

ORAL MEMOIRS  
OF  
CAESAR MELENDEZ  
An interview conducted on  
June 12, 2015

Interviewer: Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai

Angelo State University  
West Texas Collection

“War Stories: West Texans and the Experience of War, World War I to the Present”

LEGAL STATUS: The oral memoirs of Caesar Melendez are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on June 12, 2015

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WONGSRICHANALAI: [What] is your name?

MELENDEZ: Caesar Melendez.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And when and where did you enter the armed forces?

MELENDEZ: I joined in Odessa and I was stationed in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. This was in 1993 to '97.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And where were you originally from?

MELENDEZ: I was originally from here in Marfa.

WONGSRICHANALAI: So . . . born here, grew up here. Okay. Which branch of the service?

MELENDEZ: U.S. Navy.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Why the Navy?

MELENDEZ: Grew up in the desert and I wanted to see the ocean. And I want, I never had been to the beach before until then and I wanted to do it right. So I got lucky and got stationed in Hawaii. . . . There were several countries I wanted to see and it was just awesome that I got to see them. They were on the checklist and we went there.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Is there any other reason you joined the military? [Were] your family members in the military?

MELENDEZ: Yes. It's a family tradition that each generation served. . . . And it's a tradition that's still going on today. . . . My Uncle served and my grandfather's brother served and it just went down the line, so we're just carrying on that tradition. . . .

WONGSRICHANALAI: And your relatives who served were they in the Navy as well or other [branches]?

MELENDEZ: No. We branched out as far as the Army, Air Force, and the Navy. No Marines.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And during your years of service, were you an enlisted man . . .

MELENDEZ: Yes.

WONGSRICHANALAI: . . . or were you an officer?

MELENDEZ: No, I was enlisted.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay. And what were your ranks?

MELENDEZ: I still don't understand why it happened but upon entering boot camp they entered me in as an E2, Enlisted 2. I thought I was going be Enlisted 1. By the time I graduated boot camp I was Enlisted 3. I don't know why that happened. And nobody would explain, they just . . . I just took off with it and that's fine.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay. What was your reaction to first seeing the ocean?

MELENDEZ: I was happy. I was very happy to see it and it was exactly as I had seen on TV and pictured it would be. It was exactly what I thought.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay.

MELENDEZ: So, I wasn't disappointed.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay. Excellent. So you were only stationed in Pearl Harbor?

MELENDEZ: Yes.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Were you on any vessels? Did you get to see the world?

MELENDEZ: Yes, I did. I've been to Hong Kong, the Philippines, Japan, Okinawa, Australia. I've been to a lot of different countries and I enjoyed each one of them.

WONGSRICHANALAI: On different vessels?

MELENDEZ: No, just one same ship. It was the *U.S.S. Willamette*. And it was an oiler class.

WONGSRICHANALAI: How many people on [it]?

MELENDEZ: Oh, I say ship's company was about maybe 350+ and it was a pretty good sized ship.

WONGSRICHANALAI: What did you find most challenging about your time in the service?

MELENDEZ: Really . . . was just trying to keep up with everybody. You know, keeping . . . Making sure we did our job right and that nobody got hurt and everybody went back to their birthing at the end of the day. So, just keeping up really.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay. What was your conception of the United States' role in the world when you joined the armed forces? What was the United States supposed to do in the world?

MELENDEZ: Well, honestly, I believe that we're out there to preserve peace, help those who can't help, or fight for those who can't fight for themselves.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And were you involved with any rescue operations or anything like that during this time?

MELENDEZ: No. No. I didn't see any of that or any combat or anything.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Good. What's the most fascinating place you visited on all these?

MELENDEZ: I would have to say Australia.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay.

MELENDEZ: Australia. Very nice people there. I . . . I couldn't believe, I mean low crime rate. Just overall friendly.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Where did you stop in Australia?

MELENDEZ: Perth and Fremantle.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay.

MELENDEZ: And I still remember those places. And I got lots of photos when we were out there by the zoo. Although, I never did bring back that kangaroo.

WONGSRICHANALAI: [You] like the marsupials?

MELENDEZ: Yes.

WONGSRICHANALAI: They [would] probably do well out in the desert here.

MELENDEZ: I'm sure they probably would.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did you see any of the Australian countryside?

MELENDEZ: No. No. We didn't actually stay long. It was only about a week and we moved on quickly. But . . . but I was able still to go there. It was one of the places I wanted to go see.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Now, you said the people were very nice, very welcoming. Was this your experience with all the ports of call that you had?

MELENDEZ: Well, with the exception of the Middle East. All the other places they, they were pretty

friendly. It was just that one place they, they really didn't . . . they kind of gave that vibe off that, you know, "why are you here."

WONGSRICHANALAI: And where were you in the Middle East?

