

ORAL MEMOIRS
OF
MILTON A. PLAGENS
An interview conducted on
June 29, 2015

Interviewers: Melinda Holder and 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 Milton A. Plagens are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on June 29, 2015.

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WONGSRICHANALAI: This is an interview for the War Stories Project. Today is June 29th 2015. We're at Brookdale South in San Angelo Texas.

PLAGENS: I want to tell you about my career. First about my war stories.

HOLDER: Okay.

PLAGENS: I was in the service three years exactly, just to the month. I was not in any . . . I was stateside two years before we went overseas. Went to a school and anyhow, two years before we went overseas. I was in this little company about two hundred people, more or less. All the way through. We organized and we disbanded in Japan after it ended, so we kind of were a close knit group you know, family like. We had a lot of guys transfer in and out, but mainly that figure was about the same. And we never were in any combat. We were in Germany about two or three months at the way very end of the war, and we had an ordinance company, that ordinance was not ammunition. Some people think ordinance is munitions, but we were a roadside company, worked on trucks mainly. That's the main thing we were doing. No combat . . . We never . . . We got a battle star, but it was for support. We didn't do any . . . at the war's end it was. We saw a lot of . . . I think the Germans had pushed through one time and we pushed them back, and it ended up there. It was torn up, I tell you it was bombed out, those towns were. It wasn't a pretty sight. But that's my brief, as far as a combat or anything, that's as close as we ever got. We had guns and all that stuff, but we never got any. And we were a close knit little outfit, stayed together all that time. Very lucky. Very, very lucky. I tell you, we were lucky.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Before we get to that, maybe we'll ask you some questions about before the war.

HOLDER: Okay. And for the purpose of the recording, can you tell me what your name is. Your name.

PLAGENS: You want me to tell you?

HOLDER: Yes.

PLAGENS: Milton, M-I-L-T-O-N. Middle Initial "A." P-L-A-G-E-N-S. Now, I'm a senior. I have a son by that name, I don't think at that time that would be the name that I went by. So is that alright with you?

HOLDER: Yes Sir. And, where were you born and where did you grow up?

PLAGENS: I was born in Brazos County, Texas. B-R-A-Z-O-S. Kurten, K-U-R-T-E-N Community near Bryan, College Station, home of the Aggies. That's what . . . And my father, when I was about two-years-old, took a job with the agricultural experiment station down there. No less connected with any of them, but it was still a separate entity. I don't know how to describe it. When I was a young kid, that's where I spent my childhood. Went to school at A&M Consolidated, was . . . then I transferred to Bryan High School, and I stayed there until I was a senior, and that's when I was inducted into the service. Eighteen years old. Anything else in that line you want to know?

HOLDER: Um, what does West Texas mean to you, or how do you define West Texas?

PLAGENS: Well, it means a lot. Since, when I got out of the service, I came . . . Got on a bus, we got discharged, where we got inducted, more or less, and sent to our homes. I was discharged in Tyler, Texas and went to Bryan. They paid my . . . that's where I was inducted, or Houston, I don't know where. And then came right on out straight, my family was out here over a year or so. Farm laborers, farm hands, tractor drivers. That's what we were. Nine boys, and we ended up with nine boys and one girl in my family, and I was the oldest of all of them. Six of us boys wore the uniform at different times, you know what I mean? I don't know, getting back to your question, well I was twenty two or three years old when I came here. So this . . . I've been here ever since. I worked there for a year or two, about two years as a laborer. Cotton gin, and just different types of work and made a reputation, I guess. Somebody told their sister that I was a good guy or something, that I could work. Anyhow we got married in 1947, and started farming. And still have a farm out there right now. I can look out the window at this place and see if I'm getting a rain or not. Most of the time it's not, but anyhow. We had, made a living, a good life, three children, never gave us any troubles. Two of them graduated from college, and it's been wonderful, it's been good, that's what we . . . My wife is in this other unit right across the road, seniors I think something they call it, and we just got separated the other, two or three weeks ago. She fell and broke her hip right up here in this outfit and that's the first time we've ever been separated, and that's hard. I tell you, it's hard when you've been together that long, yeah.

HOLDER: And how would you characterize West Texas' relationship with the military?

PLAGENS: It must be good, we have Goodfellow [Air Force Base] here you know. And everything I've ever seen. In fact, I've had a . . . well we were right, shortly after we moved here to Wall, a jet ran out of fuel and landed on my farm, so we've had that experience. It was nothing, the boy didn't get hurt, he told me he didn't have a thimble full of gas left in his plane, I talked to him, I saw him when he hit the ground. But area wise, it's always been good. It's everything you ever talked about Goodfellow in San Angelo. It's been a good match, that's the way I can put it.

