

ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

ALFRED LAPIER

An interview conducted on

March 22, 2017

Interviewer: Camry Weinheimer

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 Alfred Lapier are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on March 22, 2017.

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WEINHEIMER: What is your name?

LAPIER: Alfred Lapier, Jr.

WEINHEIMER: When and where were you born?

LAPIER: I was born in Helena, Montana.

WEINHEIMER: And where did you grow up?

LAPIER: I grew up in Helena. I . . . I left there when I was seventeen.

WEINHEIMER: Okay . . . umm . . . When and where did you enter the armed forces?

LAPIER: In Helena.

WEINHEIMER: What branch did you serve in?

LAPIER: The first time I served in the Air Force. For four years.

WEINHEIMER: And uh . . . What were your years of service?

LAPIER: From then was 1956 to 1960.

WEINHEIMER: During your years of service were you primarily in the enlisted ranks or non-commissioned officer, an officer, warrant officer? If you served as an officer what was the source of your commission?

LAPIER: I served in the enlisted.

WEINHEIMER: In which military conflict did you take part?

LAPIER: I took part in Vietnam.

WEINHEIMER: Why did you enlist in the armed forces?

LAPIER: Well, I always wanted to join because my brothers were in and my brother-in-law served but they didn't . . . I only had one brother that retired from the military, one brother-in-law. My brothers served seven years and they got out and that that was it but I always wanted to serve twenty. So, I went in the Army after the Air Force.

WEINHEIMER: Did you accomplish your twenty years that you wanted to do?

LAPIER: Oh, yeah. I wanted to go for thirty but the type of people we were getting in there at the time, it wasn't worth it.

WEINHEIMER: What motivated you to want to join the armed forces?

LAPIER: Well, like I said, you know, being a kid I always wanted to be in the military. You know, my brothers were in. My father was never in the service but I always wanted to make it a career.

WEINHEIMER: What was your training like?

LAPIER: The training?

WEINHEIMER: Uh huh.

LAPIER: Well, when I went into the Air Force, it was just like the Army, you know. Basic training, you know. We had to wear field packs. We had to go out on bivouac, things like that, and fire a rifle, and go on the rifle range and do things that the Army did in the Air Force at the time. But I don't think they do that anymore.

WEINHEIMER: Was it difficult?

LAPIER: Uh, the only part difficult for me and most of the men in there is when we had to put our field pack on. Because, see, we had a different type of field pack than they do nowadays. We had a horseshoe pack, what they call it. And it was heavy and it was awkward wearing it, you know. And we had to carry a rifle, wear a steel pot. And they told us . . . The instructors told us the best way to do it is to lay the field pack down and then lay down on the pack and put the straps over your shoulders and buckle your pistol belt and everything like that and then get up. But, when we tried to get up, we looked like a bunch of turtles [chuckles] rolling around trying to get up. So, one guy would finally get up and he would help the rest of us. [Chuckles] It was a good time, you know. I enjoyed it, you know.

WEINHEIMER: What were race relations like when you enlisted?

LAPIER: They were . . . I would say a whole lot different than what they are today. See, we had to train in the army. We had to train for riot control in the summer time, you know, and things like that, you know. The whites, they didn't get along with the blacks, you know . . . and . . . But I tried to get along with everybody because, see I'm an American Indian and I always call myself an American Indian. I don't say Indian American or I don't say Native American because I feel that . . . If you're born in this country of legalized parents, then you're a Native American and that's the same way with you. You were born here. I consider you as a Native American, even though you're not an Indian. Because that's political. It is, you know. And if I feel now that if the Mexicans would call themselves American Mexicans or the blacks would call themselves American African, we would get along much better than what they do now. So, there's a lot of prejudice still going on but I had a lot of buddies in the Army that were black and Mexican. So, I got along with all of them. See they used to call me . . . When I first came to Texas, they called me Mexican. They talked to me in Mexican. They still do. You know, I tell them I'm not a Mexican. I'm an Indian, an American Indian. So, if people would just be proud of what they are, it would be a lot different.

WEINHEIMER: Did you find your service challenging?

LAPIER: Uh, sometimes, you know it would . . . It would all depend on the situation you were in, you know. Like in Vietnam it was difficult, you know, a lot of times and a lot of times it was easy. It all would depend on how you made the situation yourself. You could make it hard by not doing your duty or you could make it easy by doing your duty and following orders. I'm proud of what I did in Vietnam but the way people treated us when we came back, I didn't like. I still don't like it. Because I don't know your parents. Your parents might have been some of the ones that demonstrated against us. You know, and the difference today is they make everyone that goes to Afghanistan or Iraq into heroes but we weren't. We were called baby killers.

WEINHEIMER: Um, what conception do you have of the United States at the time of your enlistment?

LAPIER: Well, it was good. Everybody enjoyed, I think, the service life, you know, except for the draftees, you know, because they were drafted into the armed forces. But I knew a lot of guys that were drafted that made great soldiers, you know, because of what they . . . And people were proud of the United States. They respected the flag. They respected the president, no matter who he was, you know.

