

ORAL MEMOIRS
OF
ROBERT M. EISENBERG, JR.

An interview conducted on
October 11, 2015

Interviewer: Courtney Shields

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 Robert M. Eisenberg, Jr. are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on October 11, 2015.

Interviewer: Courtney Shields

Transcriber: Courtney Shields

Editor: Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai

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.

SHIELDS: So, first question is what is your full name and can you spell it for me?

EISENBERG: Robert McDonald Eisenberg, Junior.

SHIELDS: And then, when and where were you born?

EISENBERG: I was born in Norwalk, Connecticut, February 28, 1944.

SHIELDS: And did you grow up there or did you move?

EISENBERG: Yes.

SHIELDS: Okay, so then, um . . . When and where did you enter the armed forces?

EISENBERG: I enlisted, uh, in Norwalk and then I was, uh . . . We went in New Haven, Connecticut and that was, uh, February 6, 1966.

SHIELDS: Which branch did you serve in?

EISENBERG: Air Force.

SHIELDS: And why did you choose the Air Force?

EISENBERG: Um, probably a longer life span.

SHIELDS: [chuckles]

EISENBERG: and I had a brother-in-law that was in . . . had been in the Air Force. He was a captain and so I just decided Air Force.

SHIELDS: Air Force ran in the family.

EISENBERG: Seemed to be safer move at the time.

SHIELDS: Mhm. [chuckles] What were your years of service?

EISENBERG: Uh, February '66 to March . . . was it . . . No, February '66 to February of 1970.

SHIELDS: Okay . . . um . . . During your years of service, were you primarily enlisted in . . . Were you primarily in the enlisted ranks, a non-commissioned officer, an officer, or a warrant officer?

EISENBERG: Uh, I was primarily in the, uh, enlisted ranks. My last year, year and a half, I was promoted to, uh, non-commissioned officer.

SHIELDS: So, uh, what was the source of your commission?

EISENBERG: My source of commission was just a promotion. They . . . They had to, uh, they found out that they needed a non-commissioned officer to be a crew chief on 130's and we were not . . . That rank that I was at was not a non-commissioned officer. So, they made it a non-commissioned officer.

SHIELDS: Uh, which military conflicts did you take part in?

EISENBERG: Vietnam.

SHIELDS: Vietnam . . . What, um . . . You said . . . Did you consider that your service might cause serious injuries and was that a concern?

EISENBERG: [Smacks lips] Wasn't a concern, no.

SHIELDS: You just wanted to serve. Did any of your family members have a concern about it? Tell you not to do it?

EISENBERG: No, not that I know of. No, not that I recall. And . . .

SHIELDS: All supportive?

EISENBERG: [Smiles] Yeah!

SHIELDS: What was your training like? All of it.

EISENBERG: Um . . . Training, like basic training?

SHIELDS: Yeah.

EISENBERG: Um . . . Well, I was fortunate at the time [takes off glasses] that when we went to . . . We went to Lackland Air Force base in San Antonio for training, and they uh . . . They had spinal meningitis outbreak there. So, we all could not . . . The different barracks could not mingle with the others. So, it was relatively easy going while we were there.

SHIELDS: Well, that's good. So, then whenever you got out of basics and went into like the actual Air Force what was it . . . ?

EISENBERG: Um . . . Well, I went from basics to tech school and that was held in Wichita Falls and learned about the basics of a C-130 and also a C-141. And, uh, and then we left there to Dyess.

SHIELDS: That's good. Um . . . What were racial tensions like when you were enlisted?

EISENBERG: You know, really, I didn't notice anything. We all got along. We're all in the same pot. We all got along well.

SHIELDS: Everyone had the same goal in mind.

EISENBERG: Yeah. Didn't notice.

SHIELDS: So, did you find your service challenging and in what ways?

EISENBERG: Uh . . . Challenging in some senses in the [smacks lips] things . . . wanna say [does air quote] "stupid things."

SHIELDS: [chuckles]

EISENBERG: They'd have you do . . . But learning about the aircrafts, at the time it was a 3 million dollar plane. You, uh, you had to take care of it.

SHIELDS: You didn't wanna mess it up. What conception did you have of the United States at the time?

EISENBERG: Um, land of the free. Uh, [looks at paper] you know that we were leaders in the world, uh, trying to help those that were less fortunate than ourselves and I think that's pretty much it. Yeah.

SHIELDS: What'd you think that America stood for? What were our beliefs and what was our reason for the things we did?

