

ORAL MEMOIRS
OF
FRANKIE NEWSOM
Interview conducted on
February 14, 2016

Interviewer: Katie Cooper

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 Frankie Newsom are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on February 14, 2016.

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The electronic file and complete transcript of this interview were processed in the Department of History at Angelo State University and are available at the Dr. Ralph R. Chase West Texas Collection, Angelo State University, San Angelo, Texas.

The following document has been edited. For an unedited transcript, please visit the Ralph R. Chase West Texas Collection.

COOPER: This is Katie Cooper and, um, could you say your name for me?

NEWSOM: Frankie Newsom.

COOPER: Okay, um, when and where were you born? And where did you grow up?

NEWSOM: Well, I was born in El Reno, Oklahoma in 1943.

COOPER: And is that where you grew up too?

NEWSOM: No, we moved to Texas probably when I was around 3 and we've been here. My dad was a rancher.

COOPER: Where did he ranch at?

NEWSOM: All around West Texas and Mexico.

COOPER: Oh, okay, so, you may know some of these about West Texas, if you've been here for a long time around West Texas. How would you define West Texas? Where does it begin?

NEWSOM: Where does West Texas begin? Where the wind and the dirt blows. I did live in some prettier parts of West Texas being Sonora, Uvalde, Junction, in that area. But most of my adult life was Midland, Odessa, Whiteface, Morton, all of those little places.

COOPER: Um, what do you think the difference is between West Texans and Texans from the other regions of the state?

NEWSOM: Hmm . . . West Texans are more down to earth. They don't give off any of the city feel. They're just real laid back, enjoy people, just . . . I think they are also considered more religion, religious than some of the bigger urban areas of Texas.

COOPER: How would you characterize West Texans relationship to the military?

NEWSOM: I have always felt that they have a very strong support system from the West Texas people. I know my brother did. He had one of the biggest funerals that Midland had ever seen. But he had grown up and went to school in Midland most of his life.

COOPER: What's the name of your relative who served in the armed forces?

NEWSOM: My brother, Cecil Curtis McKinney.

COOPER: When did he enlist in the armed forces? Which branch did he serve in and, if you know, what years was he in the service?

NEWSOM: I'll have to count back because he was killed in . . . on October 22nd of 1968 and he was on his second tour of Vietnam and he was a medic in the 101st Airborne. He really believed

in the war because he said, “if we don’t win it there, it will be fought on our soil.” And he said, “I don’t want that for my family.”

COOPER: And in which military conflict did he take part?

NEWSOM: Uh, the Vietnam War.

COOPER: Um, why did he enlist in the forces? Did he explain his desire to serve to you, um . . . Was he drafted and how did he feel about all of that? I know these are a bunch of questions in one, sorry.

NEWSOM: Um, Curtis had actually started college at Texas Tech. My dad had got to the point he couldn’t work anymore, mother was holding down two jobs. And Curtis couldn’t see not being able to go to college with their situation. And I think just worrying and caring about his family. There was all the talk about Vietnam and so he just decided he would enlist. And he never regretted it.

COOPER: How old was he when he enlisted?

NEWSOM: Nineteen.

COOPER: Um, what did you think about him serving and him being over there?

NEWSOM: Well, at that time I was still very young.

COOPER: How old were you?

NEWSOM: Three years older than him. And it never occurred to me that there might be a finality to his going over there. Because he had served one tour, came back, and he was going back. And I just, you know, when you’re young, you just think you’re immortal. It was a real tragedy when he didn’t get back home.

COOPER: What were your hopes and concerns about his service? Or, did you not, did it not really dawn on you, maybe?

NEWSOM: Hopes and concerns? Oh, well I, I really can’t say I have an answer there. I just knew he was doing what he wanted to do. And his plans were to be a doctor and that was the role he was serving in Vietnam.

COOPER: Um, so he was overseas. What was your conception at the time of the United States being in the war?

NEWSOM: Well, the majority of people you talked with were against the war and they didn’t have a lot of respect for some of those guys coming back home. But, if I ever had a chance, I tried to tell them that they didn’t know what they were talking about. And I would voice Curtis’s concerns about that if we didn’t win this war, what would happen.

COOPER: Was there a lot of those concerns in West Texas too like . . . ?

NEWSOM: Oh, absolutely. They have a memorial wall out in Midland and there is a lot of West Texas men that lost their lives over there.

COOPER: What did you think about the conflict and Vietnam, and what did you know about it when your brother was over there fighting?

NEWSOM: I really didn't know that much at the time. I was young and had a child. I really only knew what was in the newspapers and I did not have a real good grasp on what we were fighting about.

COOPER: What did you think about the anti-war movement or the people who were protesting it?

NEWSOM: Well, I didn't approve of it and I was never a part of one. And the big PR people like Jane Fonda, I think, really . . . I mean she might as well have gone and spit on our guys for the way she talked about them and how they were treated.

COOPER: Did that make you really mad since your brother was over there?