WEINHEIMER: What did America symbolize to you?

LAPIER: Well, for one thing, it was my country, my home, you know, and, back then, people were completely different than they are. They were proud to be an American. You could tell by the way they acted.

WEINHEIMER: Yes. Um, what do you think it stood for?

LAPIER: Well, it stood for mostly freedom, you know. We didn't have the press back then like we have today. You know, the press doesn't respect the United States. They don't in any way. Back then, they did. You know, they respected the president and all that. And the people believed in their congressmen but you can't do that today.

WEINHEIMER: No. Were you deployed overseas?

LAPIER: Yes, I was in Vietnam three times. I've been to Europe, Alaska, Japan, France, Spain, England.

WEINHEIMER: What did you understand about the mission you were asked to be completed while you were overseas?

LAPIER: Well, like in Vietnam, I knew when we went over there that it was messed up. It was a political war because, at the time, I went over there, the first time was . . . The first time was in 1961 or '62, and we had to have passports and when we got off the plane at Saigon, I was carrying an M1 rifle and the rest of the guys in the company were carrying M1 rifles or M60

machine guns or something like that, you know, any weapon like that. A bazooka or a mortar. But the captain on the ground told us, you can't get off the plane with those weapons, shovel. We had to slide them off on the bag of a deuce and a half truck and we had to put our bags on top, so the Vietnamese couldn't see it. So, I knew back then, right then, it was a messed-up war and if you got in a firefight, you had to call back to your headquarters to return fire. They had to call Saigon, they had to call back to Washington, D.C. to go ahead and get the word to fire and then they had to pass it all the way back down the chain of command and, by then, it was over with, you know. I mean, it was a messed-up war.

WEINHEIMER: Yes. Um, what unit did you serve in during your deployment?

LAPIER: I was in the infantry.

WEINHEIMER: Um, did you serve in a direct combat during your deployment?

LAPIER: Yes.

WEINHEIMER: You did. Um, were you wounded in action?

LAPIER: Yes, I was shot one time in the left hip. But it was just a glancing blow, you know. It didn't shatter any bones or anything like that. It just . . . That was all.

WEINHEIMER: Did you become a prisoner of war?

LAPIER: No.

WEINHEIMER: No. What did you think of the local inhabitants that you encountered?

LAPIER: Well, there was a lot of good Vietnamese over there. I had a good buddy over there in Vietnam. He was discharged from the Vietnamese Army because he was wounded and, when we left, he had a big dinner for me and my buddies, you know. And, over there, they collect all the leftover food in the mess hall and they take it home and, when he had his dinner for us, we ate chicken that we had eaten maybe a week ago, you know. But, um, the only problem with the inhabitants over there, they were mostly against the United States. You could tell that by talking to them, looking at them, watching them, because they had a lot of infiltrators into the South Vietnam Army. That's why the Americans couldn't keep anything secret. You couldn't go on a mission. The communists out there, the Viet Cong or the North Vietnamese, knew exactly where you were gonna be going. We landed in a chopper. So, a lot of times, you might be dropped right in the middle of a North Vietnamese battalion with only a company of men and you didn't know that but they did. They knew where we were when we were coming in and where we were gonna be.

WEINHEIMER: When you interacted with the local inhabitants, what do you think their conceptions were of the United States?

LAPIER: Well, it all depended on how you treated them, you know. If you talked to them nice and acted nice around them, respected them, they respected you. But if you went in there with the wrong attitude and treated them bad, they were gonna do the same thing to you.

WEINHEIMER: I can see that. Um, did you ever engage them in conversation about what America meant to you?

LAPIER: No, because I didn't really learn their language, even though I was over there three times. You know, I've been to different countries and I never learn their language, you know, like in Germany.

WEINHEIMER: Were there any that spoke English?

LAPIER: Oh yeah, a lot of them. A lot of them spoke English. They understood it, what you were saying, what you wanted and things like that.

WEINHEIMER: Did your service influence or affect your family at home?

LAPIER: I have no idea because, like I said, I left when I was 17-years-old and I've been back maybe once or twice, you know, and visits, you know, and things like that, so I don't know how they feel about me, you know. They call me . . . My sisters call me once in a while, you know, but, uh, I guess to them it was alright, you know, because, uh, they'd never had anything bad to say about me.

WEINHEIMER: I'm sure they're proud.

LAPIER: Oh yeah, well, you know, we get along good. I just haven't been . . . We're not that close to a family.

WEINHEIMER: Um, what are your most vivid memories of your time in service?

LAPIER: I guess it'd have to be Vietnam because that is why I'm in the condition I am today. Because of . . . See I'm an 80% disabled veteran and I was sprayed by . . . Well, I guess, I don't know how many times with Agent Orange while I was over there. Because I spent three years and I don't know which year it was they were spraying it or not. But they started spraying back in 1962, you know. So, you figure, until 1970 was the last time I was there, you know.

WEINHEIMER: Um, what sort of technology did you use in the service?

LAPIER: We didn't have technology.

WEINHEIMER: Did you have like radios and things that y'all used?