EISENBERG: Well, I think that, um, we all felt that, uh, you had a right to your personal freedom. And, uh, that nobody should, you know, control your freedom. Like they do in some countries. And, uh, I think a lot of that, uh, was shocking to some of 'em over there. That they didn't realize that because they have never had that opportunity. And, this is what we were trying to help them get, and to stop the spread of communism and, uh, I think they had a hard time grasping all that. They didn't believe it because they'd never had it.

SHIELDS: So, if you were to enlist now, same age but now, do you think you would enlist for the same reasons and have the same beliefs?

EISENBERG: Oh, yes. Oh, yeah

SHIELDS: Same reasons. Um, were you deployed . . . Well, you were in Vietnam so, you were overseas. What did you understand about the mission you were asked to be on?

EISENBERG: Um, you know it [fumbles for words] . . . Over there the whole, the whole thing was, of course, to stop the spread of communism, stop the communists from taking over another country. One here, one there. And, um, we were there to try to stop the spread in Vietnam. Of, course the north had gone communist. We were trying to save the south from having that and, uh, it was a hard fought battle. [Taps table]

SHIELDS: Uh, what unit or units did you serve in?

EISENBERG: Um, now I'm not sure I understand exactly what you're asking on that one. The, uh, I left many times here from Dyess, we went temporary duty, TUI, which would be mostly 60 days. And we would go to Japan, but we were still a Dyess unit. And we would fly out of Japan to Vietnam and we'd spend a couple of weeks. Uh, I was still in the same, same outfit. Uh, my last eleven months I went over to Taiwan and that was a permanent change of station. I was assigned to a base there in Taiwan, which I cannot pronounce anymore.

[SHIELDS and EISENBERG chuckle.]

SHIELDS: Um, did you serve in direct combat during your time?

EISENBERG: Not in direct.

SHIELDS: So, you had indirect?

EISENBERG: Uh, yeah. I wasn't a ground pounder. I , , , I guess there were some missions I flew, with the plane, that they, the flight crew, had asked me to go, and that was mainly ammunition runs. To help the loadmaster 'cause it was a . . . It wasn't a stop, ammunition runs. You landed and you just kept going. You just pushed it, the ammunitions out the back, small pallets of ammunitions, and just kept going and took off. So, that was, that was possibly the most direct I ever had.

SHIELDS: Did you fear anything during that?

EISENBERG: No, you don't think about it. I mean, why dwell on something, you know, gory or something like that when you don't know.

SHIELDS: Were any of your comrades seriously injured or die while you were serving?

EISENBERG: Lost, uh, one load master, one time at some base in Vietnam. A plane landed before them and got mortared. And, uh, our plane, I guess it had already been on the ground right behind it. I don't know the details or I'm sketchy on the details anymore. But, uh, our plane and our flight crew stopped to get the flight crew off the other plane onto ours. And he got shot. Killed.

SHIELDS: Were there any other high profile injuries or deaths that you were aware of?

EISENBERG: Not that I recall.

SHIELDS: And then how did like, maybe not seeing his death, but knowing about it affect your thought and feelings about being in the service in Vietnam?

EISENBERG: Well, it had no, you know, it didn't change my thoughts or anything. Uh, the kid had only been married maybe a year. He lived in the barracks with us at the time at Dyess and

before all this, before he got married. And, just knew him, knew who he was, knew his name. But that's, you know, never hung around him and, uh, it affected that flight crew that he was assigned with.

SHIELDS: What did you think of the local inhabitants?

EISENBERG: Um, the only time I ran across . . . across them would be at the terminal in Cameron Bay, uh, when I was going up there for snacks or something or when there was nothing else on the flight line. They were very, uh, sort of afraid at some, some of 'em. Uh, they came in, a lot of them worked on base and in that area. Uh, they were okay with us, small, we just knew a very little bit of Vietnamese and uh, always smile at 'em, ya know. Sometimes a little hello, [motions hello] ya know. And ones you recognize from being there off and on and uh, they'd smile back, hello [motions again]. The ones that came in on flights from elsewhere or went to the terminal for whatever reason, were very, uh, shy did not get in conversation with you. And you didn't have time to mingle and talk, ya know. They didn't speak any English so you couldn't . . .

SHIELDS: Um, what did you think that their perceptions were of the United States and why we were there?

EISENBERG: Uh, that's, that's a hard question. I don't think they clearly understood a lot of it. And I'm just . . . I'm assuming that because of the farmers out in the country they didn't know what was maybe going on. Uh, life had been that way for I don't know how long, ya know, and they just didn't know any different. I think that the ones in the cities realized what was going on, what we were trying to do for them.

SHIELDS: Did they seem grateful?