WONGSRICHANALAI: How large is your farm?

PLAGENS: Pardon?

WONGSRICHANALAI: How large is your farm?

PLAGENS: Well, before we retired, we had accumulated up to around 1,500 acres, but now we're down to 320 acres of our home place more or less. My wife inherited it, and her father and mother told her as long as she lives, she better keep it, and she's still got it, and we're . . .

WONGSRICHANALAI: What did you grow?

PLAGENS: Mostly cotton. Cotton is the major crop, yeah cotton farmers. Some grain, sorghum, but mostly cotton.

HOLDER: When and where did you enter the armed forces, and what branch did you serve in?

PLAGENS: What was the first part?

HOLDER: When and where did you enter the armed forces?

PLAGENS: In 1943, in March I believe. I was then living in Bryan, Texas. Very near where I was born. I was a high school student, at that time. What else was it?

HOLDER: Um, and what branch did you serve in?

PLAGENS: Army.

HOLDER: Army?

PLAGENS: Yes.

HOLDER: And, how long did you serve?

PLAGENS: Three years, almost to the day.

HOLDER: During your years of service, were you primarily in the enlisted ranks, non-commissioned officer, an officer, a warrant officer.

PLAGENS: An enlisted man.

HOLDER: Enlisted? Okay. Okay, and you took part in World War II, correct?

PLAGENS: Yes.

HOLDER: Okay, and you said you were in Germany for the majority of that?

PLAGENS: No, I was stateside most of it.

HOLDER: Stateside most of that.

PLAGENS: Two years, almost exactly, and then one year part of the time was in Europe, and part of the time was in Japan . . . ah Pacific, but when we got . . . When we were between the Panama Canal and Philippines, when they dropped that atomic bomb in Japan. We were on the water, on that big ship I told you. No, yeah, that's where I was, on that big ship. And went on into [the] Philippines, and set up there and it was all over then, but we still went to Japan. Finished up in Japan. Not very long there, two or three months. We went up to Hokkaido, Okadama Airstrip . . . Airbase. That's where we stayed there. I remember, that was shortly after the war. And a . . . They confiscated all the guns, rifles from the soldiers, and we went into this barracks up there and there was a big pile of rifles. Just stacked up like this in no order, just piled up. And a . . . And it was all over you know? It was all over then, in fact, that island wasn't bombed. Street cars were running in Sapporo. We weren't doing anything, just waiting to come home, that's where we left from.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Well let me ask you this, what do you remember about the start of the war? Pearl Harbor.

PLAGENS: Pearl Harbor? Well I remember it happening. Wasn't too intelligent of [unintelligible]. I guess, was it called a sneak attack on us, you know? I believe that would be the main thing I would remember. It was a tragedy, you know, it was up there. I wasn't into politics, I was in high school at that time. It was a sad, sad day yeah, sure was. And I guess, soon after that, you started counting your days, how many days before you'd be in this, you know? And I went in just short of that. I turned eighteen. I was drafted right quick.

WONGSRICHANALAI: What did you understand the war was about?

PLAGENS: What?

WONGSRICHANALAI: What did you understand about the war? What was it about?

PLAGENS: You know, I can't answer that. To this day, I can't answer that. Like I said, I wasn't into politics, and didn't know. Wasn't very educated . . . I don't know. I just . . . Sad day to think about it when will my time come, you know? I guess that was the main . . . My mind, my family was worried about things like that. That's a good question you know it? I just really wasn't into politics you know, I didn't. I've read all kinds of stories since then, but at that time, I didn't know really what was going on, honest, being truthful with you.

HOLDER: What part of your service did you find the most challenging?

PLAGENS: The what?

HOLDER: Most challenging? What did you find challenging? Hard?

PLAGENS: Overall, in general?

HOLDER: Yeah.

PLAGENS: Oh. Just, what's gonna be next? You know what, like I said, we were stateside two years. Well that was always the question, what next? What next? Trained all kind of . . . You know prepared for . . . We were in maneuvers in Louisiana. I don't know if you've ever heard of that or not. Two or three months, we went out. Our whole unit, we moved trucks and all, we went out in the woods and I guess under as much as you could say combat conditions, but actually wasn't. I remember we went, had some night exercises. I think that was the most dangerous thing I was ever in was that. We would go in, one night I was jeep driver, we we're going down the road without lights. Those vehicles had a little old light about that big for . . . so someone could recognize if you were on them, almost. And one night we were going along and a lieutenant was sitting beside me in my jeep, and all of a sudden he's telling me up and reached over slide, slide. And started . . . I didn't even see the other oncoming vehicles, but um, just anxiety I guess. That's what's next, you know? What's next? What's next? I hope that answers it.

