would go back to is the obstacle course and at that point, the chief of staff came out and then, and at that point General Odierno came to visit and watched us compete on the obstacle course, which was a big deal. So, we watched all the, you know, dark vans pull up, and all a sudden all the doors open and, you know, [United States] Secret Service and whoever get out and then he came over and spoke briefly to the group. And it was, it had been raining. Everything was drenched, we were drenched, everything was covered in mud and so, these guys get ready to tackle this, and, of course, everybody's cheering them on, and you're working your way through the obstacle course. There are certain points in that where you have to keep your head down when you go through the barbed wire. You know that if you don't hold on as you cross the, what some people would call the monkey bars from-from, you know, kindergarten or whatever, right? Down below you is water and mud and whatever, and so, there's not an option to quit, there's not an option to say, "Oh well, I'm done", and so, you have to push through and everyone else is counting on you. And I think that that particular thing from basic training reminds you that sometimes you just have to keep your head down and you have to look forward and keep pushing, right? Regardless of what you have ahead of you and whether that's short or long distance, you keep pushing and you know that you're doing it not only for the people in front of you but for the people that are coming behind you. And so, I think from that sense, that's one of

the things. From the JRTC [Joint Readiness Training Center] training at Fort Polk Louisiana, when we were there, I think one of the exercises was beneficial in illustrating, to our guys, the importance of not just taking something at face value, because they will do simulated casualty, based off of any number of scenarios. And there was a scenario where we…we received a lot of simulated casualties because of some people's misdirection and also because they made a poor decision, and that was the whole point of that particular part of the training. And then the next day we were in a different area of the training facility there and we're working, and I was working in the company intelligence support team at that point, and I had been able to put some pieces together on the puzzle that I, they told us later they didn't expect us to put together. But I had said, "Okay, these pieces all here tell me that this is what's going to happen and this is where we need to be", and I remember getting up, going across the TOC (Tactical Operations Center) and having to, to verbalize that challenging, kind of, spiderweb of pieces that you're putting together from a training exercise to one of the noncommissioned officers across the room, which was a challenge for me. You have a very short amount of time to convey to them, "Here's what I've come across", and he was operating the Unmanned Aerial Aircraft or what we call UAV's, and I said, "I need you to move from this point to this point". He says, "I can't, I can't fly, the aircraft cannot fly that quickly, that distance, this time" and I said, "Okay, we just need to make this happen, here's what I've seen, can we, you know, can we cut across this distance, and maybe cut them off?" And he said, I'll take that risk", and he changed a flight pattern, did some of his magic, and he was a master trainer for these and so, next thing you know, we have the UAV overhead and he's looking down, and all of a sudden in the picture he's like, "I see them!" And for me, that was that moment of victory, you know, it's like, okay, I was right. I put all these pieces together and I forget the exact number, but it was roughly a dozen of, on the opposition forces that were there to train, for us to train against, to challenge the people from our unit. And we found them there and so, of course, we make a decisive action and move in and changed, as a result, changed the whole outcome of the scenario. From that and so, I was reminded at that point, number one, you may be a small part of the team but you can play a large role. So, everyone has a small part of that, and you're part of something bigger than yourself and so, that was number one. And I think, the second thing was, sometimes, we have to do the uncomfortable thing and we have to go to somebody that outranks us or whatever, and to say, "Here's what I've found, or this is what I've discovered, or this is not right." Whatever the case is, and bring that forward, and so that takes an element of personal courage to say, "Okay, I can do this. It may not always be easy, I may not always have the right words at the tip of my tongue", but it's about that personal courage, and knowing that here it is, here's for the greater good. And then, the last part to that that I took away, was that sometimes leaders have to be willing to take that risk and trust people that maybe are lower ranking than they are, and so that's always been something that's stuck in the back of my

mind. Maybe they have a better idea or a better way or they've seen something differently that we can incorporate and that makes us better or stronger or faster as a unit. So.

Cohen: Do you think having the idea of the greater good plays a big part for you?

Merrill: I think it certainly does, I think in a lot of ways. I never approached military service as some people say, killing the bad guys, or, you know, whatever the, whatever the common phrases are that some people will use. I never really approached it that way. I never saw it that way. It always, I think it's accomplishing the greater good, for sure. And I think that as a whole it's also about the greater good of each of those people serving. Hopefully, in their time of service, they not only see the greater good, but they're better because of their service.