EISENBERG: Well, yeah. Uh, sometimes you didn't know if they were gonna stab you in the back. [Fumbles on words]

SHIELDS: You didn't know who was for who.

EISENBERG: I was there because I was told to be there.

SHIELDS: So, how did your service influence those you loved at home, your family members and your wife?

EISENBERG: Well, ya know, Molly and I didn't get married until, like I say, I had eleven months left, so I said I had a lot of leave time and I said, well, I'll just come home half way through, five and a half months. And, uh, she had . . . She was graduating from college in '69 and I was over there. Um, didn't make that. My squadron commander picked out our wedding date in August, so he's responsible for that and uh I, I don't think it had any big effect on anybody. Cause I was, ya know, I never said anything to how close something was or what I was doing. Just general stuff. Ya know, work a couple days straight, ya know, doing all these hours and that's all we did. Just work, work, work.

SHIELDS: Uh, what are your most vivid memories of your time?

EISENBERG: Oh, man, you know you forget a lot of 'em. [Clears throat] You forget a lot of the bad things. Your mind just erases that. You remember some of the good ones. Uh, everybody was in the same boat. Uh, they were your buddies, ya know. They were the ones you were in contact with each day and everything. Uh, we all got along well, helped each other out. Um, yeah we, ya know, if we were waiting for some technicians to come out to do work on the plane we knew it was gonna be a few hours, we'd go over and help the guy next door. We just bummed around out there. We did pretty much what we wanted. We knew what we had to do with our planes, knew what the schedule was as far as, uh, when the specialist were coming out and who was having trouble that was close by, because you had to stay close by your plane in case they came out, the specialist came out. But, uh, we all worked together.

SHIELDS: Uh, what sorts of technology did you use in your service?

[SHIELDS and EISENBERG chuckle.]

EISENBERG: Ha! Technology. That was a good . . . That was a hard question. Still is. Um, gosh no cell phones, no CB radios, ha! Technology that they had back then was, uh, really hard to pick out. Uh, and I, I still can't pick out anything in particular. Uh, the road ways in space, well in the air, and there are. There's maps, the maps show what routes what and you had radio frequencies that you would pick up ahead of time and that's what guided your plane. Uh, on this highway in the sky. And, uh, I flew my plane over in, uh, over in Spain one time, and uh, that's all I was doing, changing frequencies on the, uh, on the autopilot. You run it down when you get close to running out of one frequency well then you'd have another set up here [motioning like a keyboard] and you'd set that for the next, next leg of it. When that other one ran out, you'd set it for the next one and it just guided you through. Uh, I don't know you'd call that technology or not. Um, still used the sexton to shoot stars. And that was there, that went on for hundreds of years I guess. Any big technology like we have today, no. It's, it's . . . I can't place it.

SHIELDS: Do you think if you'd had the technology you have now it would make it easier or harder?

EISENBERG: Oh, gah-lee, yes. It would've made it a lot easier. Uh, we, uh . . . One time couldn't find a way down and, with GPS, we would've known exactly where we were in relationship to it. We got down to 5,000 pounds of fuel and, ya know, had to eject cargo, put parachutes on cause we were runnin' so low when we finally found it. But, uh, GPS is a big thing. Even today, that technology has cut down on even the newer models and the 130s don't have a navigator, I don't think anymore. They don't have a flight engineer. It's pilot, co-pilot and, uh, in the back, loadmaster. I think that's pretty much it on the J-models they have now. They lost two crew members. All of it's done digitally now. They know what's going on. GPS, navigation, those are big moves.

SHIELDS: Um, did you expect to face any challenges when you returned to civilian life?

EISENBERG: No, no. Well, yeah. There was one. Going back to college. Finishing my college. That was the only thing I was worried about.

SHIELDS: [chuckles] Um, after your time in the military, has your conception of the United States changed?

EISENBERG: No, not at all.

SHIELDS: Still believe it's . . .

EISENBERG: Oh, yeah.

SHIELDS: . . . for our freedom.

EISENBERG: Mhm.

SHIELDS: How do you feel about your time in the service looking back on it?

EISENBERG: It was good. It was good. Ya know, at the end, you intermingle with a bunch of people from different parts of the country and what they . . . What their life was like back in the hills of West Virginia, my roommate was from there. Ya know, different thoughts, different way of doing things. Um, somebody from California, ya know, has to have his haircut just right, like who cares, ya know? Um, just people's opinions of things from that part of the country they're from and uh, it was interesting. We had good times. We always did.

SHIELDS: Um, do you have any advice for the young men and women entering the service?