MELENDEZ: In . . . In Saudi . . . were also in Bahrain. Yeah, those two main areas. Jebel Ali was one of the ports we were always pulling into.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay. So how did your time and service affect your family? Did you stay in touch? Were they worried about you?

MELENDEZ: Yes. My mother, she was always very concerned. My brother knew I could take care of myself, so . . . but I kept in touch with them. We had lots of phone calls. I know I got a little bit of a scare. My mother called . . . Well, two recruiters came down to visit my brother from the Navy. Well, they went to the door and the first thing she thought something happened to me. And they thought they were there to notify her. So, I got a red cross message call home. But I did, I spoke to her, told her I was fine and everything, that they were just there for my brother.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Which they did not get.

MELENDEZ: No. No. He opted to go to college, so . . .

WONGSRICHANALAI: Well, now what was your role on . . . on the ship? What function did you perform?

MELENDEZ: I was a boatswain's mate. Basically we took care of the ship, made sure it was clean and we also did a lot of navigation, security, under import out . . . import and underway watches. We . . . since it was an oiler class ship, we did a lot of underway replenishments as far as refueling other ships, resupplying with armament. That . . . that sort of thing right there.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did you encounter any wildlife? Either on the ocean or in all these places you stopped at?

MELENDEZ: Well, we may have seen one or two sharks following the ship. You know, it was pretty exciting to see the little fins coming out. Other than that, that was all I really saw. . . .

WONGSRICHANALAI: Did you get seasick the first time?

MELENDEZ: No. Surprisingly no, I didn't. It was my first time ever on our boat and I never got seasick. I was surprised and everybody thought I would be seasick and "Oh, God, you're gonna be bad." And no, we got out to sea, I was feeling fine.

WONGSRICHANALAI: So where was basic training?

MELENDEZ: San Diego, California.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And do you remember the approximate size of the class?

MELENDEZ: Oh, I would say about maybe 75.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And how many of them were from West Texas?

MELENDEZ: Well, I'd say, well, from, from West Texas, I left with five. One was out of Van Horn, the other two were out of El Paso. And I'm not sure where the other tech guys were from but they said they were from West Texas. I can't remember where it was.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Was there a bonding, because you were from a similar region?

MELENDEZ: Yes.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Same state?

MELENDEZ: Yes. We stayed pretty close to each other, you know. Especially myself and . . . I can't . . . I know his last name is Lira, from Van Horn. So we kinda stayed pretty close to each other. 'Cause he's just down a ways. But, yeah, we did stay close together.

WONGSRICHANALAI: And how was . . . did the other recruits or other people you met in the service they say, "Oh, West Texas. Tell us . . ."? Was there a reaction when you said you were from West Texas?

MELENDEZ: Sometimes we got that. You know, we were asked how it was like, if it was desert or you know. Some of them had this perception that it was all sand. But I was like "No, it's not like that. It's not like that." You know. There were a lot of questions, especially about the jackalope.

WONGSRICHANALAI: So they've heard of the jackalope?

MELENDEZ: They've heard of the jackalope and I usually play along with them, "Yeah, you're lucky if you got to see one." I'd rope on to them, no I was just playing. There's no such thing as a jackalope.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay. Alright. So, there was some level of curiosity about West Texas and . . . ?

MELENDEZ: Yes.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Because they hadn't encountered any before.

MELENDEZ: Yes.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay. Alright. What about the . . . did you identify being from West Texas in any of the countries you visited?

MELENDEZ: Yeah, I would say that . . . I would say that yes, that I did. Usually some of the ports, they would if I was an American and I would tell them, "No. I am a Texan. Before I'm an American." Kind of a joke. And when I told them where I was . . . where I was at, they would usually ask questions about it, you know. Some of them would even ask about the Marfa Lights.

WONGSRICHANALAI: They'd heard of the Marfa Lights.

MELENDEZ: Yeah, I was actually kind of stunned when they asked about it and I was like "Woah, wait a minute. You've been out there?"

WONGSRICHANALAI: Where, where were you?

MELENDEZ: One place was in Hong Kong and I was asked that and the other was in the Philippines.

WONGSRICHANALAI: The world famous Marfa Lights.

MELENDEZ: Yeah, I was literally asked about it and I was stunned for a second. "Woah, wait a minute. Have you been there?"

WONGSRICHANALAI: That's impressive.

MELENDEZ: Yeah.

WONGSRICHANALAI: So . . . when you told them you were from Texas, did they have an idea in their head about cowboys and . . .



MELENDEZ: A lot of times they did. They, they, they expected this tall 10-gallon hat, cowboy-boot-wearing persona coming at them but, you know. I just kinda broke it down the kind of different cultures that are out here and everything, that it's not exactly that.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Fair enough. Very good. Did you face any challenges when you returned to civilian life?