Cohen: Wow, I think you also mentioned that you were, did some training in Fort Hood, Texas? Was that…

Merrill: Yes.

Cohen: Like a different aspect of the training?

Merrill: So, my unit, when I-when I finished OSUT at Fort Benning, I was stationed at Fort Hood and so, I was there with the 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division. And while I was there, we would do training, both on the installation at Fort Hood, but also at Fort Polk, Louisiana and Fort Irwin, California. And so that was one of the exercises, the training exercises that we completed, was at Fort Polk but then we also completed training at Fort Irwin.

Cohen: So in the article[3] you mentioned that, unfortunately, there had been direct harassment by your platoon leader during this time, as well as a trickledown effect for being gay. Would you like to talk about this?

Merrill: I think… there's an awful lot that I could say and that is sometimes something that we would choose to forget, or kind of put behind us. But what I can say is that, at the time it was very painful and it was a very challenging situation. Looking back at it, I also think that it helps you grow and a lot of life is about how we respond to those things that we encounter. Not necessarily what we encounter and so, I try to kind of keep that in perspective and that's not to justify what some people did or the lack of action in some people's cases, but only to say that I don't think holding onto that or being bitter, necessarily accomplishes the greater good of one, and also I think that there's a point where

[3] Reeve, Elspeth. *One Gay Man's Army.* Atlantic Monthly Nov. 19, 2013.

some of them have grown as a result of that. And I have seen several of the people from that time period since then, and that also speaks to that. In fact, this last week, I got an email from one of the officers that was in the unit at the time, and I can quote him for saying "thank you for always ALWAYS" --in caps--"Being your authentic self and demonstrating selfless service" and that just has surprised me , but now he's out, and I didn't realize at the, you know, most people didn't realize at the time, you know, he wasn't out and so I think that that's happened on many occasions since then. And I think that maybe to a certain degree, that that helped prompt people in that direction and that's always been my challenge to people. Was to look at the picture bigger than yourself and be authentic. That's really the two things that I'd encourage my soldiers now and that I've encouraged people along the way. Is those two things, selfless service and being authentic.

Cohen: In terms of people growing, it sounds like you're saying there's a lot of changes and to some you have been an inspiration. I was also wondering, in the case of the platoon leader, if, if it, if you think, in part, it was a different generational perspective?

Merrill: You know, that's a, that's an interesting thing to-to look at and I've talked with some people from the, between the time that it occurred and now about that. I, I think that that can certainly play a factor, right? Age, generation, environment, education-- those things can all play a factor, but I also know people who are in their sixties, seventies, eighties, whatever, and they don't have that issue and so, I think that that's an excuse, at least from my perspective, right?

Cohen: [Laughs]

Merrill: I-I think that the challenge there is that oftentimes when we're confronted with something that's different then ourselves, if we're not secure in who we are, then we sometimes struggle to accept who others are and that was certainly my experience with the platoon leader and with the platoon sergeant at that time. I think the bigger concern for them was that they wanted to seem like they were macho, or that they were a real man, or some of the things that they would say. And I always kind of, my response to that is--that a homophobe like that is someone who is afraid of a gay guy treating them the way that they treat women. And when you would see him, cat calling other female service members or whistling at them as we're running in formation or telling me and some of the other gay service members too, that we can go join them—it really wasn't about me, so much. It was that, that mirror, if you will, he really was verbalizing a mirror of his own insecurity and his own inadequacies and his own need for growth. That certainly was painful and it certainly was uncomfortable, and eventually I went forward with it. But that was also a challenge because at that point, orientation was not covered with the equal opportunity policies in the

Army. And so, I had to wait enough to have proof that it was a sexual harassment case, because I wasn't protected under equal opportunity and people kind of looked at me and were like, "Why don't you file an equal opportunity complaint?" and I said, "We're not protected, it's not in the black and white". And so, when it was a sexual harassment complaint, and then a sexual assault complaint, then I could pursue it in that direction. Until that, up until that point, it was just kind of looked, be viewed as someone whining, griping, you know, complaining, not a part of the team and that wasn't it at all. So that was part of the challenge that I faced in that situation, and knowing that I joined the Army, knowing that I would not have the same treatment, the same benefits, the same privileges as those people to my left and to my right. And they were going to make that further difficult or challenging by making that environment a toxic environment. So, I think that's probably the best way I can encapsulate that.