NEWSOM: Absolutely. Yes, I mean, he was fighting for her safety but that's not how she saw it; [she thought] we were just over there killing innocent people.

COOPER: What were your most vivid memories of your brother's time in the service?

NEWSOM: Well, he was always writing home, wanting us to send him some Wild Turkey Bourbon and chocolate chip cookies. And he was always assuring us that everything was fine and not to worry. He had made us promise to him on one trip home that, should he come home in the casket, that we would never ever look at him . . . so. I didn't know why but later the man that escorted him home told us what it was about.

COOPER: Why? Because he wouldn't look the same?

NEWSOM: Well, when the soldiers were killed out there, they were usually out in the field. They were picked up and taken to the morgue and they were all frozen so their body wouldn't decompose. And they just looked very much, well, they were kind of shriveled up. Plus Curtis was also decapitated. And, so, with the two of those together and Curtis serving as a medic, he saw a lot of wounds that the service men had gotten and he just didn't want us to ever . . . He wanted us to just remember him as he was.

COOPER: Yeah. So, did you get to keep in touch with him? I know you said he wrote letters a lot. Did he ever make phone calls?

NEWSOM: No, we didn't have that cellphone, phone freedom like we do now. But there were a lot of letters and . . . um . . . We sent him lots of little gifts in the mail. He was, like I said, he had been home on leave and so we made a special trip to Carlsbad Caverns, no not Carlsbad, Sonora Caverns. And I just remember it was family time and we were all together and just laughed and it was wonderful.

COOPER: So, you said he did two tours. When he came back from his first tour was he any different? Or, what was it like when he came back?

NEWSOM: He had matured a lot, took things much more seriously than he had before. But one of the main reasons that he re-upped for another tour was he got a \$10,000 bonus and he wanted that to go to mom and dad.

COOPER: Sounds like a sweet guy. Were there any particularly challenging aspects or moments that you remember?

NEWSOM: From which?

COOPER: Maybe from when he was over there.

NEWSOM: Oh, when we would hear . . . If we knew where he was and the news would tell you something that was going on, you always wondered . . . I did wonder if Curtis was involved.

COOPER: How often did you get letters from him?

NEWSOM: Oh, probably, since he corresponded with all of us, I would say we each probably got two letters a month.

COOPER: Was he . . . well . . . so he did pass in the Vietnam War. How were y'all notified? What was that like?

NEWSOM: It was the two military men coming up to the door and knocking, that was officially. Mom and dad actually got word that he had been killed through . . . What are the phones that people have a hobby with? You see the towers. But it was a phone line . . .

COOPER: Like an operator?

NEWSOM: Yeah, a ham operator, I think that's what they call them. Somebody that knew mom and dad and that had military people over there when Curtis was killed, somehow, they got word back to the ham operator and they called mom and dad. And then about twenty-four hours later the military officers came.

COOPER: And do you remember your mom and dad getting the news on the phone and all of that?

NEWSOM: Oh, yes, my mother had to be put in the hospital. She was in the hospital about ten days. She was under psychiatric treatment for about nine months. And my dad went on a

drinking binge and mother and dad got a divorce years later and, I think, it stemmed from the way each one of them handled the situation.

COOPER: How did you handle it?

NEWSOM: At that time I was in more of a role as a nurturing individual to mother because she just needed so much help. So, it was almost like you didn't have time to grieve.

COOPER: After your brother's passing has your conception of the United States changed? Or the role of the U.S. in the military, has that changed?

NEWSOM: Well, I'm very opposed of what has happened. The cut in military spending for their . . . the equipment they have needed to do their job over there. At the time that Curtis was in the military they had all the money they needed. I mean, the budgets were in place. But I think it is terrible what our country has come to in support and the cuts the government has made to our military.

COOPER: Do you have any advice for families of young men or women who are just entering the service?

NEWSOM: I think the people that go over there, a lot of them are going there in hopes of getting an education or getting out of a life of poverty. I just hope they realize what could happen. And that the boys that they're with, or the men, will be the best men they ever had and they will die for them. And they have to, I mean, they're putting their life out there. And all the facets that the military is about.

COOPER: Think long-term?

NEWSOM: Yes, think long-term.

COOPER: It's asking if you have any items or correspondences that you wish to share with the project. And there's a picture we will put on your recording. And do you have anything else you would want to talk about or would like to add?

NEWSOM: My son who now is 53 has all of Curtis's memorabilia, his flag, his senior picture, a lot of correspondences so, if need be, I could . . . I wouldn't mind giving it to you. But I personally this is the only thing that I have of Curtis's.

COOPER: That's a great picture. Do you still have . . . Oh, he has all of the letters and the stuff that he sent you?

NEWSOM: Yes.

COOPER: That's so neat. Okay, I will take a picture of this for sure to put it in there. Is there anything else that you want to talk about or you would like to add?

NEWSOM: No.

COOPER: Okay, thank you.