MELENDEZ: It took a little bit to readjust, you know, it took a little bit as far as, you know, relaxing a little bit more. You kind of stay in that, you know, mode for . . . I mean, for me, it took me about a year to readjust as far as, you know, sleeping in late. I was usually always up. My mother would get mad at me, as I was always up at 5 in the morning. I was always cleaning everything all day and you know, she was just like, "You know, you need to slow it down. You know, you're not there anymore."

WONGSRICHANALAI: And do you have any advice for any young men and women who are just now entering the service?

MELENDEZ: Yes. I, I would have to say, you know, while you're there, make, make the most of it and have a good time. There, there is a lot that they can do aside from their normal job when they have, when they get their time off. It's to go have fun, enjoy where they're at. Enjoy the cultures that they're around, because you may never see them again.

WONGSRICHANALAI: So make the most . . .

MELENDEZ: Yes, yes. While I was stationed in Hawaii, I learned to surf. I just got it out of the blue, I saw them out there and I'm doing it and I learned. And I also picked up martial arts when I was out there and I competed in the Aloha State games and everything, you know, so, there were a lot of things that I learned there that I wasn't able to do here, so I wanted to make my mark. I'm actually in a sports almanac. My name came up on there. I took a gold medal in the Aloha State games and it's a Hawaiian sports almanac and my name is on there as far as for gold medal.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Which year was this?

MELENDEZ: That would have been in '94.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Congratulations.

MELENDEZ: Thank you.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Excellent. I take it you have a copy?

MELENDEZ: No. Not yet. I hadn't bought it. I found it online and I was looking at it and I was like "Wait a minute." And my wife was looking at it and she goes, "Why didn't you..." I didn't even know myself! It was just a fluke accident.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Very good. Excellent.

MELENDEZ: Yeah, I would have to say tell these, the new recruits, the one's going in now, you know, make the most of it, have fun. Enjoy the experiences and try to gather as many experiences as they possibly can, 'cause they will carry for a lifetime. I, I still remember a lot of things while I was there like as though it had just happened yesterday. And I'm still friends with a lot of my shipmates on Facebook and we exchange pictures, you know, of us together while we are there on the ship or we're out in town having fun or something. You know, make the best of it.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Would you say your conception of the United States has changed or remained the same or altered in any way after you left the service?

MELENDEZ: No, not really. I believe that the mission is still the same, so I, I really don't see it has changed at all.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Any stories you'd like to tell us about your time in the service?

MELENDEZ: Really not much, just I enjoyed every bit of Hawaii while I was there. It was one of, they usually give you a dream list when you're in boot camp and of all the naval stations and I pick Honolulu, Hawaii; well, Pearl Harbor; Anchorage, Alaska; Norfolk, Virginia. I wanted to get as far away from here as I can, 'cause I needed to experience the world and I couldn't believe my luck when I saw my orders cut for Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. I was jumping up and down in the barracks. But yeah, I had a lot of fun in Hawaii. I had a lot of fun as of the other countries I have been to you know, I really

enjoyed myself.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Out of curiosity, did you try any exotic foods?

MELENDEZ: Yes.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Was there a dish that you really enjoyed or really didn't like?

MELENDEZ: I can't really say I didn't like much, but there was one in Japan that I liked. I don't know if I'm pronouncing it right, but it was a tenzaru soba or something like that. I really liked that. You know, I did.

WONGSRICHANALAI: What was it?

MELENDEZ: It was like cold noodles with some shrimp in it and I really enjoyed it. I did. And really just the other countries I would sit down and whatever the put in front I would try it.

WONGSRICHANALAI: How about Hawaiian poi?

MELENDEZ: Oh, yeah I did like that. I enjoyed the Honolulu, the hula hula chicken, I guess is what they called it, been to a couple of luau's, actually ate some shark and that was pretty good so, I went, I went all out when I went out there like that.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Do you ever miss those cuisines . . .

MELENDEZ: Yes.

WONGSRICHANALAI: . . . back in West Texas?

MELENDEZ: I sure do. I really do. I do miss it and I really wish I could get it again and I wish my family could try it, because I know they would like it. 'Cause I'm very finicky as far as what I eat, but I would like them to try it too. And I know when I was in Hawaii, I didn't miss the cuisine from here. So when I got back home, my mother she whipped up a huge feast for me and everything that I missed. So I gained some weight when I got back, a lot of it.

WONGSRICHANALAI: That, that happens, so . . . any concluding remarks?

MELENDEZ: No, no.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Okay.

MELENDEZ: No. I had a positive time there, I really did.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Excellent. Well, we really appreciate you speaking to us and do let others folks know that we're interested, that we are here to collect their stories.

MELENDEZ: Okay. I sure will.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Thank you very much.

[End of interview]