Cohen: Well, one thing that, puzzles me, is that I thought the Don't Ask Don't Tell policy[4] is [that the] superior, did not have the right to investigate anybody, other than they saw some overt sexual behavior. So I would wonder why this person making judgments about you would be legal under that policy.

Merrill: Right, I-I, you know, I think that maybe was part of the carryover from that Don't Ask Don't Tell period, that "Oh, I'm going to find something out". You know, that, that kind of thing and I think also, part of it was the infantry mindset, right? There's this… it-it's just [a] very different kind of culture. I'll, I'll say it that way, in an infantry unit and I, and I-and I think it's fair to say that, because I've encountered different first sergeants, different platoon sergeants, different company commanders, in different units on different installations, and there is a very similar-- in many cases, not in all cases, but in many cases-- a very similar mind set and environment that is captured in that particular field or MOS in the Army. Now and again, there are people that don't necessarily mat-, match that and I think, in his particular case, part of that was a carryover from that time period. I also think that I wasn't out at that time to coworkers, or to my family, and so certainly that enables them to do some more digging, you know, "Oh, I'm going to find something out that's not out there in public or whatever". So that I think also kind of fueled that fire and at that point I wasn't ready to come out. Everyone's journey is different. Whether they're in uniform or not. Everyone has their own unique journey, right? And-and it's not just coming out once. You come out in different levels at different times and in different ways. So, for example, I marched in a Pride parade in Austin, Texas along with veterans and active-duty military and it wasn't until afterward that I thought, "Oh Man, if that goes in the newspaper, then what" you know? [Merrill laughs]

[4]Don't Ask Don't tell was official United States policy, established by the Clinton Administration on military service by gays, bisexuals, and lesbians, lasting from 1994 to 2011.

Cohen: [Laughs]

Merrill: But people in my unit didn't know. I had not come out at that point. Now, there were some people who knew, in the brigade, and there were other people who had, I had told, but not my direct coworkers. I wasn't at that point. I, because of the way I was raised, kind of going back to the religious background., there was this belief that if you didn't believe it was the so, and if you were praying that it wasn't so, and you didn't act in a certain way and you didn't dress a certain way and you didn't do certain things or say certain things, then it just wasn't true. The reality was, you come to realize, who am I as my own authentic self? And when you can face that, then you begin that process. For me, that took a very long time to get to. I. I was twenty-six when I came out, and the first time, I remember, I couldn't, when I sat across from a therapist, after facing the harassment and the things I had dealt with from the platoon sergeant and people, I was going and seeing a therapist or a counselor. They go by different titles, yeah know, right. [Merrill laughs].

Cohen: [Laughs]

Merrill: And in speaking with them, it wasn't until probably, if I remember correctly, about ten visits in, before I could even say the words, "I am gay". That was the hardest thing for me to say. And he said, "Why is that so hard for you? You're in the Army, and you're in the infantry, you've whatever", and I, I said, that just wasn't something I could say. And I remember breaking down the first time he asked me and I just couldn't answer and the second time that I, the second visit I had gone back, still couldn't do it. And when I finally said that I broke down, because it was the first time, I could say those six letters. And for me, that was, that's definitely a moment I will always remember, because I had, I had denied it all the way up to that point. I hadn't dated guys. I hadn't been out about it with people,. I certainly was not the flamboyant type that a lot of people will have that stereotype that they'll associate with. So that made it a challenge. In fact, I had coworkers that when I would tell them, I would say, they would say, "You're gay? I didn't know, so-and-so said you're gay, you can't be gay!" and they'd give me these most absurd reasons, right?

Cohen: [Laughs]

Merrill: Like, they'd be like, "Well, you play softball, and you play, and you drive a truck," and, you know, I mean like the most bizarre things. And they'd, they'd say, "Well, you can't be that way because you-you come out to barbeques with us", and I'm like, so it's just interesting the mindset for them that was so limiting. Obviously, they associate it with one very small stereotype of what they've created in their head. So, I think that was part of that challenge.

Cohen: Interesting, yeah, yeah. When did you decide to come out to your family?