LAPIER: Oh, yeah. We had, uh, walkie-talkies and things like that, er, uh, things . . . We had radios that we could communicate with, you know. They started like computers in the middle

70s so, I didn't have much, you know. The only people that used computers was like, finance, personnel, things like that. But in the infantry, we didn't . . . We had no use for a computer.

WEINHEIMER: Um, did you get like a personal radio that you could listen to music on?

LAPIER: No, no. Mm-mm. There was no such animal back then.

WEINHEIMER: Okay, um, did you expect to face any challenges when you returned back to civilian life?

LAPIER: Oh, it's . . . To me . . . Well, I still have a lot of problems today understanding some of the way that the civilians do things and the way we did things in the military, you know. Like, uh, I'm used to doing things at a certain way, you know. Like, if I put something away, I know where it's at or . . . Or even like cleaning house, you know, and we had to clean our own barracks. So, to me, cleaning house and cleaning barracks are the same things, you know. You gotta dust it and you gotta, you know, so . . .

WEINHEIMER: It has to be done a certain way?

LAPIER: Yeah, yeah, it has to be done a certain way and this has to be done here and this over here. Things like that, you know. It's just a bad habit to break. See, I even get up at 4 o'clock in the morning like I did in the Army and I retired in '76, so that's quite a few years. What is that? 40 years?

WEINHEIMER: Um, are there any other challenges you had?

LAPIER: Well, what really gets me . . . It's not a challenge but what really gets me is to go into a restaurant or any business or any place, you know, and men wear their caps. I can't stand that. I hate it. Even for the older people like me, my age, you know, that you see them in there with long hair, I don't like it. I tried it when I first got out, because I wanted to see what everyone was seeing in long hair and I let my hair grow down to my shoulders and then next time I went to the barber, I said, "Give me another flat top." Because that's what I wore for twenty years in the Army. I used to get my hair cut every week, you know. But I just can't stand people, especially women, that, when you go into a restaurant, and you see them, and they eat, sit down at the table and eat with their caps on. I don't like it.

WEINHEIMER: That gets on my nerves too. Um, did you . . . Did being from, uh, Texas shape, uh, your years in the service in any way?

LAPIER: No, not . . . See, I'm not originally from Texas. I'm from Montana but, yeah, in a way. You know, like you said, I'm an Indian. I'm proud of it, you know. So, I didn't want to get the Indians a bad name.

WEINHEIMER: Yeah. Um, when did you move to Texas?

LAPIER: In '76.

WEINHEIMER: So, that was after your service. Um, after your military service, has your conception of Texas changed? I know you aren't originally from Texas.

LAPIER: No, not really. I just don't like the big cities. I like the small ones like San Angelo. You get to know a lot of people here. But if you go up to a big city, like Dallas or Houston, you can . . . Your neighbor can live next door to you for forty years and you don't know him.

WEINHEIMER: Um, after your time in the military, has your conception of the United States changed?

LAPIER: Oh, yes, very much. Especially in Washington, D.C. The people up there, the congressmen and everything like that, they don't care about the United States. All they do is care about themselves. Because, they can spend, what, one term in Congress and retire for life for thousands of dollars. But I had to spend 20 years to make what I get, you know. And see, another thing is like, the Washington Redskins, all they want to do, get all over, they want to change the name of Redskins, which I am proud of, being an Indian. I just don't . . . I just want them to change the name Washington, you know. Makes more sense. But the politicians don't care about this country anymore. It's all about themselves and that's what gets me, nobody respects it.

WEINHEIMER: Um, how do you feel about your military service looking back?

LAPIER: I'm kinda . . . I'm proud of my service.

WEINHEIMER: Um, do you have any advice for men and women who are just now entering service?

LAPIER: That are just out?

WEINHEIMER: That are just entering into service.

LAPIER: I'd say stay, make a career out of it. It's a good life, you know. I draw pension every month, my medical is taken care of and I don't pay any money on prescriptions. I just go out to Goodfellow, pick them up. They're free and the medical care, I don't pay any premiums other than social security. I pay ninety-something dollars or something like that but I don't pay anything for Tricare. It's free. What Medicare doesn't pay, Tricare does. So, it's a good deal. You give up a lot of your rights as an American because, being in the service, you'll have to do a certain thing, you know, you'll have to perform your duty and do it right. Don't just go in there and say, "Oh, I'm in here, now I just have to spend six months and then get kicked out. Boy, I get all the benefits." It's wrong. If you're going in, make a good career out of it.

WEINHEIMER: Do you have any items or objects that you wish to share for this project that correspond with your time in the service?

LAPIER: No, I don't have anything from my service time.

WEINHEIMER: Um, would you like to share anything else about your service?

LAPIER: I wouldn't.

WEINHEIMER: Okay, then.

LAPIER: Well, just that I'm proud of it, you know. I think everybody, you know, nobody respects the flag but that's one thing that really means a lot to me. I lost good, good friends in Vietnam and it's just getting emotional.

WEINHEIMER: It's okay. Okay.