HOLDER: All right, and during your time enlisted, what conception did you have the United States? What did America symbolize for you?

PLAGENS: Oh, well. You know I was so young. I don't know if I really understood. It was just duty calling, and you answered it. That's all. Did the best you could.

HOLDER: Did your time in the military change that perception at all?

PLAGENS: Did it what?

HOLDER: Did your time in the military change that perception of America at all?

PLAGENS: That's a hard question. All we looked forward to was when were we gonna get out. Just a tremendous amount of anxiety, wondering "What's next? What's next? What's next?" And we moved, while I said, when we were in the states, three of four . . . ah two years, we moved two different camps in Louisiana, two different camps in Arkansas and then we went up to the East Coast, and overseas. Just never knowing what's next, you know? That's about, the unknown I guess.

HOLDER: Okay, what units did you serve in, in your time of deployment?

PLAGENS: What unit?

HOLDER: Yes.

PLAGENS: Well, 140th Army. 140th Ordinance. O-R-D-N-A-N-C-E. I guess, ordinance. With, in parenthesis LM, Light Maintenance. And then later on it changed, we went, took a few more men in and went to ATM, which was Heavy Maintenance. I guess, probably I don't know when we went to that. I think in Arkansas. That unit, that 140th, that's what I served in. It stayed all the way through. We started together, it was organized then, and then separated, I don't know what you'd . . . Three or four groups came out of Japan and came on home.

HOLDER: Okay, and what did you think of the local inhabitants that you encountered? Did you have any encounters with local inhabitants?

PLAGENS: Local what?

HOLDER: Local people. Like people in Japan, or Europe?

WONGSRICHANALAI: Or Germany.

PLAGENS: Oh while I was? No, you know, everywhere we went, the war was just about settled.

HOLDER: Yes.

PLAGENS: They were, in Europe especially, as we went up in France, going up into Germany. We met just thousands of people coming that had been imprisoned. The Germans had them and they had been freed. And trains coming in loaded with people. Boxcars, just standing up. It come right by our camp there in Germany, and they were glad it was over. And in Japan, well it was

over. I mean we . . . It wasn't torn up. The part we were in. We didn't spend any time on that island that Tokyo was on. You know, they did a lot of bombing and what do you call that burning, some kind of gas or what was it? Oh I can't . . . I'm old folks. I can't think. It'll come to me. A certain type of gas, flames they just torched those places. And it was big scale too. In that, on Luzon, I believe it was. That was all done before we got there.

WONGSRICHANALAI: What about inhabitants in the Philippines?

PLAGENS: The what?

WONGSRICHANALAI: The Filipinos.

PLAGENS: Well, we . . . Are you familiar with the Philippines and India at all? Clark Field. About fifty miles out. That was a staging area where we come in there and waited till we got our trucks and stuff. And then got on those LSMs. And boy, on that North Sea they just go up like that and they come down *sound effect* quiver. Oh, that was miserable. Lasted about ten or twelve days I think, and it was over. But the sailors got sick on those trips, boy that was . . . Those flat bottom things. I got a good picture about it, couldn't find it. We're landed four of them side by side, those ships, and they were just all GIs unloaded and ready to go, get on the trucks and go on up. The encounters we came with the Japanese people, they were . . . They had surrendered, I mean they were happy to see us, I believe, you know. They wanted it to be over. That's about the only impression I got.

HOLDER: Okay. And how did your service influence or affect your family at home?

PLAGENS: Well, I was the oldest. And that's . . . They were concerned, I guess. Glad to see it over when it was over. I had two brothers born after I got out. I got . . . My son is their age. But one of them was in Vietnam, I believe. The youngest one. I don't know what kind of draft system they had. You had, certain numbers were called and certain weren't. I don't know how that worked. And I don't know too much about that young boy. I never have sat down and talked with him about it. But, I know my parents were hoping that it settled you know, and sure enough. A couple of them that were in some kind of reserve outfit after. Like I said, there were six of us that wore the uniform. So they, you know they were concerned about the future in between then and here. I don't know how else . . .