Merrill: Wow, that's… coming out to my family was a long decision. I knew that I would have to come out to them eventually. It's kind of this, this feeling that you just can't keep inside you. There's a certain point at which it just has to be told and that had been growing and there was this point where I said, I need to tell them. Partially based on the missions that we were dealing with in Afghanistan, partially, you know, the amount of times we had been rocketed and a lot of other things, and then also, knowing that the article was going to eventually be coming out. I didn't want that to be the way that they were told. I wanted to be able to say, "I, at least, told my family." And so, I think that was a combination of those three things really that prompted me to come out to my family.

Cohen: H-how did you do so?

Merrill: [Merrill laughs] Wow...That's, that's one that I haven't really had to talk about…

Cohen: Do-do you want to? Because I don't want to--

Merrill: Oh no, sure that's, sure. We'll go for it. [Merrill laughs]

Cohen: [Laughs]

Merrill: [Merrill coughs] Excuse me. I came out to my family…over the phone in Afghanistan sitting in the USO [United Service Organizations] tent at the time. So you have this time limit that you can talk, and you're in this little kind of plywood booth, if you will, sitting on a, on a little bench. So, there was this tent, canvas tent and it'd been put up, and they run a line in, phone line in, and there's probably like eight booths or so and I walked in, and I knew I just couldn't keep it inside me, and I said, "I have to be able to tell them ''. And with the mission and everything, I knew there was this one point where I was going to have a break. So I said, "Okay, I'm going to call them, and they couldn't talk". So, I had to wait for another, I don't know, fifteen- or twenty- minutes. Called them back and I was on the phone talking to them about how their travels were going, and I remember telling my mom, "I need to talk to you. I have something really important that I need to tell you." and I think part of it is that there's a certain point, at least when my unit was there, where the situation was very uncertain and I didn't want it to be something that came out if I had passed, that wasn't something I wanted my mom or my family to encounter, and I didn't want it to be something that they found out from a newspaper [Merrill laughs].

Cohen: [Laughs]

Merrill: So, I knew I had to tell them and, and so I told her, I said, “I need to tell you something, and I’m not sure how to tell you” and she said, “Well, you can tell me anything, you know, whatever” and I said, “Well, you know, this is really tough”, and so I, there was a long pause. And I told her, I said, “Well, I’m gay” and she said, “Well, are you sure? How do you know? How long have you known this?” all these types of questions. And at that point, she was crying. And then my, she told my dad to get on the phone, and he had finished fueling their truck, because they were travelling at the time, I’d called their cell phone, and he got in and first thing he did was raise his voice, and there was a lot of anger, frustration, confusion, whatever, but I didn't have very long because the phone calls, you have a time limit, right? [Merrill laughs].

Cohen: [Laughs]

Merrill: The USO says, “You’ve got this much time”, or whatever, so when that time limit was up, I said, “Okay I have to go” and that was the opportunity I had to come out to them, but I knew in-in a sense, like I had to do it, it wasn’t something that I could wait until I went home, you know, I wasn’t even sure at that point if we would go home, you know, so, that was how I came out to them.

Cohen: I’m sorry for jumping around a bit, but do you want to talk about when you were deployed in Afghanistan and what your mission was, where your unit was based?

Merrill: So, we were deployed in what they called, “RC [Regional Commands] South” at the time. Which was, we were responsible for the area from Kandahar [Afghanistan] to Helmand [Afghanistan]. So all the way along Highway One, that was our stretch and then we had a good chunk of the space from Helmand, or Kandahar rather, to Helmand. We were responsible for there all the way down to, pretty much the Arghandab on the south side and then up a good distance on the north side of Highway One, as well. And our unit was pretty much out, we had a very fast op [operational] tempo there. The mission really didn’t stop. I worked pretty much a seventeen or eighteen hour shift every day. I had two half days in the entire time that we were there, nine, nine and a half months roughly. I had two half days that were off, one of those being Christmas. And I say ‘off’ in the sense that you’re still working, it just, I didn’t have, you know, my normal shift, the commander said, “Hey, we’re gonna switch things up a little bit, since it’s Christmas” and that tr-, they gave people a little extra time to try to, you know, email their family or maybe Facetime with them, if, you know, if you could get it to go through. Or at least talk to them on the phone with USO, that kind of thing. So, that’s roughly where we were and what we were doing.