EISENBERG: Mm, make the best of it. Don't dwell on the, the little things that tick ya off. Take full advantage of what's there.

SHIELDS: And do you have anything to say to the people that don't appreciate our service?

EISENBERG: Hm, there's other countries to move to. [SHIELDS chuckles. EISENBERG shrugs shoulders.]

SHIELDS: Um, would you like to share anything else about your service? Any stories or anything?

EISENBERG: Um, you know, it's . . . Looking back it was good times. Really did. Uh, you were young. I think I went . . . I got out I was 25. I think I was one of the oldest ones probably at the time and, uh, 'cause I had been to college before, going in the service. Um, a lot of 'em looked up to me because I was older. Um, they loaded stuff up on you, us older ones that had been in for a while and stuff, ya know. And, uh, I got over there, overseas, to Taiwan, and could only crew one plane and had four to crew and two people from my crew would be on these other two until we got more manning in. And, uh, that was hectic, because then I'd have to take off on one of 'em and go in country for about 12-14 days and come back and see the . . . check the status to figure out what's goin' on with the rest of 'em. And, it was uh, busy times. Didn't have time to

dwell on anything. Ya know, you had a good time. You liked to fly. I went all over the world when I was in the service. Didn't get to spend much time down with the locals, or visit, but I think my first trip was to Panama Canal Zone. You know that was different, ya know, on the way back, the other pilots, and they may not have been there 'cause we flew the whole length of the canal comin' back and takin' pictures and we'd bank and take pictures over Japan and we went past, uh, what's the name of that mountain over there? Oh, I can't . . . [Pauses] Mount Fuji. Yeah, we went all the way around Mount Fuji and we'd turn just so everybody could take pictures. Um, Spain, Germany. Got into Bangkok, got downtown Bangkok, bought some things, ya know. Bought my wife some earrings, sapphire earrings and stuff there, cheap. Got into, uh, Japan, bought some stereo equipment. And China, and all that. Cheap. Seiko watches were like Timex were here at the time. You could buy a good Seiko for 20 bucks. You just . . . All over. Philippines. Saw the world. Say . . . I could say I saw the world. It was different and . . . different cultures. Ya know, you got to see a little bit of it. Nothing in depth but we did see enough of it. I enjoyed it.

SHIELDS: That's good. What was your most memorable day?

EISENBERG: Hm, my most memorable day. Hm, gah. I, uh, I guess the discharge day. I, uh, was fighting to get out to get back to college because I had been accepted at Hardin-Simmons. And, uh, a lot of fellas were getting early outs because manning was so great that they, things were sort of winding down a little bit and they didn't need 'em. And some of 'em were even getting out 18 months early and all this. And I got my letter of acceptance at Hardin-Simmons and, uh, I couldn't get back in time, discharged in time to start the fall, no the spring semester. And so, I pulled a shrewd one. They had had a night the inspector general came through the base because of manning, earlier. And uh, I told my 1st sergeant I wanted to talk to the, talk to the IG team about getting my discharge moved up. He knew . . . He knew what I was doing, ya know, because I'd discussed it. Knew him real well. He was 1st sergeant at Dyess at one time before he went overseas himself. Then I knew his son real well. He was in with us. And, so he, uh, said okay, we'll, we'll go through the chain. I got to see my squadron commander and he said okay, he knew what was going on. I said, I just, I just need a month off early. And uh, Hardin-Simmons were sending me letters, "Well don't worry about it when you get there, you get there. We'll get you a tutor if you need it." Uh, cause I knew somebody on the board of regents at Hardin-Simmons. She was saying, "ya know, he's comin'. We'll do whatever." But I finally got to, to meet the base commander. We went all the way to the base commander and he got me an early out. He said, "When do you wanna leave?" I said. He said, "I can get you out of here next week." And this was in December. And I said, "No, you're gonna have to cut somebody to do that." And they plan on being home with their families for Christmas. I don't need that. Mine's not expecting me. Let them go. So I got out, uh, February 6th. Almost . . . No, January 6th. A month early. To get started in college. That was uplifting that the whole chain of command worked. Explaining things to people and that was, you know, one of the things I was happy with. And I got out on time.

SHIELDS: So then, what was your most memorable or like your favorite, I guess, like mission that you went on while you were in the service?

EISENBERG: Um, there was one mission I was supposed to go on. I didn't get to go on. But boy, it sounded exciting. They were gonna take my plane and put, uh, I got, uh, moved up in my priority to Top Secret for this mission. They put, uh, black out curtains on my flight deck all the windows in the plane. And, uh, I knew something was up. Ya know, they took me off to some special training. And, uh, it got cancelled! [Gasps and chuckles] Sounded like it was gonna be a fun thing, I think it was a spy mission over Cambodia basically. I can say that now because they can't touch me. I'm an old man.