HOLDER: What were your most vivid memories of your time in service?

PLAGENS: [Chuckles] That's a good question. [Chuckles] We spent lots of time on boat trips on the water. We spent a lot of time on the water. When we left New York, going overseas, we were in a convoy of ships, there were all type of ships in there and at that time the war was active and

there was concern about the convoy being attacked. I don't know what you'd call it. We had a little old . . . boats would go out all around us so you could see them. Destroyer escorts, they called them, I guess that's what they were. That type of fear, and . . . It's been so long ago I've forgotten a lot.

HOLDER: And do you have any memory of the sorts of technology you were using during your time of service? The technology at the time?

PLAGENS: Well, we were involved with it you know. Mechanics and stuff like that, that we had to . . . If we couldn't fix a wrist-watch, or a big tank, or a big cannon, we had a manual in a library. Someone was supposed to be able to, that was a . . . Kind of the type of work we did. I don't know what else to say.

HOLDER: Okay. And did you expect to face any challenges when you returned to, when you returned home?

PLAGENS: Did you say college?

HOLDER: Did you, when you came home, did you have any challenges?

PLAGENS: Oh, challenges.

HOLDER: Challenges.

PLAGENS: No, I guess, worried how I'd fit into society. What I could, what I would do, you know? Whatever I did, I did right. It's been good, I'll tell you it's been a wonderful life. I had a good wife, country girl out there at Wall and she was raised on a big farm, farming family I mean, and I didn't know a thing about a tractor when I got here, but we had faith in each other, and we made it work, and it's been good, it's been very good. She's over there now, we're just, we're eighteen days apart, but she's eighteen hundred, a hundred years wiser. And I gave her . . . her family, they took me in and my family, my brothers most of them turned out to be farmers. So, yeah. It's been good. Life has been good.

HOLDER: And how do you feel about your military service, looking back on it?

PLAGENS: What was the main part of the question?

HOLDER: How do you feel about your military service, looking back at it?

PLAGENS: Well, the main thing, I was very fortunate to get in that type of outfit. I was lucky. An eighteen year old guy, he's prime infantry you know? He can run, athletic. I remember when we were in training, we would go out on a hike or something, and well, I would always be one of the first ones in. But I later found out it wasn't that, it was the overall timing or something. But I would come in and I'd go back and help some stragglers, bring a pack, hold the pack. We had some older guys in there, too. I don't know how to . . . My mind kind of slips so. I hope I'm giving you the kind of answers you want.

HOLDER: You're doing good. Okay, do you have any advice for young men and women just entering the service?

PLAGENS: No, I wouldn't want to advise anyone. That's personal you know. And you take people who are in military, a lot of times their kids will follow, you know what I mean? I would not want to influence anyone in either for or against. You know, I would not. That's kind of a personal thing I believe.

HOLDER: Okay, and is there anything else you would like to share about your time in service?

PLAGENS: Only that I feel like I was a lucky man, lucky guy, lucky kid. That's about the only thing I . . . No one ever aimed at me, and I never had to aim at anyone else, you know. I can be thankful for that, yes I can. You see the stories of relatives. I had two, a brother in law and a cousin were prisoners of war. And I don't want anybody to go through that again. That's my Not to have a chance with that. I'm concerned, I read the paper and watch the news. But I don't know how things are going, I'm not that smart. I do, I'm concerned about it though. I've got so many, y'all don't know how many nieces and nephews I got. Yesterday we had a group, we had a wedding out at Wall Saturday. My niece got married, and they were three generations there that came to visit my wife, and a little second grader, little girl, and then three or four little boys. What is their future? That's all that concerns me. I hope none of them have to go through service. I hope there will never have to be any more wars, that's what I hope. That's what I would like to leave with you. But there are rumors aren't they. These aren't what's going on.

WONGSRICHANALAI: Let me ask you one more question. When you were in the Army, you met folks from all over the country. Right, soldiers, recruits?

PLAGENS: You mean foreigners, or?

WONGSRICHANALAI: No, Americans from other states, from other parts of the country. Or was it primarily Texans?

PLAGENS: Well, I had a cousin. I went to school up in Maryland, and I had a cousin in Washington D. C., worked for the government, and she was from Missouri, and I was from down here in Texas. And we didn't know each other well, but we knew that we were that close. She got in touch with me, and I went to Washington two or three weekends. That type of met different people that way surely. And when we were stationed in Arkansas, I had, my buddy was an Okie, and we were fifty miles from his hometown, and we went down there a couple of times.