Cohen: What were your responsibilities like on a daily basis?

Merrill: So, I worked for the command team at that point, in a variety of different roles, part of that, we would go out, part of that was serving as the intel advisor to the commander and keeping track of those things. Part of my job was managing the biometric devices that we would use to keep track of local players and the local population in relation to IEDs [improvised explosive devices] or potential IED threats and so, I helped manage that for, they, over forty devices that were on our installation. And then I also managed some systems that we used to give soldiers a real time map and imagery analysis when they're out on mission and to be able to collect information and bring it back. So, I helped with some of that and then also, you know, we're an infantry unit. So basic-basic functions like, that were infantry related, but then also helping with supply and managing the, what we called "Theater Procured Equipment" or TPE. And helping take care of that and track it and make sure that the right people had the equipment they needed, make sure some of it got turned in as it would become outdated or no longer used, whatever the case was. So those were my, probably my main roles while we were there. I was very fortunate to have a first sergeant, at that point that was very supportive of me and ultimately, I found out later, his younger brother was gay, so he had a very different sentiment than my previous leadership had had and that probably was also a significant contributing factor. One to my continued service, and certainly to being able to still serve now, but also to the vast improvement in the situation and the working environment as it was. I really was very confident going downrange with him as the first sergeant, that I was treated no differently or as less than anyone else. And that had certainly been the case with previous leaders, but he was different in that respect.

Cohen: Was he the first sergeant, I think you quoted as saying, "As long as you shoot straight, that's all I'm interested in"? [Laughs]

Merrill: [Merrill laughs] Right, right, yes, that was-, that definitely him. And-and honestly, that, that meant the world to me, at that point. It's-it's tough because there weren't a lot of people, honestly, who were out in the military at that point, and certainly although there were service members from the LGBTQ community throughout the [United States] Armed Forces and certainly in the Army, that's also a very different audience if you will in the infantry world, and so that was probably the-the really big sticking point for people was, "We have somebody that's out and they're gay and they're in an infantry unit." You know, that, that was not so common at that point and so, that probably brought a lot more of that attention, and he-he just looked at it and said "Hey, he's no different than anybody else here in the unit. We all wear the same US Army name tape, and we all wear the same uniform, and so we all, we treat everybody alike", so.

Cohen: And I think you mentioned also it had a good trickledown effect, as well, like he set a different tone?

Merrill: Absolutely, I-, and it's probably one of the things that I tell leaders in the Army consistently. Is that their view and their treatment of others is the single biggest factor in the environment that people like me experience. It was him being strong in that belief, treating people with dignity and respect, and not tolerating anything other than that, that shaped an environment that I not only felt was, I was comfortable in, and that I could be who I was and still serve, but also that people know that's not accepted; that is not tolerated to treat someone as less than and everybody deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. And he was not afraid to go toe to toe with lieutenants or platoon sergeants or whoever, and it happened on multiple occasions where we had to fix people and their behavior or their language or whatever the case was. And even today, there are two first sergeants now who, or at least that what it was last, I'm tracking, [Merrill laughs].

Cohen: [Laughs]

Merrill: But they'll say this, they're senior noncommissioned officers, and they were platoon sergeants at that point in time, and they've come back to me, not only written me but have talked to me face to face, and said to me "You are part of the reason that I'm still here with a career, because I would, it would have been ended had I continued with the behavior or treatment the way that it was. And so, they told me, they, "We are so grateful to you, for educating us, for putting up with us, for helping us to grow in that way and I don't, I don't say that in a proud sense, but I-I feel like that is part of our duty as that LGBT service members is to help educate these people, because in some cases they don't know. They don't know any better and that's not an excuse, but if we want the situation improved, we also have to demonstrate that personal courage to help bridge that gap and help educate them, and I really do believe that that has, or it did have, a very significant impact on the ability for him to have a career going forward.

Cohen: Hmm, wow. Out of curiosity, did you find the prejudice to-to be connected to other forms of prejudice as well, or racism, like did they, was it one, one big grab-bag, you know, for certain individuals, or not necessarily?