SHIELDS: [Laughs]

EISENBERG: But uh, I think, I think that's what it was but I don't know why they were gonna use a C-130 as a spy plane but that's what was in the works, I think. Um, one of the best times I think we had was we went on, uh, doing a joint maneuvers with the Spanish Air Force. And we had to go to a base that was . . . had been shut down for years and, gosh, there had to have been about [clears throat] 150-200 C-130s at that place, all lined up for this maneuver. And, we got there we had nothing to do. And, we played cards. We did all kinds of odd things to stay busy and, in the meantime, we were doing some shuttle work. We were shuttling some equipment from Germany down here to Spain for this maneuver. And once that was done we really didn't have anything . . . Uh, we washed our clothes on the plane. Got buckets of water and washed our clothes and we hung 'em out on the antennas from the tail section to the nose and there's all our laundry hangin' out on this thing 'cause we had no place else to. That was funny. To see all this stuff just flappin' in the breeze out there. But we did what we had to do. Um, the morning of the maneuvers was really moving. There was probably five or six planes in a row and I don't know how many rows back. Like I said there was probably 150-200 planes and it started out. First plane, way up, I could hardly see it. It was a big base. And they started taxin' out and comin' on by. Kept on going. They took off in, uh, threes. Lined up and ya know, took off. They'd take off then the next one, just one line after another. I guess it took us 45 minutes to get those planes in the air. And it was moving, to see that. [Tearing up.] It's one of those things.

SHIELDS: And everyone worked together for that.

EISENBERG: Yeah, there it is. That's what it's about. I'm sorry.

SHIELDS: No, you're fine! I mean that's awesome to like see everyone like come together, ya know.

EISENBERG: Yeah.

SHIELDS: To work together for the whole purpose of it, the greater, the greater part of it. So, I know you have pictures and stuff. So is there anything you want to share, like explain, ya know, and talk about.

EISENBERG: [Holding hat] This is my last cap. It's . . . It's well worn and dirty now, but uh, uh, I got this when I was still at Dyess but on one of my trips overseas I had it made and, uh, it has your hometown on it, and my name on the back and Cameron Bay and C-130Es. I worn this up until I was discharged. So, it's sweat, blood, and tears in that hat I guess. [Holding up flight

book.] This is my flight crew checklist. And some other things here. I was engine run qualified so I had to have a checklist to go by for starting up the engines and all that. Running engines, ya know, there's a lot to it. Procedure of the engines to firing off and everything, fueling, uh, that was, that was my book. I uh, have some old patches of the squadrons and the command we were in at Dyess. Extra ones right there, which I didn't realize I had. Still got all my records of TDY trips [brings out leather case] and all that that I took. Uh, still got my, uh, little red book that, uh, that I kept all my, every time that I went somewhere I had to . . . You had to write it down. [Pulls out red book] So, my little pocket red book. And I've got little books in here and this contained all the stops, dates, and times of everything I did. Right there, in those two little books. Plus other important information, radio, uh, radio frequency for control tower and all that. Numbers for maintenance that I might need and places we went frequently and, uh, top one here's Pope Air Force Base, North Carolina. But yeah, kept this. That has, that has everything in it. My paperwork has everything, my orders, any orders I had. This little folder, stayed with me from . . . and this little book. We got a black one. So, all four years I had this, all this junk. All this, ya know.

SHIELDS: You have everything.

EISENBERG: Everything. That is pertinent. My dog tags, my, uh, international certificate of vaccinations. I forget what else. All kinds of stuff. Yeah, my I.D. tag, final copies of all that. Everything I had, just stuck it in the folder cause you never know when you're gonna need it. They tell ya just don't ever throw anything out. And I've got, uh, tech orders. This is a general purpose tech order from one of my planes, was a '63 model, triple 73 was its tail number [pulls out tech order binder]. And, uh, this was an exam or something, I must've passed. This goes back to August of '67. But this is the flight manual for the aircraft. Don't ask me how I got a copy of it. I borrowed it from the military I guess as a souvenir. But it has the basic information on the aircraft and then other tech orders they give you more specific on engines, hydraulics, ya know, all that kind of stuff that you can go deeper. But these you can have. Other pictures in here that are . . . I couldn't find a lot of what I was looking for. But there's some of mine, sittin' around.

SHIELDS: Well, thank you. I'm gonna turn this off.