Merrill: I think that's a very unique question that probably very few people make a tie to, but certainly, I think you're onto something with that question. For example, when I was in basic training, there was a lot of racism that was present and maybe not everyone felt that way, but they also didn't necessarily step up to stop it. And my battle buddy in the bunk, kind of diagonal to mine, faced a lot of that and there were a lot of things that went on, but I knew that it was tied to

that, right, that sense of prejudice, I guess it's probably the best word. I, I, the point in time I thought of it more as hate, but they, in one situation, took the metal weapons rack where we store our M4's [M4 carbine] when we're not carrying them. So they scratched into the metal oven track, over the top of our weapons, the N-word, and then numerous other slurs over mine, and figured that we would see it but that nobody else would catch it. During one of the surprise inspections for that bay in the barracks, one of the drill sergeants discovered that, and so they immediately called this other service member and me into the office, and said, "What is this?" which only added insult to injury, or injury to insult, whichever way you want to look at it, because it was both at the same time. Because there's no comfortable way to broach that. You know that these are the people that you're supposed to have to your left and your right. These are the people that are supposed to have your six, as they say, and yet… this. And why? And there was never a point where I had fallen out of formation or failed an event or couldn't do the run or couldn't pass the- no, I'd done all those things and I think that, maybe, if they'd felt like I was less than in my performance, then maybe it wouldn't have been so much of a threat. And in that sense, they didn't like it because it was true also for the Black service member that I had diagonal to my bunk-- same thing. It wasn't that he was a slacker by any stretch. He had performed every bit as much as they had, but there was certainly that prejudice, and we certainly both felt it in many occasions. In-in various ways that they would damage your things, or they would make sure that your personal items in your locker were different or messed up, or, you know, any number of pieces like that. So, I think it is a fair assessment to say, but I also think, I would say in that situation, the thing that was most powerful to me in that, was the reaction that our senior drill sergeant had and when he came back, I will never forget, he had called everyone to what they called the kill zone, this marked out painted section in the middle of the bay, and you never step in the kill zone, like that is one of those things you just don't do, but when they say, "Toe the line" everybody lines up by section on that box, on that painted box in the center of the bay. And everybody was supposed to toe the line, and he told them, he said, "You are the best rotation I've had, you know. You have helped me drop my run time to the fastest run time I've ever had in my time in the Army". At that point in time, I think he was going through Air Assault School, if I remember correctly, when, while also being the senior drill sergeant for our section. We had won numerous platoon competitions against various other platoons, and he said, "You've done all these great things, and then you ruin it with this", and he was disgusted, and at one point you turn around and you can see that he had a tear streaming down his face, just streaming down his face, you know. And you knew at that point that it was a much deeper thing to him, and that he didn't feel the same way about it that other people did. And so I guess, what I'll leave it with is that, about four years later, I, during a ceremony at Fort Hood, I crossed paths with that former drill sergeant of mine. Had no idea that he would be at that ceremony, and when he walked up to me and he was

like, “Merrill! You’re here!” and he was like, “I’m so glad to see you’re still in the Army!” and I think that he was kind of stunned that somebody would survive all of that and then decide, “Yes I’m gonna stay in, I’m gonna keep going, I’m gonna keep serving” and that was really neat to see, to see him several years later.

Cohen: Well it’s true, and after Afghanistan, what was your next assignment, or how did it work that you returned to the US?

Merrill: [Merrill laughs]. So after Afghanistan, we came back to the US, We had a train up period, and my unit was set as a rotational unit to go to South Korea and so probably fifteen months or so after coming back from Afghanistan we were in South Korea. We were there for, again, for another nine month rotation or so… there, and I was still with the 2nd Brigade from the 1st Cavalry Division, and so we served there and then came back and it was during that period of time, toward the end of Afghanistan, people had kind of noticed that I could take photos. Then, of course, during Korea, I was asked to be, as it were, the unit photographer. I guess the technical term for that would be the Unit Public Affairs Representative. I worked for the commander and the command sergeant major at that point in time, so I was a command driver, responsible for other command drivers, and had numerous other additional responsibilities and it was during that point in time that sergeant major told me “You need to look at doing this for a career” and numerous other people came along and said this is what-, “This is where you were meant to be” and this is what you need to do, and that was when I decided to go [reclassify to] Public Affairs. And so I switched my MOS at that point, which was its own process, but it was certainly interesting to kinda see how each piece played out in that puzzle. That was what lead me from Afghanistan to Korea, and then ultimately into public affairs, but I had-, I didn’t even know public affairs in the Army existed until my article came out in Afghanistan, and that was when someone called me up and said “Oh, I’m, I’m so-and-so from the Public Affairs Office, and we need to talk to you”, and that was the first time I had any interaction with Public Affairs from the Army. Little did I know that, you know, fast forward a few years and that would be the career field that I was a part of.

Cohen: So, where, where are you based right now as a part of, part…?

Merrill: So, I’m currently with the 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division at Fort Carson and that’s Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Cohen: And do you do a lot of photography as part of your…?

Merrill: Yes, I do, I do, I do a lot of photography, I do a lot of video products, writing, social media, a variety of other aspects related to public affairs.

Cohen: And just for the record, could you go through your different MOS's over your career? [1:01:12 knock on door]

Merrill: Okay.

Cohen: Oh, okay, I guess, I guess we'll hurry up then!

Merrill: I was infantry, I was 11-Bravo to start and then I re-classed to 46-Quebec, which was a public affairs, that's a print journalist, and recently we had a merger from public affairs print journalism and broadcaster into one MOS, 46-Sierra, and that's mass- communications public affairs, so.

Cohen: I-I got to field a question. Sort of wrap things up here because of the time.

Merrill: Sure.

Cohen: So, but I have two questions. One of them, I wondered whether your family was ever able to come to some reconciliation in their own mind, or broaden their…understanding of… what I'm saying is, is like in Orthodox Judaism. I see slight shift over time, towards gays. Well, like is it really prohibited? Or, you know, it seems to be a lot more questioning going on than there was thirty years ago so that's what made me wonder.

Merrill: Sure, I don't think that, I don't think that there's really reconciliation with that currently. I think that's a process that, that we've begun. So really probably the bulk of that kind of reconciliation process occurred around Thanksgiving, actually. My mom had to have an emergency surgery. She was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and while she was in surgery, her dad unexpectedly passed away, and it was at that point where the family was already wondering whether my mom would survive. One, because there was a point where they couldn't stop the internal bleeding, and then the loss of her dad, and it was about that point in time where I think there is a different attitude now and so, we're working through that, so it will be interesting to see how that plays out, and I'm, I'm very hopeful to see what happens in the future for that, but that, losing my granddad in that point was challenging. He was the veteran and he was the one that had made a point to be there when I got my blue cord, my infantry blue cord in our ceremony, so he's the one that put that blue cord on me during that ceremony, and that is a moment I will never forget. That was one of the proudest moments for me I can honestly say. And I, the pictures that I have from that are priceless. So that's probably the closest that we are right now to being at a reconciled kind of state. We'll see, we'll see.

Cohen: Are you looking forward to being hero of the game, for Pride Night at the White Sox?

Merrill: Absolutely! I think it's an awesome opportunity, not only to represent the Army but also to interact with an organization like the White Sox. I think it's something that I never expected to have happened, but I'm certainly honored for the opportunity to be part of the event.

Cohen: Is there something that you would like to talk about that we have not talked about? [Laughs]

Merrill: [Merrill laughs]. Well, we've, we've talked about a lot and that's great. I-I think honestly that there's so many things that we could talk about, but you've-you've talked about a lot of them. I think the only thing that I would say regardless of what a person goes through, right, and whether they're in the military or not, my challenge is always to encourage people to be their authentic self, right? Regardless of whether you're in the military or if you're serving in another capacity or maybe they're younger and they're still at home. Being your authentic self has so much power. Not only for you as an individual but also for others, and you never know what greater good will be accomplished as a result of that.

Cohen: Well thank you so much for the interview today, for your time, and enjoy the evening tonight.

Merrill: Thank you.

Cohen: And on behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, we thank you.

Merrill: Thank you.

Epilogue: Staff Sergeant Micah Merrill has since been promoted and is serving with the 24th Theater Public Affairs Support Element, at Fort Bliss, Texas. In 2020, he was selected as one of three in Army Public Affairs to study with the Military Visual Journalism program at Syracuse University. He is now serving as Multimedia Section Lead with the 24th Theater Public Affairs Support Element. [Added on March 17, 2022].